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Authors: Janaina Ferreira dos Santos and Marie Lena Holthaus

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Koserstraße 20
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Contact information:

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II. NICARAGUA

Comrades or pupils? The politico-cultural cooperation between GDR and post-revolutionary Nicaragua (1979 – 1989)

by

JANAINA FERREIRA DOS SANTOS
AND MARIE LENA HOLTHAUS

ABSTRACT

This article examines the cultural relations between East Germany and Nicaragua during the time period that ranges from 1979 to 1989. After Anastasio Somoza was overthrown in 1979, material resources as well as qualified personnel were scarce in Nicaragua. Amongst other aspects, education and culture were politically perceived by the new Sandinista government as one of the main pillars of social reconstruction. To overcome the deficiencies in this sector, the Nicaraguan government heavily relied on foreign aid. The German Democratic Republic, as eager for economic partners as it was for diplomatic recognition, supported the country not only with financial and material resources but also by sending specialists, experts, and political consultants. Taking the East German-Nicaraguan “Agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation” from 1980 as a starting point of the investigation, this article explores the transfer of personnel and knowledge in the three areas of culture, education, and politics, mainly from the GDR’s perspective; it thereby investigates GDR officials’ perception of themselves and of their Nicaraguan counterparts. We argue that this relationship, as well as the one fostered by both countries, were simultaneously perceived in part as an equal relationship between “comrades,” in part also as a student-teacher-relationship, exhibiting ideas of European superiority.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Janaina Ferreira dos Santos studied History and Political science at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas and Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg. She is currently concluding her master’s degree in History at Freie Universität Berlin with a thesis on West German-Brazilian relations on the field of nuclear energy in the 1970s. Her fields of interest are social movements in early 20th century Latin American History and transcontinental political relations.

After having studied her B.A. in Spanish and European Ethnology at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Marie Lena Holthaus is currently completing the master program in Latin American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. She is particularly interested in the historic relations between Latin America and Europe, with a research focus on the history of social and feminist movements in the late 20th century.

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2019 marked the 40th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. The end of Anastasio Somoza's authoritarian rule in June 1979 was the result of a multitude of ongoing riots, protests and strikes, especially from the mid-1970s onwards, which gave vent to a long-lasting dissatisfaction with the established system that cut off the vast majority of Nicaraguans from their most basic needs—material, political, and not the least educational needs. In their efforts to rebuild and reshape Nicaragua, the Sandinista Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional-FSLN) faced determined resistance most prominently from US-backed paramilitary Contra-groups, making Nicaragua an arena of armed confrontation in the Cold War.¹ Yet, while this dimension of the conflict is the most prominent, especially due to the following Iran-Contra affair, the Global Cold War was not primarily characterized by violent struggle. Instead, scientific, technical and medical knowledge rapidly advanced to become major categories in the conflict and influenced domestic and foreign policies. When regarding

1 For an overview on the events surrounding the Regime under the Somoza dynasty and the Sandinista Revolution see Héctor Perla Jr, *Sandinista Nicaragua's resistance to U.S coercion: Revolutionary deterrence in asymmetric conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

the global dimension of the conflict, the *transfer*² or export of knowledge during the Cold War Era can be seen as an instrument to spread a determined ideology and to forge political and economic alliances. In other words, knowledge and education became, amongst other aspects, the intellectual ammunition which kept this global conflict running for over 40 years.³

2 There are a variety of studies on the concept of transfer of knowledge. The idea of a mere export of knowledge from the political "centre" in the "periphery" has gradually given place to a notion of an intertwined production of knowledge and the exchange of its results between various nations worldwide. For an overview on the different phases of the studies on the subject see: Veronika Lipphardt and David Ludwig, "Wissens- und Wissenstransfer," accessed on March 3, 2020, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/lipphardt-ludwig-2011-de>.

3 On the relevance of knowledge and its transfer during the Cold War see Bernd Greiner, Tim B. Müller and Claudia Weber, eds., *Macht und Geist im Kalten Krieg* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2011). On the concept and research on "Cultural Cold War" see Nicholas J. Cull, "Reading, viewing and tuning in to the Cold War," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Crisis and Détente*, vol. 2, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 438-459; Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "Culture and the Cold War in Europe," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Origins*, vol. 1, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 398-419.

Following the examples of production and transfer of knowledge in and from both superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic as well as the Federal Republic of Germany understood science, technology and education not only as instruments to highlight state legitimacy but also as strategic fields to build political bridges to other nations, according to their respective political filiations or position in this race of systems. The GDR's involvement and support in developing countries played a key role in the country's self-perception as an established socialist player in the power constellation of the Cold War.

Against the background of the "cultural Cold War", this article discusses the politico-cultural relations between Nicaragua and the GDR in the 1980s. As well as other documents collected from the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation ("Abkommen über die kulturelle und wissenschaftliche Zusammenarbeit"), ratified by both countries in 1980, will be used as a basis of our analysis. After a brief summary of the situation in Nicaragua following the downfall of Anastasio Somoza in 1979, we will describe the post-revolutionary relationships between the protagonists in Nicaragua and in the GDR, focusing particularly on the interaction and cooperation regarding the production and export of knowledge. Therefore, the third

section of this paper retraces the "Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation" from 1980 and its implications in Nicaragua. We will argue that the measures taken on the East German side could be perceived as both mechanisms of practical cooperation as well as an attempt to carry on its political calculation and ideological propaganda in the 'Third World.' Further, we will draw conclusions on East German engagement in Nicaragua, discussing the GDR government's perspective and investigating whether it saw the transfer of knowledge and the cooperation in the field of culture and sciences as a collaboration between two "equal" partners, as references to an internationalist solidarity between comrades would have suggested, or rather as an emblem for mere *development* support.

2. NICARAGUA, THE GDR AND THE EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE CULTURAL COLD WAR

"We must develop scientific and technical knowledge in general, and political science in particular, without letting ourselves be pressured by prejudices and influences that come from the centers of imperialist domination. Through education we must promote revolutionary strength, hatred of man's exploitation by man, loyalty to the revolutionary principles that sustain our vanguard, the FSLN, and open

the floodgates of science so that man's beliefs and superstitions, accumulated over centuries, can be washed away."

*-Nicaraguan Home Secretary Tomás Borge on February 4th, 1983*⁴

When the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* rose to power in Nicaragua in July 1979, the newly established government faced major socio-economic challenges. The last revolutionary insurrection in 1978 had led to many deaths, economic crisis and evidently dependency on foreign resources. Furthermore, the bad condition of the Nicaraguan education system - in the form of a high illiteracy rate and a system of higher education that was almost entirely exclusive to urban elites - was another challenge faced by the Sandinistas. From the very first months after Somoza's overthrow, promotion of the development of scientific and technical knowledge, alongside the reform of the popular education system, was perceived as the driving force for political and social prosperity for post-revolutionary Nicaragua.⁵

For better or worse, this had to be achieved while completely realigning the country's foreign policy. The United States had wielded strong influence over Nicaragua for more than a century and had supported the governments of Anastasio Somoza Debayle and his predecessors with state aid. After the revolution, Nicaragua gradually lost access to this kind of support, with Ronald Reagan's government instead assisting opposition militants. However, international cooperation was still much welcomed—and needed—by the Sandinistas in order to promote the renewal of the Nicaraguan society. The fostering of cultural and scientific exchange between the country and other states were essential components of the Nicaraguan plan for social reconstruction. While Nicaragua also maintained economic and diplomatic relations with various western European countries and its social democratic parties, relations between Nicaragua and Eastern Bloc countries in these fields saw a particular and gradual expansion after

post-revolutionary Sandinista government was evidenced by the National Literacy Crusade promoted in Nicaragua 1980. On the subject see Robert F. Arnove and Anthony Dewees, "Education and Revolutionary Transformation in Nicaragua, 1979-1990," *Comparative Education Review* 35, no. 1, Special Issue on Education and Socialist Revolution (Spring 1991): 92-109, <https://doi.org/10.1086/446997>.

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- 4 Speech given by Tomás Borge on February 4th, 1983 in Managua at the congress of the National Association of Nicaraguan Educators (ANDEN). In: Bruce Marcus, ed., *Nicaragua: The People's Revolution. Speeches by Sandinista Leaders* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 70-72.
- 5 The relevance of education and alphabetization for the

the Sandinistas assumed power.⁶ In addition to material aid, Nicaragua welcomed advisors and experts from different sectors and sent many students to attend courses in allied socialist countries like Cuba or the GDR, to name only a few examples.⁷ In an address from March 8th 1980, the Committee of Propaganda of the Nicaraguan *Centros Populares de Cultura*⁸ requested revolutionary brother nations (“pueblos hermanos revolucionarios”) worldwide to support the process of reconstruction in Nicaragua.

With the GDR being “one of the true brothers of Nicaragua, alongside with Cuba and the USSR”⁹ it is not surprising that the

country would be one of the first amongst these “pueblos hermanos,” providing its Nicaraguan comrades not only assistance in the politico-military sector, but also supporting them with the country’s social reconstruction. As early as October 1979, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture had consulted the GDR’s embassy in Managua regarding existing deals in the fields of culture and sciences and had explored the possibilities of intensifying cultural exchange between both countries.¹⁰ Following the policy of “socialist internationalism”, the Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten (MfAA), the East German Foreign Ministry, saw this as an opportunity to expand the GDR’s involvement in the ‘Third World’. Since at least the 1970s the GDR’s leadership had acknowledged the importance of a close cooperation with the political and intellectual elites of these countries in order to attract them to the “socialist project.”¹¹

Aside from Nicaragua, the GDR was most heavily involved in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique and

6 A considerable part of the research on the connections between Nicaragua and the Soviet Union dates from the 1980s and, due to the actuality of the issue, there is little consensus regarding the intensity of those relations.

7 Johannes Wilm, “On Sandinista ideas of past connections to the Soviet Union and Nicaraguan exceptionalism,” in *A Nicaraguan Exceptionalism? Debating the Legacy of the Sandinista Revolution*, ed. Hilary Francis (London: University of London Press, 2020), 87-101.

8 The *Centros Populares de Cultura* were state institutions for the coordination and management of diverse cultural projects in different cities in Nicaragua. See Gema D. Palazón, *Memoria y escrituras de Nicaragua. Cultura y discurso testimonial en la Revolución Sandinista* (Editions Publibook, 2010).

9 Speech from July, 1981 by Carlos Nuñez Téllez, member of the FSLN directorate. Quoted from: Odd Arne

Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 343-44.

10 PA AA, Mf AA M 60, ZR 2891/81, Letter from Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture to the GDR embassy in Managua from October 10, 1979.

11 See Rayk Einax, “Im Dienste außenpolitischer Interessen. Ausländische Studierende in der DDR am Beispiel Jenas,” *Die Hochschule: Journal für Wissenschaft und Bildung* 17, no. 1 (2008): 165.

Cuba, having both political as well as economic ambitions. According to the East German advisors in Nicaragua, the support given would be very much appreciated by the Nicaraguan population and would contribute to the prestige and reputation of the GDR amongst Nicaraguans. In fact, even before the cooperation between the two countries was contractually regulated, the idea of the GDR being a role model for states following a socialist path (“sozialistische Wege”), seems to have vastly influenced the approach of East German advisors and specialists in Nicaragua. For instance, during a visit of an East German delegation in Managua at the end of October 1979, the posted advisors attested that the power and performance of the German Democratic Republic were well known in Nicaragua and that the Sandinista leading cadre would be willing to make use of the GDR’s expertise on various fields, describing the East German actuation as exemplary.¹² Furthermore, the advisors considered that aid offers from capitalist states were only accepted by the Sandinistas if and when not attached to political terms.

The expansion of the GDR’s cultural policies throughout the Global South was carried out

12 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 2891/81, “Report from 1979 from the GDR embassy in Managua on the possibilities regarding the development of the cultural and scientific relations to Nicaragua.”

primarily through agreements and treaties, which regulated the delegation and reception of qualified personnel and stimulated new cultural contacts through the exchange of technical and scientific specialists. The “Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation”, ratified by Nicaragua and the German Democratic Republic in April 1980, suitably exemplifies this practice.

The agreement’s foundation was the “firm solidary bond between the two nations and governments in the common anti-imperialist struggle.”

¹³ By the mid-1980s the GDR had already sent 3.5 million schoolbooks to Nicaragua and built the educational centre “Ernst Thälmann” in Jinotepe, where around 300 apprentices graduated annually.¹⁴ Moreover, the GDR received a yearly number of Nicaraguan exchange students and sent specialists and experts to the country for further qualification of the local teachers and university lecturers. Not least, the GDR sent consultants to Nicaragua to support the FSLN in matters of political education.

13 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 5378/13. “Agreement between the government of the German Democratic Republic and the government of the Nicaraguan Republic on cultural and scientific cooperation,”1.

14 Merlin Berge and Nikolaus Werz, “Auf Tschekisten der DDR ist Verlaß” Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit und Nicaragua, *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* 27 (2010): 170.

More than a conflict of economic systems or a race for technological and military 'supremacy,' the Global Cold War can be viewed as a "clash between cultures and ideologies."¹⁵ Therefore, the politico-cultural cooperation between the two states had ideological underpinnings. As pointed out in one of the many reports of the East German advisors in Nicaragua, the "aid" ("solidarische Hilfe") provided by the GDR would not only contribute to the consolidation of the new government and facilitate the continuance of the Sandinista revolution, but would also ensure the integration of Nicaragua into the community of socialist states ("sozialistische Staatsgemeinschaft"), pointed out as being one of the main goals of the GDR's foreign policy.¹⁶

3. THE EAST-GERMAN-NICARAGUAN AGREEMENT ON CULTURAL AND SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION

The politico-cultural relations between the GDR and Nicaragua in the 1980s were marked, amongst other aspects, by the urgency of a social reform in Nicaragua and the country's efforts to establish a broad network with various nations worldwide, in order to put its plan of national reconstruction into practice. From the East German perspective, these relations could be perceived as an instrument to self-legitimize, as well as a way of disseminating its ideology and permeating the Nicaraguan state machinery. Since these politico-cultural relations comprised various 'segments of knowledge' (schooling, sciences, political consultancy and education etc.), a glance at three major sectors of this cooperation can be useful to understand the complex and, in some ways, contradictory character of the East German-Nicaraguan relations in the 1980s. In the following sections we will discuss the measures taken in the specific fields of schooling and academic education, arts and popular culture,¹⁷ as well as political consultancy and education.

15 Giles Scott-Smith and Joes Segal, "Introduction" in *Divided dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, eds. Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith and Joes Segal (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 1.

16 See e.g. the annual reports on the development of the cultural and scientific relations between Nicaragua and the GDR by the Embassy of the GDR in Nicaragua from December 12, 1981 and January 16, 1983. PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 580/86; PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 579/86.

17 Encompassing various fields from theatre, fine arts and literature to sports.

3.1. SCHOOLING AND ACADEMIC EDUCATION

At the end of the 1970s, the Nicaraguan educational system reflected the dynastic rule of the Somoza clan. Public schooling was in disarray and illiteracy rates were extremely high, reaching over 76 percent in rural areas. Only 22 percent of the children enrolled in public schools had completed sixth grade. Meanwhile, the situation in the higher-education system was rather different: while the number of university enrollments were higher than the Latin American average, tertiary education in Nicaragua remained restricted to urban elites.¹⁸ Correspondingly, the leaders of the FSLN declared their commitment to promoting cultural pluralism in Nicaragua, which could only be achieved by a broad reform of the educational system in the country.¹⁹ Consequently, after their triumph in July 1979, the Sandinistas proclaimed education as one of the new government's pillars, as well as an integral component of the revolution. The Sandinistas listed the guidelines for their educational policy emphasizing the relevance of extinguishing illiteracy, creating proper educational institutions for

18 Arnove and Dewees, "Education and Revolutionary Transformation in Nicaragua", 93-94.

19 Andrew J. Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 124-126.

adults, as well as promoting scientific and technical fields.²⁰ All these measures aimed to contribute to the transformation of the Nicaraguan educational system which would, in turn, operate as the political project's foundation for building a new and self-sustaining society.

While emphatically characterizing the educational system's reform as a matter of national concern, the Sandinistas simultaneously recognized that external support—be it via material donations or through the deployment of experts—was essential for the project's effective functioning. During the *Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización* from 1980, a campaign against illiteracy which mobilized thousands of Nicaraguan students and teachers, Nicaragua received the support of 16 countries and welcomed "brigadistas" from different parts of the globe.²¹ Amongst these countries, which were "setting an extraordinary example of solidarity and who have shared the illuminating energy of education"²² to the Nicaraguan people, was also the GDR.

20 See Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 140-41; Arnove and Dewees, *Education and Revolutionary Transformation in Nicaragua*, 94-95.

21 Cuba was one of the most heavily involved countries during the campaign in Nicaragua. On the *Cruzada* and the role of Cuba see Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 136-37.

22 Marcus, *Nicaragua: The People's Revolution*, 81.

The so-called international pedagogical work (“pädagogische Auslandsarbeit”) of the GDR²³ comprised the activities of educators in special schools and academic institutions as well as in the training of teachers. Further, it stipulated the assignment of guest lecturers and language instructors. As was the case in other Global South countries, the GDR’s involvement in the Nicaraguan educational system’s reform proceeded in accordance to this model. This pedagogical work could also be realized in the form of consultancy work on the administrative level of educational institutions and ministries. Officials in the GDR’s embassy in Nicaragua considered the deployment of experts and specialists, not only in educational institutions but also in the Department of Education in the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture, as highly important. The know-how of such specialists in the area of socialist education planning (“sozialistische Bildungsplanung”) should have been passed on to the Nicaraguan comrades at all levels of the educational system.²⁴ Little is known about the prerequisites East German experts or specialists had to fulfil in order to exercise their function in the area of education. Interestingly, “basic knowledge of

23 Arnove and Dewees, *Education and Revolutionary Transformation in Nicaragua*, 95.

24 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 2891/81. “Situational report on the Nicaraguan educational system,” 3

Spanish” was considered to be “more than sufficient,” as mentioned in the work plan.²⁵ One can only speculate whether this was more an expression of the general East German conduct regarding the work of its functionaries in the ‘Third World,’ or a result of the relative lack of Spanish speaking experts in the GDR.

Regarding the area of education, the East German-Nicaraguan treaty on cultural and scientific cooperation stipulated joint work in the fields of popular education (for children and adults), vocational and technical training for young adults, and higher-education. The GDR’s main tasks in the field of popular education (“Volksbildung”) were the reconstruction of schools and educational institutions, many of which had been destroyed during the revolutionary insurrections as well as during the 1972 earthquake, and the building of new educational facilities. The GDR also declared to be very committed to the professional training of young adults, especially in technical fields.²⁶ Besides the deployment of

25 Ibid., 3.

26 This was one of the main motivations for the construction of a centre for technical education in the Nicaraguan city of Jinotepe. The “Politecnico Ernesto Thälmann” was financed by solidarity funds (“Solidaritätsmitteln”) of the GDR and built with the help of East-German specialists, members of the Freundschaftsbrigade of the Free German Youth (FDJ), as well as Nicaraguan educators and training teachers. See Lothar Fratzke, “Heimat einer FDJ-Freundschaftsbrigade.

specialists and advisors in higher education areas, the GDR stipulated the delegation of professors and lecturers, emphasizing however, the importance of student exchanges between East German and Nicaraguan universities.

A careful look into the sources reveals that the number of Nicaraguan students going to the GDR was significantly higher than vice-versa. The number of examined sources is not sufficient to make a precise statement about the gender ratio in the exchange programs. Nonetheless, a list of candidates for exchange programs in the GDR, compiled by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, provides us with an interesting picture of the circumstances: there were 4 women among 27 candidates, one of whom was the daughter of a well-known late Guerrillero.²⁷ The

Das Berufsausbildungszentrum in Jinotepe" in *Aufbruch nach Nicaragua: deutsch-deutsche Solidarität im Systemwettstreit*, eds. Erika Harzer and Willi Volks (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2008), 141-144.

27 2 PA AA, Mf AA M 60, ZR 2892/81. "List of candidates for scholarships in the German Democratic Republic". While during the literacy campaign in Nicaragua the Sandinistas emphasized the importance of women in the process of educational reconstruction of the country, this emphasis seems to fade when it came to exchange programs between Nicaragua and its "brother nations." On the role of women during the campaign against illiteracy see Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 134.

selection of these "young emissaries" ("Junge Sendboten"²⁸) should take place under the supervision and codetermination of the East German specialists. Since it would "bring socialist brother nations together," thus leading to a broader "socialist economic and social integration,"²⁹ exchange programs fulfilled an important function for the GDR's domestic and foreign policies. While the SED leadership attributed the foreign students also a certain "recruitment potential," which could be put to good use on the national territory, officials at the MfAA considered this exchange as a good opportunity to strengthen even further political and economic cooperation.³⁰

3.2. CULTURE AND ARTS

If we understand the Cold War as a "struggle for cultural supremacy,"³¹ in which the Soviet Union, the United States, and their allies found themselves in constant competition for the most prestigious artists, artworks and cultural

28 Einax, *Im Dienste außenpolitischer Interessen*, 162.

29 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 579/86, "Brief assessment of the development of cultural and scientific relations between the GDR and Nicaragua in 1982," 1-2.

30 Einax, *Im Dienste außenpolitischer Interessen*, 183.

31 For a broader study on the linkage of Cold War ideological warfare and culture see David Caute, *The Dancer Defects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

productions in order to dominate on a politico-cultural level, the GDR-Nicaraguan cultural cooperation appears to be embedded in a constructed broader political identity. At that time, referring to the black-and-white ideological divide meant referring to one cultural and political concept by refusing the other. However, this framing is, at best, suitable to describe the relations between countries within the respective blocs, rather than their relationship with non-aligned states. An example of a contradictory or, at least, flexible and ambivalent attitude towards ideological alliance in terms of artistic exchange, is the cooperation between the aligned GDR and non-aligned Nicaragua. Both partners simultaneously referred to socialist values to underline the urgency of their culturally mutual interests, while only one of the two sides positioned itself “inside” the socialist cultural bloc system.³² As a consequence, socialist ideology traversed cultural borders and formed a recurring reference element in official communication.

32 Nevertheless, ideological affiliation was marked by inner differences as well. From 1986 onwards, GDR and Soviet Union were distancing, as Honecker refused Gorbatschow’s opening and reformist tendencies. Hermann Wentker, “Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen. Die DDR im internationalen System 1949 – 1989,” *Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte* 72, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 490-91.

Only two months after the FSLN junta had formed the government council in September 1979, East German foreign minister Oskar Fischer travelled to Nicaragua.³³ The newly formed Ministry of Culture in Managua had already contacted GDR officials in October 1979.³⁴ These events express an apparent mutual interest that was fundamental for the shaping of the Cultural Agreement, signed a few months later in April 1980. As for the official cultural interactions between the GDR and Nicaragua, theatre and music seemed to be dominant fields for cultural exchange right from the beginning.³⁵

Nevertheless, cultural cooperation between the post-revolutionary country led by a former guerilla group and the bureaucratic German socialists did not always work the way it was planned. In accordance to the earlier cited

33 PA AA, Mf AA, M 95, ZR 12079/93.

34 The Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture in October 1979 aimed to intensify the relationship to GDR in the area of Culture and sees the cultural exchange as an effective instrument for national reconstruction. PA AA, MfAA M 60, ZR 2891/ 81.

35 The Cultural Agreement from 1981 names theatre and music already in its first article, while sports appears in the 6th and film in the 8th article: PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 5378/13 “Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Nationalen Erneuerung der Republik Nikaragua über kulturelle und wissenschaftliche Zusammenarbeit,” 1-4.

“clash of cultures and ideologies,” Nicaraguans and Germans both had to adapt: the former to the fact, that many of their requests for donations, internships, and funding of cultural material were rejected; GDR officials in contrast were surprised that some of their planned “diverse and generous measures”³⁶ were met with little response. An assessment from 1982 on the development of the cultural and scientific relations suggests a confident behavior of the young Latin American republic, seeing itself not in the inferior role of a petitioner. Instead, Nicaraguans wanted to obtain advice and exchange on an equal level. By referring to concepts such as solidarity and brotherhood to gain support from socialist countries they seemed to “press the right buttons,” while they maintained cultural contacts to capitalist countries as well; this gave them access to both ideological ‘worlds.’

Later, Nicaragua proposed the exchange of goods and people in smaller disciplines apart from theatre and music, as for example juggling, or circus,³⁷ an idea that was taken up by the official “Work plan

of cultural cooperation between Nicaragua and the GDR for the years 1989 till 1991.”³⁸ The example illustrates a growing self-esteem and a stronger level of organization in the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture, found in the official correspondence and arrangements from the end of the 1980s, whereas artists in Nicaragua still had to work under precarious circumstances.

During Cold War times, national cultural politics of both the East and the West were integrated in a greater project of (re)producing capitalist or communist “divided dreamworlds,”³⁹ and in doing so many times they ignored the individual artists’ political opinion by interpreting it only through a special, narrow framework. Producing artistic work and exchanging talented students and experts underlined the cultural strength and progress, whereas the artists themselves could have intended a different meaning or would even have preferred to stay ‘outside’ an imagined collective appropriation. One can only

36 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 579/86, “Brief assessment of the development of cultural and scientific relations between the GDR and Nicaragua in 1982” through GDR embassy in Managua, authored by Macht, II. Secretary, January 16, 1983, 1.

37 Nicaragua proposes the sending of an animal trainer and asks for internships for “maestros de circo.” PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 2895/94, 5.

38 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 5378/13, “Work plan between the Government of the GDR and the Government of the Republic of Nicaragua over Cultural and Scientific Cooperation in the years 1989-1991,” 12.

39 The authors define both capitalism and communism as “dreamworlds,” because they can be interpreted as “[...]collective dream projects, as thought systems or ideologies supported by ‘dream communities’ which share a common interpretation of the world,” Scott-Smith and Segal, “Introduction,” 1-2.

speculate what Hilda Vogl's⁴⁰ political position in detail might have been, as she was proposed to travel to the GDR by Nicaraguan Cultural Workers' Association, accompanying 40 of her pieces of art, but she was definitely representative for Nicaraguan muralism at the time. Donaldo Altamirano's⁴¹ planned visit in East Germany provides another example for exchanging artistic expertise through people's participation in art fairs and meetings of arts criticism.⁴²

The "Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de la Cultura" proposed the exchange of these two artists and listed further artists by name. Once again, the gender ratio disproportion in this sector is worth noticing: only one woman in comparison to three men were proposed for the short courses, as well for the two-year internships.⁴³ We cannot draw certain conclusions as to the degree of

female integration into the cultural sector through GDR-Nicaraguan cooperation, as all documents are only formulated in masculine form in terms of language, women are not mentioned at all as *Spezialistinnen*.

In addition to the fine arts, theatre was also an integral part of the cultural cooperation: apart from being a public event, it became a vehicle for political communication, particularly when the GDR and Nicaragua corresponded about the possible production of "Die Mutter" by Bertolt Brecht to celebrate the second Anniversary of Sandinist Revolution.⁴⁴ The playwright's communist political opinion made his work a well-suited reference within GDR-Nicaraguan cultural cooperation, in which Brecht served as an East German poster child. Far from being only a national wish for aggrandizement and self-legitimation, the GDR evidently wanted to strengthen progressive forces in the socialist bloc, considering the special role of Nicaragua in the US sphere of influence, and had an educational and ideological mission. The *Kulturarbeitsplan* (Cultural Work plan) from 1981 justified GDR engagement through the idea of rendering solidarity and support to ideologically related movements.⁴⁵

40 Hilda Vogl (also known as Hidalgo Vogl Montalegre) was a Nicaraguan muralist and painter, some of her pieces of art are in: David Kunzle, ed., *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua 1979-1992*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16, 51, 196.

41 Donaldo Altamirano was a well-known Nicaraguan painter and writer. Arnulfo Agüero, "Muere el escritor y pintor Donaldo Altamirano," *La Prensa*, October 25, 2016, <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2016/10/25/cultura/2123258-fallece-donaldo-altamirano-de-un-infarto>.

42 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 2895/94, "Propuesta de Intercambio Cultural" of the "Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de la Cultura."

43 Ibid., 3.

44 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, 2892/81, Telegram "ihr 474:" from Gen. Moeckel (Managua) to Gen. Dr. Tautz, October 29, 1980.

45 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 2891/81, "Sketch of Cultural Work Plan," 5.

Despite the important role of Cold War binaries in the sphere of foreign policy, implemented measures, adapted methods, and the important place of consultancy and transfer of knowledge in cultural fields were not always ideologically justified. The decision to send experts and educators to Nicaragua was, to some degree, rooted in pragmatic thinking and financial pressure. After having evaluated the cultural measures, planned by the Cultural Agreement and the Cultural Work plan, the GDR embassy, instead of qualifying cadres at home, recommended the cheaper version of sending educators to Latin America.⁴⁶ In that sense East Germany profited twice: by secretly saving costs on the one hand and appearing as a travelling teacher, or ‘illuminating savior’ in European colonial tradition on the other.

The economically weakened Nicaragua was eager to participate on the international stage as well. The country’s need for donations, as well as its reliance on the goodwill of further industrialized countries simultaneously bore the possibility to position itself as a post-revolutionary and multi-influenced country, threatened by the USA but still nonaligned, in order to be able to cooperate with a variety of communist and capitalist actors

46 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 579/86, “Brief assessment of the Development of Cultural and Scientific Relations between the GDR and Nicaragua in 1982,” 4.

at once. This position may have helped to make the GDR accept their requests, as East German cultural relations during the Cold War were always formed under the impression of being confronted with richer capitalist countries and their ability to offer broad cultural exchange.

Its own economically tense circumstances and the practical problems of cultural relationships became overt when the GDR was directly confronted by the constant threat of cultural and financial contest with capitalist actors. The example of Indiana Gonzalez’ posture towards her participation in the “5th International Summer Course for Culture” in the GDR illustrates how Nicaraguans made use of this fact—which they referred to as diplomatic strategy—that increased pressure on East German officials. Gonzalez was head of *Division IV* of the newly formed Ministry of Culture in Managua, and had understood that her attendance at the Summer Course included the pay of travel costs, which was not the case in the eyes of the responsible “Genosse Dr. Greiser”, who had neglected to explain it to her. After the East German embassy had clarified the situation, Gonzalez asked if the GDR was capable of paying the costs, as Nicaragua “would be keen to participate not only in cultural seminars in capitalist states, who would usually pay for the whole stay.”⁴⁷

47 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 2892/81, “Letter from GDR Embassy in

3.3. POLITICAL CONSULTANCY AS POLITICAL EDUCATION

The educational mandate that underlay the exchange of specialists, experts, and expertise, codified in the Cultural Agreement from 1980, characterized not only East German operations in the fields of popular culture and education, it structured political relations between Nicaragua and GDR even stronger. The East German cultural sense of mission is to be found in the design and implementation of political consultancy and was to a certain degree rooted in the idea of belonging to the ‘culturally superior’ side in a divided Cold War world—a world of constant struggle. Adopted by the two superpowers and their official cultural positioning as hegemonic ideologic forces, this worldview influenced East German involvement in Nicaragua in a double sense. First, because consultants referred to the “collective dream world” of real existing socialism, but, secondly, because they perceived themselves as avant-gardist and superior to their FSLN “students.”

GDR policy in terms of FSLN consultancy ranged from benevolent behavior and a self-confident appearance to a rather arrogant attitude towards a possible socialist ally with less experience in terms of real socialist state organization

(“*Realsozialismus*”).⁴⁸ The relationship between the consultants and their socialist comrades conceived the Nicaraguans more as students, while both partners shared the common agenda to advance the process of reconstruction in Nicaragua.

The GDR’s service in the Central American country was one strategy to acquire influence in the international sphere and to spread a Marxist-Leninist agenda while gaining international respect. In the act of passing on a specific political culture, the East Germans were very aware of their integration into a bigger “framework.” They found themselves in concurrence, or at least in constant comparison to the Soviet Union’s political internationalist work. Efficiency was measured glancing to Moscow.⁴⁹

Far from being only a consultant, the GDR liked to see itself as avant-gardist educator, with the final report by the political consultant’s group in 1988 mentioning the FSLN’s “political maturity”⁵⁰ as one criterion to

48 The term “Realsozialismus” was popularized from the 1970s onwards, as a designation for the political systems of countries like the GDR and alluded to a highly “developed” socialist system. See Klaus Ziemer, “Real existierender Sozialismus” in Dieter Nohlen, ed. *Lexikon der Politik*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Directmedia, 2004), 535 f.

49 PA AA, Mf AA, MAV Managua, ZR 2888/94, “Letter to Günter Sieber” that refers to a visit of members of FSLN in Germany, October 19, 1987, 1.

50 PA AA, Mf AA, MAV Managua,

Managua to the Office for Cultural Foreign Relationships in the GDR from Gen. Dietrich, July 4, 1980”, 2.

measure the consultancy's success or failure. Nevertheless, this might be the characteristic style of the Marxist-Leninist GDR to express a sense of progress to reach a better world, it upgrades the act of consultancy while downgrading the people it was addressed to at the same time. The political consultants deployed in the Managua bureaucracy perceived themselves as envoys in the role of facilitators, whose state of knowledge was superior to those they intended to educate, form and illuminate, even if the agreements were established between formally equal partners.

Treating the Nicaraguan cadres as students was nourished by the existing age discrepancy between the East German consultants and the latter. According to Fischer in 1979, citing in turn members of the State Council of National Renovation in Nicaragua, the cadres were very young and militias were formed out of 13 to 16 year-old members.⁵¹ The average age for a member of the cadres was under 20 years old and “unexperienced,” “without expertise”—though also capable of redeeming this inexperience through a “fighting spirit.”⁵² Another two years later, the GDR embassy in Managua still stated

that there was little qualification amongst the cadres and described the young ones as full of “ignorance and inexperience” which would lead to a frequent change in office.⁵³ Schoolmasterly judging of their capacity of formation and evaluation of their skills to concentrate, the final report on consultancy for FSLN resembles a school certificate given to children in primary school, crediting them with a “thirst of knowledge, flexibility of mind” while simultaneously being “volatile, easily distractible and influenced,” as well as tending to a “sporadic work style [...]”⁵⁴ Rather than as a socialist European politician speaking about an allied Latin American partner, the author seems to speak as a “teacher” judging his “students,” evaluating their intellectual capacities and their will to properly behave.

Nevertheless, FSLN members had confidently demanded advice through consultants of the central committee of the SED, especially because they relied on cadres of the old Somoza state system, who often were of a different political affiliation. Embedded in an avant-gardist attitude towards FSLN—seeing them technically as equal but practically treating them as inferior,

ZR 2888/94, “Final Report of ZK Consultants Group in Managua,” February 2, 1988, 4.

51 Here again we miss more details on the gender relations inside FSLN, there is no reference to women.

52 PA AA, Mf AA, M 95, ZR 12079/93, “Report after a visit of Oskar Fischer in Nicaragua in 1979”, 11.

53 PA AA, Mf AA, M 60, ZR 580/86, “Report on the Development of Cultural and Scientific Relationships of GDR Embassy in Managua,” January 16, 1983, 3.

54 PA AA, Mf AA, MAV Managua, ZR 2888/94, “Final Report of ZK Consultants Group in Managua,” February 2, 1988, 5.

with a tendency to paternalism—the GDR though showed respect for their achievements, as the final report in 1988 documents.⁵⁵

Recurring fundamental values structured and guided the cooperation between the two countries. Besides the mutual reference to internationalism, Nicaraguan officials emphasized the clarity, consistency, and respect towards work, as well as the good relationship of trust to the people in everyday life as remarkable characteristics of the Berlin SED.⁵⁶ The communication about such facts between both parties and inside GDR offices in Managua and Berlin influenced the political education, as insights circulated back to the consultants.

Therefore, the GDR “teachers” themselves learned from their activity in a new environment, where they had to face the new challenges of “clashing cultures and ideologies.”⁵⁷ A rather unintended side effect of consultancy for FSLN might have been the personal knowledge GDR officials brought home after having completed their mission. Dionisio Marengo wrote in a letter to former-consultant Gert Ulrich, expressing his regret that he had not obtained maximum profit from his stay in Nicaragua, but was sure that Ulrich would have learned something

about the difficult circumstances in Nicaragua and reassured him “[...] aquí tendra siempre un pequeño pedazo de Patria Libre.”⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

When the very “rigid” world of diplomatic codex clashed with the fluid subject of “culture(s),” and the infamously bureaucratic GDR met the rebel group turned government FSLN, the ensuing interactions contained various challenges and misunderstandings, highlighting the provisional or even experimental character of measures. Within the inter- and transcultural engagement especially the representatives of the East German state were acting with two conflicting understandings of their role: they saw themselves as partners in an internationalist fight against imperialism that emphasized equality and solidarity, but also presented deep-rooted ideas of European superiority—nourished by their self-perception as a socialist avant-garde—that reduced their Central American comrades to mere pupils.

The role of the East Germans as “educators” was even more prominent in the fields of political consultancy and education, less so in the mostly cooperative work in the field of schooling and academic

55 Ibid., 4.

56 PA AA, Mf AA, MAV Managua, ZR 2888/94, “Letter to Günter Sieber”.

57 Scott-Smith and Segal, “Introduction,” 1.

58 PA AA, Mf AA, MAV Managua, ZR 2888/94, “Letter from Dionisio Marengo to Gert Ulrich,” November 4, 1988.

education. Although the sources offer little insight into the numerical proportion of the participants, especially regarding the East German students, the exchange programs listed in the accessible documents point to a severe imbalance, since far more students from Nicaragua visited the GDR, while the relation was inverse with lecturers. It remains debatable to which degree this was a result of more limited capacities of the Nicaraguan universities, an expectation that there was less to learn there for German students, or the excessive caution the GDR-authorities showed when granting permissions to leave the country.

Ambivalence and simultaneity of ideologic and rather pragmatic decisions characterize the different areas of cultural cooperation. Taking place in the fields of culture - especially theatre, arts and music - education and political education, it was mainly driven by the idea that experience, knowledge and culture implemented through education were central principles for national and revolutionary liberation. Apart from the cultural sovereignty and freedom that should be obtained it was a practical way of influencing the other country and self-assert on a national level, thereby increasing the own international prestige in the global Cold War world.

Although the present paper provides an insight into the complexity of the cultural entanglement between the two countries, our analysis offers—due to the singular perspective

of the documents surveyed—little information in the ways differences in gender and race might have influenced the interactions between the German and Nicaraguan associates and further bolstered the conception of an unequal cooperation. Accessing different sources that provide better insight into the Nicaraguan perspective might help historical research to avoid involuntarily reproducing the power imbalance that was inherent in this cross-continental relationship.