van Ommen on Berth, 'Food and Revolution: Fighting Hunger in Nicaragua, 1960-1993'  

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Revolutionaries who set out to radically transform societies often encounter a range of obstacles that are difficult to overcome, including a diversity of opinions about the shape society should take, international interference, and a lack of financial and material resources. More often than not, brief moments of revolutionary optimism quickly devolve into long periods of disillusionment and counterrevolution. In the literature on the Nicaraguan Revolution (1979-90), international historians have mostly grappled with the question of the extent to which one actor, namely, the United States, was responsible for the ultimate failure of the Sandinista revolutionaries to improve the daily lives of the Nicaraguan people.[1]

By writing the history of the Nicaraguan Revolution—and the period leading up to the Sandinista triumph on July 19, 1979—through the lens of food, Christiane Berth’s *Food and Revolution: Fighting Hunger in Nicaragua, 1960-1993* provides a new window onto contemporary Nicaraguan history. She argues that a focus on “food and its scarcity” can help us to better understand the “rise and demise” of the Sandinista project (p. 5). The Somoza dictatorship, Berth writes, was “severely weakened by the crisis of the Nicaraguan food system in the 1970s” (p. 6). This weakness contributed to the growing popularity of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in the late 1970s. Similarly, in the late 1980s, Berth argues, after years of civil war and scarcity, the Nicaraguan people were “exhausted” as they “struggled to provide three daily meals to their families” (p. 7). This lack of food security caused Nicaraguans to lose faith in the Sandinistas’ revolutionary project, convincing them to vote for the opposition alliance in the elections of 1990 instead.

This is an ambitious book with multiple layers of analysis. On the international level, the book argues that we should incorporate a range of foreign actors beyond the US into the history of the Nicaraguan Revolution, including international organizations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO); relief agencies, such as Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE); and developmental projects of European governments. Berth draws on an impressive range of sources and data from archives in Switzerland, Germany, the US, Italy, and Nicaragua, tracing how the daily calorie intake of Nicaraguan people fluctuated over time. At a more grassroots level, *Food and Revolution* urges historians to consider the “consumer” as a social identity and historical actor, demonstrating that the government’s distribution rules and focus on nationally produced goods often clashed with consumers’ individual desires (p. 9). Finally, the book makes the
important point that the Nicaraguan Caribbean should be better integrated into contemporary Nicaraguan history. Considering this, it was somewhat surprising to find an individual chapter at the end of the book that chronicles the history of the Caribbean coast from the 1960s until the 1990s. Perhaps these stories could have been incorporated into the book’s otherwise chronological narrative.

The book achieves many of its objectives. It shows how international actors tried to increase access to foodstuffs by introducing new and nutritional products, such as canned food, powdered milk, and corn-soy milk, into Nicaraguans’ diets. It also demonstrates how ambitious projects launched by international agencies and the FSLN sometimes clashed with local realities, as Nicaraguans rejected foods that they deemed tasteless or visually unappealing, such as brown sugar or large beans (instead of the traditional small red bean). In the 1980s, donated and imported Eastern European foods, for example, mackerel from the Soviet Union, were often rejected by consumers. Nicaraguans, it turned out, preferred other types of fish than mackerel and meat was considered “more prestigious” than fish or vegetarian meals (p. 140). Drawing on several oral history interviews, Berth also shows how Nicaraguan women found creative ways to deal with food shortages, as they invented new recipes and participated in the Sandinistas’ urban gardening campaigns to grow their own vegetables.

Despite these illuminating anecdotes, Nicaraguan voices are not always as present in the book as they could have been. I was left wanting to read more about how the Sandinistas developed their food policies. Why did Nicaraguan officials make certain decisions regarding food distribution and agricultural reform? Throughout the book, this remains somewhat unclear. In chapter 3, for example, the author writes that “we do not know” how the FSLN evaluated proposals by an international advisor regarding small-scale farming due to “a lack of sources” on this topic (p. 77). Similarly, considering the book’s focus on the revolutionary consumer, I was expecting to read more about what Joshua Frens-String has called “the daily experience of revolutionary food politics” in Nicaragua.[2] A bit too often to my taste, the Nicaraguan response to and perception of certain food policies remains obscured. In chapter 4, for instance, the author writes that “we lack sources” on how women responded to proposals to cook more vegetarian meals (p. 109). Could further interviews with former government officials and women not have provided us with—at the very least partial—answers to these questions?

This book will be of interest to historians of Nicaragua, consumer culture, and the global politics of hunger. Through its multilayered analysis, it shows how the trajectory of the Nicaraguan Revolution was shaped by a range of actors that scholars have not yet considered in much depth, including relief agencies, European and Latin American governments, consumers, and officials concerned with food distribution and agricultural reform. As a result, it is a welcome contribution to an exciting and growing academic debate in which historians of Central America discuss how the international, transnational, and local intersected and shaped the trajectory of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

Notes


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