

The Somoza Dynasty

The Rise of Anastasio Somoza García



Anastasio Somoza García was just short of thirty-five years old when the departing U.S. marines turned over to him the command of the National Guard. In the years immediately following the departure of the marines, Somoza worked efficiently to consolidate his control over the guard, purging officers who might have stood in his way. Also, on February 21, 1934, he gave his subordinates permission to capture and murder Augusto César Sandino. Sandino's execution was followed by the persecution and execution of hundreds of men, women, and children living in the semiautonomous region previously set aside for the former guerrillas.

By 1936, Somoza was sufficiently sure of his control of the National Guard and Nicaraguan politics to overthrow the elected president, Juan B. Sacasa and stage an "election" in which he was the inevitable winner. He was inaugurated on January 1, 1937, beginning the forty-two-and-a-half year reign of the Somoza family.

The Rule of Anastasio Somoza García (1937 – 1956)

"Tacho" Somoza was the dictator of Nicaragua for nineteen years. In these years he developed an effective style of rule that was to characterize the Somoza dynasty until the late 1960s. He ruled Nicaragua with a strong arm, deriving his power from three main sources: the ownership or control of large portions of the Nicaraguan economy, the military support of the National Guard, and his acceptance of support from the United States. Family members and close associates were given key positions within the government and the military. The Somoza family also controlled the Liberal Party (PLN), which in turn controlled the legislature and judicial system, thus giving Somoza García absolute power over every sphere of Nicaraguan politics.

The guard's loyalty was assured by keeping direct command in the family and by continuing the practice of psychologically isolating the guardsmen from the people by encouraging them to be corrupt and exploitative. Accordingly, gambling, prostitution, smuggling, and other forms of vice were run directly by guardsmen. In addition, it was necessary to pay bribes or kickbacks to guard officers or soldiers if a person wanted to engage in any type of business activity. In effect, the guard was a sort of Mafia in uniform, which served simultaneously as the personal bodyguard of the Somoza family. The institutional power of the National Guard grew in most government-owned enterprises, until eventually it controlled the national radio and telegraph networks, the postal and immigration services, health services, the internal revenue service, and the national railroads.

Continued on next page

Somoza García built an immense fortune for himself and his family during the 1940s. Among his many industrial enterprises, Somoza García owned textile companies, sugar mills, rum distilleries, the merchant marine lines, the national Nicaraguan Airlines, and La Salud dairy—the country's only pasteurized milk facility. Somoza García also gained large profits from economic concessions to national and foreign companies, bribes, and illegal exports. By the end of World War II, Somoza García had amassed one of the largest fortunes in the region—an estimated US\$60 million.

Somoza García had many political enemies, and coups against him were attempted periodically, even within the National Guard. For protection, he constructed a secure compound within his residence and kept personal bodyguards, independent of the National Guard, with him wherever he went. Nevertheless, on September 21, 1956, while attending a PLN party in León to celebrate his nomination for the presidency, Somoza García was fatally wounded by Rigoberto López Pérez, a twenty-seven-year-old Nicaraguan poet, who had managed to pass through Somoza García's security. The dictator was flown to the Panama Canal Zone, where he died eight days later.

Luis Somoza
(1957 – 1967)

Luis Somoza Debayle assumed the position of interim president after his father's death. His brother Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle took over leadership of the National Guard. A major political repression campaign followed the assassination: many political opponents were tortured and imprisoned by the National Guard and the government imposed press censorship and suspended many civil liberties. In 1957, Luis Somoza Debayle was formally "elected" to a term that would expire in 1963.

In 1960 Nicaragua joined El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the establishment of the Central American Common Market. The main objective of the regional economic group was to promote trade among member countries. Under this partnership, trade and manufacturing increased, greatly stimulating economic growth.

In the international political sphere, Luis Somoza Debayle's anticommunist stance won government favor and support from the United States. In 1959 Nicaragua was among the first nations to condemn the Cuban Revolution, and the Nicaraguan government played a leading role in the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, allowing the Cuban exile brigade to use military bases on the Caribbean coast to launch the failed maneuver.

All was not well, however, during Luis Somoza's reign. A new opposition group, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) had begun guerrilla operations in 1962. In response to these "subversive" activities, the United States helped increase the National Guard's anti-guerrilla capabilities.

Continued on next page

**Anastasio
Somoza
Debayle
(1967 – 1979)**

Anastasio Somoza Debayle gained control of Nicaragua in a blatantly rigged election in June 1967. As chief of the National Guard, he relied on the old tradition of encouraging corruption and protecting officers from prosecution for crimes committed against civilians. Whereas Luis had surrounded himself with a group of highly trained development technicians, Anastasio soon began replacing these skilled administrators with essentially unqualified cronies and political allies. Anastasio showed no restraint in using public office for personal enrichment. The result was that by the 1970s Somoza's legitimacy and civilian power base were evaporating rapidly and the government was becoming increasingly corrupt and inefficient.

After the 1972 earthquake leveled a 600-square block area in the heart of Managua, Somoza chose to turn the national disaster to short-term personal advantage. He allowed the National Guard to plunder and sell international relief materials and to participate in looting the devastated commercial sector. In addition, Somoza and his associates used their control of the government to channel international relief funds to their own pockets. The promised reconstruction of the heart of the city never took place. Emergency housing funds channeled to Nicaragua by the Agency for International Development went disproportionately into the construction of luxury housing for National Guard officers, while the homeless poor were asked to content themselves with hastily constructed wooden shacks.

It was at this point that open expression of popular discontent began to surface. A series of strikes and demonstrations developed as citizens became increasingly angry and politically mobilized. In addition, many independent businessmen resented the way Somoza had muscled his way into the construction and banking sectors. They were increasingly angry at being asked to pay new emergency taxes at a time when Somoza was using his position to appropriate international relief funds. As a result, more and more young people from elite backgrounds joined the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN).

In December 1974, a unit of the FSLN held a group of elite Managua partygoers hostage until the government met a series of demands, including payment of a large ransom and the transportation of 14 imprisoned FSLN rebels and themselves to Cuba. After the event, Somoza imposed martial law and sent his National Guard into the countryside to root out the "terrorists." In the process, the National Guard engaged in extensive pillage, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, rape, and summary execution of hundreds of peasants. The Roman Catholic Church demanded an explanation of these atrocities from Somoza and then denounced these human rights violations before the world.

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President Jimmy Carter, advocating the promotion of human rights internationally, pressed Somoza to change his policies. In response, Somoza ordered the National Guard to stop terrorizing the peasantry, and reinstated freedom of the press. Newspapers such as Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's *La Prensa* began to cover opposition activities and discuss in detail the past and present corruption and rights violations of the Somoza regime. The newspaper ran articles on opposition meetings, successful guerrilla actions, and the fate of "missing" peasants in guerrilla areas.

A group of prominent citizens—professionals, businessmen, and clergy who became known as The Twelve—denounced the dictatorship and called for a change in government that would include the FSLN. Most Nicaraguans now felt, as did The Twelve, that

“there can be no dialogue with Somoza . . . because he is the principal obstacle to all rational understanding . . . through the long dark history of *Somocismo*, dialogues with the dictatorship have only served to strengthen it . . .”

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