ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter

Vol.11 – Issue 1 [July 2024]

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Accepted: 28 June 2024 / Published online: 31 July 2024

How to cite:

Marty S. (2024), On Weathering: Anti-Imperialist Solidarity Struggles Around the Nicaragua Mural in Berlin After 2018, *Alternautas,* 11(1), 59-84. DOI: 10.31273/an.v11i1.1590.

University of Warwick Press
http://www.alternautas.net

ISSN - 2057-4924

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Abstract

This article looks at the process of historical reinterpretation and anti-imperialist struggle around the Nicaragua mural in (former East) Berlin to demonstrate how internationalist solidarity does not unfold singularly but in a multi-layered, often contradictory manner. Since 2018, this mural has turned from an inconspicuous site into a place of contestation. On the one hand, for residents, the mural has transformed into a projection of rescuing and reinstating memory of the former GDR's efforts of internationalist friendship and solidarity. On the other hand, it has become a site for political struggle for Nicaraguan exiles living in the area. Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in Nicaragua and Germany in 2018–2019 and 2023, this article complicates how memory practices shape everyday lives in Berlin for German and Nicaraguan residents alike. Their divergent interpretations of the mural's meaning sheds light on the tensions of memory politics vis à vis political and historical reinterpretation and demonstrate the potential for the Nicaragua mural to place a magnifying glass over the anti-imperial politics of Berlin.

Keywords: Solidarity, Anti-Imperialism, Nicaragua, East Berlin, Mural, Memory

Introduction

Despite its notable size of 255m², the Nicaragua mural in Eastern Berlin's Lichtenberg district is easy to miss. Painted on a windowless gable wall on a five-

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story residential block of apartments, a former cooperative building, its imperceptible appearance hides its once political clout. The mural, officially entitled "Nicaraguan Village – Monimbó 1978" and known locally as the "Nicaragua mural," depicts the village of Monimbó, a former town that today forms part of the city of Masaya (see figure 1). A large volcano, most likely the Masaya Volcano, looms over the scene in the background.[2] The artist, Nicaraguan *muralista* Manuel García Moia, was commissioned to create the artwork in 1985 by the German Democratic Republic's Ministry of Culture and the East Berlin City Council.[3] García Moia was one of Nicaragua's most renowned artists who employed a distinctively primitivist style (Kunzle, 1995, p.69–70). At first glance, the colourful picture depicts a simple country life in the tropics: a cluster of dwellings with thatched roofs, banana palms, and free-roaming livestock. However, a closer look reveals the gruesome war scenes taking place—the grievances of Nicaragua's civil war before the Sandinista revolutionary triumph in 1979 (see Figure 2).

[2] Volcanoes have long been featured as symbols of insurrection in Nicaragua, be it around the FSLN insurrection (Kunzle 1995, 68) or the 2018 mass protests where the slogan "*juntos somos un volcán*" ("together, we're a volcano") featured prominently.

[3] In fact, García Moia was commissioned to paint a a second mural in the nearby Wilhelmsberg school, entitled "Folk Festival in Monimbó". Given the mural's inside location and constraint of public access, this second mural has received much less attention.

Figure 1: The mural after the 2019 restoration. Picture taken by the author, February 6, 2023.

Figure 2: Depictions of war grievances. Picture taken by the author, February 6, 2023.

Murals are a common form of political expression in Nicaragua and have been deeply embedded in Nicaraguan national cultural identity since a leftwing revolution in 1979 – when the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN) staged a successful armed revolution against Nicaragua's then-President Anastasio Somoza, the latest member of a political dynasty that had ruled the country for over four decades. The Sandinistas' once-revolutionary proposal was to turn Nicaragua into a unique socialist state with solid public institutions and market and land reforms (Lancaster, 1988; Sierakowski, 2002). The FSLN's armed struggle continued when fractions of Somoza supporters and other opponents of the revolution, who united as the *Contras*, began a civil war in the early 1980s (Agudelo Builes, 2017). The civil war lasted almost a decade until the FSLN's electoral defeat in 1989 (Babb, 2004). After decades of political opposition, the former revolutionary leader and President Daniel Ortega returned to power in 2007. His political campaign built firmly on revolutionary successes of the past, while obscuring anything that would distract from Ortega as a leading and heroic figure (Francis, 2012; Torres Rivas, 2007). The consequence of Ortega's authoritarian regime was a mass popular uprising in 2018, which was met with extreme forms of state violence, resulting in a wave of mass exile, amounting to almost a million in early 2024 (Grupo de

Expertos en Derechos Humanos sobre Nicaragua, 2024). As Schindler, a German activist and former member of the solidarity brigade in Nicaragua, recalls regretting, "all the hopes associated with the Sandinista revolution, both within Nicaragua and internationally, had been completely dashed" (Schindler, 2022).

My first encounter with the mural was accidental. I was on a quest to visit all the streets and squares in the city that bore names related to the Nicaraguan revolution and came across Monimbó Square – which, as it turned out, was named after the mural. This first visit, as well as the many to follow, took place during my ethnographic fieldwork on the transnational solidarity movements that emerged after the Nicaraguan regime violently oppressed mass protests in 2018. The deterioration of the mural's façade, worn by wind and weather, bore the imprints of time passed (see figure 3). Reflecting on the architectural value of the changes to its surfaces, Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow (1993) observe that weathering includes "naming both the process and the object through which this process is controlled and allowed to make itself manifest (ibid., 1993, p. 36). While the mural's fading colours first proposed structural neglect, I came to understand that it instead invoked passages of time that both the mural *and* the depicted scene underwent. Thus, the coevalness of the weathering invoked a powerful metaphor for the complex political processes of the depicted scene – both in seemingly far away Nicaragua and the mural's immediate surroundings in former East Berlin.

Figure 3: The Nicaragua mural before its latest renovation. Picture taken by the author, February 4, 2019

To my knowledge, the Nicaragua mural is a unique expression of anti-imperialist ideology in the former Eastern bloc. While murals, often arranged through colourful mosaics, formed an integral part of promoting Soviet folk art and ideology, these were exclusively created by local artists (Hilton, 2002). However, many international solidarity brigades who travelled to Nicaragua to support the Sandinistas in the 1980s were inspired by the country's muralism and applied the techniques they learned in Nicaragua after returning to their local communities (Alewitz and Buhle, 2002; Kunzle, 1995). As Bradbury et al. (*in this volume*, 2024) describe, promoting transnational solidarity over murals also found traction in the support of El Salvador's leftwing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

With the example of the Nicaragua mural, this article ponders the remnants of the localised history of leftist anti-imperialist politics in Berlin, which has been significantly shaped by the city's past division and contrasting alignments in relation to the Cold War. My engagement with anti-imperialism serves both as an analytical tool and as a term used and strategically mobilised by my interlocutors. Ideologically, anti-imperialism has been the vehement stance against US domination and capitalist exploitation. The activists I encountered have

particularly welcomed efforts for national independence and revolutionary freedom. International solidarity has been an ideological and practical vernacular response to manifest their support of these struggles. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many of these older struggles have significantly shifted. The processes of historical reinterpretation and memory politics are ripe with tension on broader questions, such as who gets to decide what the mural stands for and to whom the past solidarity and its remnants – exemplified by the mural – belong today.

Beyond *Ostalgie*: a site for contestation

In the early hours of a day in mid-August, 2019, Friedrich and Birgit, elderly residents of the Lichtenberg district in Eastern Berlin, took their dog on their usual walk in the early morning hours. They were giddy: later that day, the Nicaraguan ambassador, together with the local mayor, would finally reveal the newly restored Nicaragua mural. The pair had dedicated over twenty years of advocacy and fundraising for its renovation, and even founded an association to keep the mural intact.[4] However, when the couple reached Monimbó Square where the mural was located, they realised with great horror that its walls, benches, and lamp posts were covered in colourful leaflets. Each of them depicted the black contours of an elderly man with thick eyebrows, a curved moustache, and a round face, with the words "*Ortega Asesino*" ("Ortega Assassin") above the image. According to the couple, their initial shock was immediately replaced with a compulsion to do something; action mode. They frantically began tearing down all the posters, and stuffing them deep down inside the bin in the middle of the square. They then walked the neighbouring streets, up and down, eliminating any and all the posters they could find. "It was pure vandalism," they recounted indignantly.

A few hours earlier, a handful of Nicaraguan activists gathered in the square. They carried plastic bags filled with colourful printed sheets, glue, and paste. Protected by the darkness and the night-time abandonment of the largely residential district, they plastered the posters on every surface they could find. It was one of dozens of actions militant Nicaraguans took around the city to raise awareness about the Nicaraguan socio-political crisis ongoing since 2018. Several of the leading activists were political exiles who had fled to Berlin as a result of President

[4] In fact, the mural had already been renovated in 2012. Due to a mistake in the engineering of newly installed heating platters, the mural's surface withered prematurely.

Ortega's brutal crackdown on protesters. That night in 2019, with the "*Ortega Asesino*" posters, was, in fact, the second time that Nicaraguans had staged an anti-government protest in front of the mural. In the first days of the violent crackdown of mass protests in Nicaragua in mid-April 2018, Nicaraguan residents in Berlin gathered for their first protest in the city in front of the mural to express their solidarity with the protesters back in Nicaragua. At the time, the centrally-located Nicaraguan embassy had shut down due to budget constraints, and the only official building that remained was the ambassador's residence, in a district far to the west. Thus, the organiser of the first protest in front of the mural was the only place in the capital that held an imminent connection with Nicaragua.

Initially, the mural was commissioned to inspire residents and warn them of the dangers of imperialism – which lurked behind the Berlin Wall. The ruling party, the Socialist Union Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, SED), sought to use the Nicaragua mural as a place with an educational, political, and cultural mission. However, unlike the Berlin Wall, the mural was not intended to signal a message to the "other side." Its purpose lay (and remained) within the parameters of the Lichtenberg district. This district also housed the *Stasi* headquarters (an abbreviation of the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, Ministry of State Security). Thus, what nowadays might be considered a remote district of the city's Eastern outskirts, was once the centre of political power and control.

This notion of former political centres pushed into the periphery also reflects the struggles with and over the memory of the past in former East Germany. The memory of the German Democratic Republic and its material remnants have often been coined as *Ostalgie* (a neologism of *Ost*, East, and nostalgia) (Bach, 2021; Berdahl, 1999; Boyer, 2006). However, *Ostalgie* is also a term ripe with irony, and speaks much less of the longing for a more nuanced view of the GDR's rule, including its vibrant transnational relations beyond the Soviet Union, than it does East Germany's quick transition into a capitalist economy (Kunze and Vogel, 2012; Schwenkel, 2022). The fall of the Wall and the collapse of the state set off a deeply rooted uncertainty about a state project that East Germans thought "was forever, until it was no more," as Alexei Yurchak's (2006) book on post-Soviet change aptly puts it. The public erasure and ignorance around "anything East" has led to decades of resentment and misunderstanding. East Germans have juggled a "tightrope walk between the East's assimilation and the insistence upon their own identity" (Ladd, 2018, p. 197–8). Friedrich and Birgit, the local couple who tore down the protest flyers, were bothered by the faded surface of the mural, which they considered representative of the rest of East Berlin's former public buildings, statues, and other architectural remnants of the GDR (Ladd, 2018, p. 192f).

However, as it became clear throughout our long exchange, renovation efforts have been not really about renovating a withered surface but rather about reinstating a different account of memory, unveiling the tension between state-

mandated anti-imperialist and individually enacted understandings of solidarity. The mural once united children for so-called "*Kinderfeste*" (children's parties): during these events, children were encouraged to assemble in front of the mural, where they were taught about the deadly effects of imperialism on people worldwide. During these (and undoubtedly many more) occasions, residents were encouraged to link their everyday lived realities with people's struggles elsewhere. Solidarity was more than a dominant ideology; it was a means to situate individual citizens in a worldwide struggle. According to the mayor of the Lichtenberg district, Michael Grunst, who had grown up in the district before the fall of the wall, the mural still ought to be educational for residents and open their minds to a shared proletarian internationalist and anti-imperialist struggle in the ongoing battle against capitalist exploitation and US dominance:

"The mural raises questions [for children] like who supports the oppressor? Who supports the oppressed? And why was there a Sandinista revolution in the first place? (…) The mural has a strategic task here in the district (…) Art in public space, the conveying of history, that is its mandate."

Thus, what the mural once stood for went beyond a top-down mandated anti-imperialist ideology. Appealing to younger residents, the mural was an important locus of a strategic politics of memory production that emphasised the educational value of ideological and emotional alignment with the Nicaraguan revolution. The mural's ongoing educational mission was why the mayor supported the citizens' association's request for additional subsidies for its renovation. Therefore, both the mayor and locals strived for an objective that went far beyond simple *Ostalgie*: their insistence on preserving the mural was an act of resisting the mandate of Western hegemony altogether. Those supporting the mural's renovation upheld the virtues of anti-imperialism, and especially anti-US and anti-capitalist sentiments. Fostering solidarity between Lichtenberg and the Nicaraguan revolution did not have an expiration date; it was a historical reminder of some of the core values of the GDR. Indeed, the withering of the mural's facade became a metaphor for political neglect and the disregard for the internationalist values that had shaped the district in past decades.

Mahnmal against Imperialism

Berlin's cityscape is imbued with the past: remnants of the Berlin Wall that once cut a rift through the city meet with Prussian statutes and, most importantly, the city's numerous Holocaust memorials and other places dedicated to commemorating the victims of the Nazi regime (Jordan, 2006; Whigham, 2022; Young, 2000). Like other memorials, *Mahnmale* is committed to ensuring that the

past is not forgotten and that victims of past wrongdoings remain commemorated. *Mahnmale*, derived from the German term *ermahnen*, translates as 'to caution' or 'to remind,' are pivotal in Germany's memory politics regarding the Holocaust, where they serve as public monuments of a collective politics of "Never Again" (Till, 2005, p. 82). However, their core, being a memorial admonishment – is an active process that, as this article underlines, is imbued in the case of the Nicaragua mural as well: the mural's intention, as I will explore, was to warn East Berliners of the deadly effects of US imperialism. In that vein, the Nicaraguan revolution was not simply presented as a hopeful new beginning but a gruesome portrait of the sacrifices that pursuing a liberating revolution entailed. Crucially, the Nicaraguans who overturned the Somoza dynasty were not isolated but part of a larger anti-imperial agenda that also included the support of Marxist revolutionary struggles in Angola, Chile, Cuba, Mozambique, Syria and Vietnam (Otieni Sumba, 2024).

In what follows, I map a political history of anti-imperialism from its beginnings of post-colonialism to turning into a core ideology of the GDR. Anti-imperialism emerged in the late 19th century as a critique of colonial powers, especially the European colonial empires, and became a century-long political project (Babiracki and Jersild, 2016; Manjapra, 2019; Parrot, 2022). Their intentional use of the term "anti-imperial" laid bare their open opposition to Western, i.e., Euro-American imperialism. Shared experiences of colonial exploitation in former colonies across Africa, Asia, and Latin America made anti-imperialism a joint political endeavour of resistance and South-South collaboration to counter these devastating and lasting effects of empire (Parrot, 2022, p. 4–6). For some, the framework of devastation and exploitation held specific economic significance, which is why their critique of anti-imperialism was, at the same time, strongly anti-capitalist (Weiss, 2016).

Anti-imperialist thought and militancy were premised on Marxism, which "constituted an instrument through which anti-colonial struggles could be translated from one colonial arena to another" (Young, 2016, p. 169). From this point of view, the colonised were equalised with the working class (i.e., the masses) vis à vis colonising forces (i.e., the bourgeoisie) (Parrot, 2022, p. 17). Building on this premise, the consequence of colonialism was a continuous, systematic logic of capitalist extraction and exploitation, which, in turn, were the object of anti-imperialist struggles. Although the Soviet Union initially formed an essential part of this anti-imperialist critique, it later developed a complicated relationship with anti-imperialism. On the one hand, the Soviet Union strove to build and maintain connections and a close relationship with allies in the Global

South.[5] On the other hand, its dogmatic idea of communism complicated collaborations with many leftwing movements that strove for alternative interpretations and forms of liberation (Laursen, 2019). Nevertheless, anti-imperialism emerged as a currency of movements for national liberation, racial equality, and an international redistribution of power and resources throughout the 20th century.

In light of this vibrant anti-imperialist endeavour, it is unsurprising that Nicaragua's FSLN received vast international support. Based on Akira Iriye, internationalism can be defined as "an idea, a movement, or an institution that seeks to reformulate the nature of relations among nations through cross-national cooperation and interchange" (Iriye, 2001, p. 3). During heightened tensions between East and West, internationalism promised to overcome the divisions across nations and classes and unite people in a "socialist commonwealth" (Rieber, 2016, p. 329). The Sandinistas strategically mobilised this deeply rooted desire for transnational solidarity and collaboration to mobilise supporters in Western Europe and the US, who travelled to Nicaragua as so-called "solidarity brigades" to experience the revolution first-hand and help advance its progress (Christiaens, 2014; Helm, 2018; Perla, 2009; Weber, 2006). The seduction of the Sandinista revolution was the deeply rooted belief that everyone could be part of it. For the Sandinistas, anti-imperialism was a reaction to the repeated experience of US invasions.

The GDR's Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, *SED*), led by Erich Honecker, mobilised support for the Sandinistas under the ideological umbrella of anti-imperialism, solidarity and internationalism. The GDR's idea of internationalist solidarity aligned with the Soviet internationalist alliance, based on an ideology of friendship (Burton, 2018; Müller, 2010; Otieni Sumba, 2024). The importance of this principle was anchored in the GDR's constitution, which, according to Article 6, states that "[t]he GDR supports those states and peoples which fight against imperialism and its colonial regime, for national freedom and independence" (quoted in Weis, 2011, p. 357). The importance of internationalist solidarity is also evident from the fact that it was not assigned to the Foreign Ministry but to a separate committee, the Solidarity Committee, that handled all financial and material contributions (Witkowski, 2015, p. 94). The GDR's understanding and pursuit of solidarity was tied to the idea of international socialist assistance. It aimed to counter efforts of US imperialism and the neo-

[5] The Tricontinental's objective was to unite anti-imperialist revolutionary movements in their struggle for liberation in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Louro et al. 2019; Parrot 2022; Stolte et al. 2020).

colonial ideology of development that opposed their core idea of mutual aid through solidarity. Moreover, due to the recent Nazi past, East Germany was especially committed to a longer tradition of antifascism, which shaped their internationalist agenda accordingly.

The Sandinistas in Nicaragua benefitted vastly from the GDR's efforts. Although the Sandinistas were not interested in implementing the "real socialism"[6] that the GDR projected onto them, the common ground of anti-US sentiment bound them together. Since the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, fears of a US invasion of Nicaragua increased. Moreover, the civil war held a firm grip over the country. The Contras, counterrevolutionary forces that fought the Sandinista revolution, received weaponry and military training from the CIA – which, at the time, was a rumour that was only later verified (Travis, 20017). The perception of the US as meddling in a civil war to destabilise a popular revolution tapped into the GDR's conviction that the US was the embodiment of the class enemy, which in turn helped them frame anti-US sentiments within East Germany (Balbier and Rösch, 2006, p. 11).

The GDR provided direct aid in terms of financial, material, and military support to Nicaragua in a top-down fashion. Their expressions of internationalist "friendship," a common phrase for internationalist solidarity, also included strengthening the public sector, particularly in the accessibility and equipment of public health infrastructure. The GDR dispatched dozens of trained German medical personnel to support their Nicaraguan counterparts in establishing a reliable national medical healthcare system. As a result, the GDR founded the *Carlos Marx* Hospital in Managua, for which they deployed medical personnel throughout the 1980s (Borowy, 2015, p. 418). Their assistance formed part of a broader discourse of anti-imperialist solidarity. This particular understanding of solidarity travelled from the GDR to Nicaragua and back. Beyond providing aid and winning a strategic ally in Central America, the GDR used the Sandinista project as a source of political education for its own citizens. The Sandinista revolution and Nicaragua's ongoing struggle to counter possible US sabotage became a cautionary tale of the dangers of US imperialism.

At the same time, solidarity with Nicaragua was a moral duty within an individual's responsibility. Although the GDR's notion and practice of solidarity were managed top-down, the SED leadership also encouraged citizens to support the struggle of the Nicaraguan people individually. Several of my German

[6] The expression "real socialism" (*real existierender Sozialismus*) was introduced by then SED-general secretary (and later President) Erich Honecker in 1973 (Ziemer, 2004, p. 535). While it emerged from the SED leadership, real socialism was later employed as a critique of the GDR (Bahro, 1977).

interlocutors from former East Berlin mentioned how they were regularly assigned to host or make purchases at cake fundraisers at local schools. Another tactic was a nationwide postal stamp action, charging buyers an extra third to donate to Nicaragua (see figure 4).[7] Thus, solidarity with Nicaragua can be seen as an amalgamation of a state-mandated ideology, foreign policy and personal practice.

Figure 4: "Solidarity with Nicaragua". Postal Stamp in the GDR (1983), scanned by the author.

The tension between individually enacted and state-mandated solidarity was a central theme in my recorded interview with Heinrich, an active member of the Nicaragua Solidarity Movement, a grassroots movement acting under the umbrella of the Protestant church in former East Germany. In our conversation, Heinrich reflected on over forty years of Nicaragua solidarity activism. In the early 1980s, Heinrich used the context of activities of the church primarily to disguise his political stance. Using the church both in terms of infrastructure and cloak was not exclusive to Nicaragua activism but was commonly treated as a gateway to political resistance in the GDR (Horvay, 2011). Interestingly, Heinrich brought up the potential dissent that the Nicaragua solidarity evoked in him and others. He explained that his activism was based on the principle that solidarity meant direct and individual contributions. This stood in contrast to GDR politics. He explained that "[s]omething like solidarity cannot be left to the state's

[7] The stamp portrayed the Sandinistas' first considerable grassroots effort, the so-called alphabetization campaign, which taught approximately 80% of the mostly rural population to read and write).

monopoly. The state has had everything under its monopoly, including solidarity." Thus, Heinrich framed the solidarity he pursued as an active process based on individual convictions, which he contrasted with state-sponsored solidarity. The activism he and other solidarity group members sought took similar forms: they supported the building and equipment of a public school in rural Nicaragua, and they collected donations to travel to Nicaragua in person.

Furthermore, beyond executing direct action outside a state realm, solidarity activism with Nicaragua permitted the East German activists to project their imaginations of new and more democratic beginnings of a socialist state. These were indeed not only in opposition to the GDR but also a more comprehensive rejection of the Soviet Union and its satellite states. In that manner, Volks expressed that:

[...] with Nicaragua, we associated something like a third way, in other words, a more democratic socialism. That was one side, and of course we also used that, so to speak, by looking at Nicaragua and what we thought was happening there, a democratic socialism, we held up a mirror, so to speak, to the GDR government. We said: Look at what's there and take a look! And that's how it works (…) That was yet another internal aspect, being able to do something in solidarity [with Nicaragua] across borders in such a closed country. Of course, this had an immense attraction [on us].

Heinrich's statements reveal a strong projection of his idealism on the Sandinista revolution, on which undermines the GDR's official discourse on anti-imperialism. Instead, young East German activists used Nicaragua to enact their visions of what a democratic socialist state should entail. In that vein, engagement with the Nicaraguan revolution, and, by extension, the Nicaragua mural, can also be considered a portal to a utopian conceptualisation of "socialism otherwise."

Murals: The Paradox of Revolutionary Scripts

Murals in Nicaragua are a particular form of cultural expression closely connected to the Sandinista revolution. Murals remain a powerful public expression of dissent, offering interpretations of the past and providing aspirations for alternative social and political futures. For most Nicaraguans in Berlin, the mural represented a conflation of the past and present, particularly in the wake of the violent events of April 2018, where at least 355 protesters were killed (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021). The renewed interest in and engagement with murals is the reactivism and reconfiguration of the 1979 revolutionary insurrection. However, although youth in Berlin stuck to what I have termed "revolutionary scripts" by including the mural as the visual backdrop

of their first protests, they firmly rejected anything related to Ortega's Sandinismo, which they disdainfully named "*Orteguismo*."

Johnny was a Nicaraguan activist who had lived in the Lichtenberg district for the past few years. Originally trained as a lawyer in Nicaragua, he was now employed in elderly care. Upon seeing unarmed students being fatally shot in the streets of his hometown in April 2018, he joined a Nicaraguan friend for a spontaneous protest in front of the Nicaragua mural. Shortly after, he co-founded a collective with other Nicaraguan activists and dedicated all his free time to the cause. Johnny knew the mural's illustrations in great detail, having passed by on his daily walks to and from work for years. We met in front of the mural in early 2023, where the idea was that he would explain the mural to me from his own viewpoint. Standing in front of the mural, it became clear that he had studied its depictions in great detail as he pointed out minute details that I could barely make out with the naked eye. One of the things Johnny pointed out was an almost inconspicuous quote from Augusto Sandino, a Nicaraguan folk hero and namesake of the Sandinista party. This quote, painted in red capital letters, was placed in the bottom right-hand corner of the mural:

> *We are heading toward*
>
> *The sun of freedom*
>
> *Or toward death, and if*
>
> *We die, it doesn't matter*
>
> *Our cause will continue to live on*
>
> *Others will follow.*
>
> (see figure 5)

Figure 5: “We are heading toward the sun”. Picture taken by the author, February 6, 2023.

Before I could even make out the first line of text, Johnny had already started reciting it, with a reverence and formality that surprised me. Like many other Nicaraguan anti-government protesters I met, Johnny’s family formed part of the Sandinista stronghold in the 1980s. Johnny joined its youth wing as a teenage militant, where he learned the basics of successful political crowd control and practised recitals of Sandino and other heroes and martyrs of the Sandinista counterinsurgency war and revolution. When he took to the streets to demonstrate the FSLN in Berlin, the party whose founding mission he was once committed to, his intricate knowledge helped him undermine their current mission. Moreover, coming-of-age youths like Johnny had grown up exclusively under President Daniel Ortega, significantly shaping their intimate understanding of the revolution and its memorabilia, including recitals from Sandinista’s ancestors (Rodgers, 2009).

During my fieldwork in early 2018 in the Northern Nicaraguan city of Estelí, nationally renowned for its mural culture, traditional murals of revolutionary “heroes and martyrs” could be found side-by-side with murals sponsored by local NGOs, which encouraged women to denounce accounts of domestic violence. Similar to other revolutionary cultural remnants being repurposed by protesters, such as poetry or music, murals soon became forums for their critical engagement

with the Ortega regime (Selejan, 2021)[8]: faces of well-known killed protesters such as the 15-year-old Nicaraguan high school student Álvaro Conrado mushroomed alongside anti-regime slogans, and the national blue-white colours increasingly drowned out the traditional red-black Sandinista party flag.

Initially, murals were placed on the cultural map of Latin America during the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), when they were used for cultural and political engagement, particularly with rural populations.[9] Moreover, murals became a token of Mexican national identity at a crucial point in Mexico's process of state formation (Greeley, 2012, p. 2–3). In that spirit, murals became synonymous with Mexican state culture (Anreus et al., 2012; Coffey, 2012; Raussert, 2023). The political messaging in public space that the Sandinistas promoted in Nicaragua similarly tapped into the opportunity to disseminate messages of Nicaragua's revolutionary insurrection and success, martyrs, and leading figures of the Sandinista movement, and, increasingly, to promote revolutionary campaigns such as public health announcements (Kunzle, 1995). Nicaragua's Cultural Minister, Ernesto Cardenal, was a poet and former Jesuit pastor who had been excommunicated due to his involvement in the revolution who promoted a grassroots approach to the arts (Selejan, 2015; Guevara, 2014; Vannini, 2012). In his view, the arts should grant accessibility for the working class, leaning toward the dissolution of the distinction from "painters" vis à vis "people who paint" (Kunzle, 1995, p. 75). Manuel García Moia was one of the most renowned Nicaraguan muralists, and he incorporated several characteristics of the revolution: youthfulness, the promotion of revolutionary tales and emblems, and accessibility, which is often derogatorily termed primitivism (Kunzle, 1995, p. 16; 68–70). However, the Berlin mural's content is far from "naive": it reflects García Moia's gruesome experience of violence in Monimbó, a district of Masaya known for a comparably high proportion of the country's indigenous population (Field, 1999).

Monimbó forms part of what I understand as Nicaragua's revolutionary script: the historical framework of revolution and insurrection that the protest movement relied on in 2018. It gained national popularity in the late 1970s when *Monimbeños* resisted the National Guard of Somoza during the revolutionary insurrection of the FSLN, despite significant losses (Field, 1999). In 2018, again,

[8] Nicaraguan police banned two *muralists* in Estelí from painting a celebratory mural of the recently elected Nicaraguan Miss Universe, Sheynnis Palacios, days after her election, denouncing the act as inciting public unrest. (see La Prensa, 2023)

[9] The three founding fathers, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, envisioned murals as a canvas for Marxist messaging for a broad (Mexican) audience (Anreus et al. 2012).

Masaya became a site of violent clashes between opponents of the Sandinista regime and security forces, which quickly invoked the "idiom of insurrection" (Díaz and Weegels, 2022, p. 342). In this regard, the Nicaraguan government's so-called "Operation Clean-Up" in June and July 2018, where street barricades, occupied university campuses, and other anti-government strongholds were violently removed, hundreds of protesters were arrested and several dozen killed, reproducing imagery that many interpreted as a repetition of the past (see Rocha, 2020).

Johnny's most pivotal remarks about the mural revolved around the symbols of the uprising and, as a result, the high price that the Nicaraguan population has (had) to pay. As he interpreted it from a safe distance in Berlin, the revolutionary script was that the present unfolded in the same way as the past did. In that vein, he pointed out in the mural that showed a man lying on the doorsteps of a simple house built of wooden pegs and a thatched roof. He held a folkloric mask and machete with a bleeding wound on his neck.[10] Near him, a woman runs away from the scene, barefoot with a half-naked baby in her arms. It was a gruesome sight (see figure 6).

[10] The so-called *Ahüizote* masks that the Sandinista revolution repurposed have their origins in a Nahuatl theatre play mocking the Spanish Crown in the 16th century (Field, 1999).

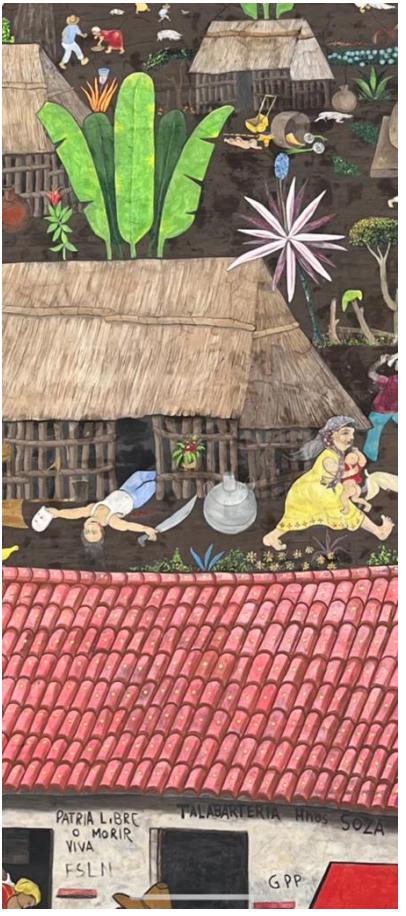

Figure 6: Detail pointed out on the mural in my interview with Johnny. Picture taken by the author, February 8, 2023.

Johnny then explained how, for him, the mural was a source of national pride before 2018. Back then, it represented his nation's struggle for revolution and the great sacrifices that went along with that. Since the outbreak of the protests, the mural had become a place of great sorrow. I asked him why this shift occurred. What did he see differently now? He replied agitatedly:

And now? And now this mural is the reality of what's happening in Nicaragua [today]. Nothing has changed, really. Nothing has changed. It's the same today. (…) Look at this dead person over there, on the doorstep of their house. If you look at the documentation of what happened in 2018, people were

intruding on other people's houses and killing them inside their own homes. It's the same. 40, 30-something years, and the same is going on. It's the same thing."

In his statement, Johnny brought Nicaragua's past and present together, conjuring them as "the same." As he saw it, the mural was not a relic of the past but a witness account of the present and proof that the history was repeating itself. That is why, for Johnny (and many other Nicaraguan activists in Berlin), pursuing anything vaguely familiar to the present-day Sandinista revolutionary project is not only reminiscent of the past, but is also doomed to failure. In that vein, anti-imperialism was a revolutionary and Sandinista virtue that belonged to an outdated and disdainful political project of the past.

Conclusion

Using the Nicaragua mural to study the "faraway nearby" (Solnit, 2014) that transnational activism around conflict can evoke, I have demonstrated how the past and present do not merely overlap but simultaneously produce unexpected frictions. These interactions were based on tensions behind the historical reinterpretation and memory politics that were unearthed with the renovation of the Nicaragua mural: on the one hand, the defence of internationalist, anti-imperialist solidarity, and on the other hand, Nicaragua's violent past rendered contemporary. These were the contestations about the significance and re-interpretation of what everyday life in the German Democratic Republic's Berlin-Lichtenberg district entailed. Monimbó in (former East) Berlin has not signified a simplistic projection of a romanticised revolution elsewhere. Instead, it lends itself to a complex case study of how internationalist solidarity does not unfold singularly but in a multi-layered, often contradictory manner.

Considering solidarity as a transformative process (Featherstone, 2012), contestations around the mural demonstrate how solidarity as a political relation can also branch out into different, if not contrasting, directions. The anti-imperialist solidarity that the GDR leadership pursued, propagated through the Nicaragua Mural in Lichtenberg, is a telling example. Young activists like Heinrich used the principle of internationalism in the 1980s to push for a route to a "Socialism Otherwise," reinterpreting the mural in their terms. Others, like the members of the local citizens' association and the mayor, mobilised for the renovation of the mural and considered its original mission of anti-imperialist solidarity an ongoing project of defending and reinstating the values that the GDR represented for them as former East German socialists. The remnants of East Germany's anti-imperialist solidarity, therefore, did not solely inform activism but also became a project of defending and honoring their past.

For local Nicaraguan residents like Johnny, on the other hand, the mural's symbolism shifted from portraying a rare bond with distant homelands, to a documentary testimony of the present-day state repression and violence that had been unfolding since April 2018. The conflation of past and present on the mural's façade powerfully illustrates the battlefield that shapes current Nicaraguan and local politics and, to a degree, a reflection of contemporary geopolitics: mass protests have put the relevance of the past and the Sandinista revolution at stake. What is more, for young Nicaraguans like Johnny, the only way out of the current socio-political crisis and repression is to abandon Nicaragua's revolutionary past, including its remnants, altogether.

The anti-imperialist solidarity I encountered produced its own set of complications and contradictions. Revealing this complexity also meant discovering that internationalist solidarity cannot be reduced to a single denominator and that conducting ethnography on timely political phenomena is to dwell on a simultaneity of opposing views. Residents providing financial donations to the renovation of the Nicaragua mural did not necessarily mean to declare support for the current regime; their contributions were much more a response to their social status in reunited Germany than a statement about current Nicaraguan politics. Then again, raising awareness about Nicaragua's recent bloodshed was much more a claim about Nicaragua's revolutionaries clinging to power than a statement about the GDR's tradition of solidarity politics.

The trials and tribulations around the Nicaragua mural demonstrate that internationalist solidarity, in its multiple and simultaneous forms, has remained a vital form of 21st-century politics. (Internationalist) alliances have been severed, adjusted, and mended, but the virtue of coming together to oppose imperialist ideology remains central to their mode of operating. Furthermore, this article sheds light on how activism, under the umbrella of solidarity, is a productive process that persistently reinstates fostered alliances. These, too, are constantly renegotiated and remain a pivotal force in our global political arena.

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