

# H-Diplo

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**Klaus Storkmann. "East German Military Aid to the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua, 1979-1990."** *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16: 2 (Spring 2014): 56-76. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00451. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00451](http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00451)

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In Nicaragua's capital city Managua, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is still alive – a small area is called 'Alemania Democrática,' commemorating the development aid handed out by East Berlin in the 1980s. East Germany also provided funds for a hospital aptly named 'Carlos Marx.' In Germany, veterans of the solidarity brigades – from East and West – to this day recount the allegedly selfless support for the progressive regime of the Sandinistas. Yet Klaus Storkmann's article sheds light on what these romantic recollections neglect: the military assistance for the government in Nicaragua. Officially, of course, East Berlin provided medical and technical assistance only. But under the table, weapons flowed freely.

Basing his argument on thorough research in the GDR Ministry of Defense and Stasi files, Storkmann, who is a researcher at the Military History Research Institute in Potsdam and a major in the German Bundeswehr, paints a convincing picture of the secret military support. The material fueled the conflict in Central America and helped the Sandinistas maintain control over the country. Over 200 Nicaraguan officers trained in East Germany as motorized rifle or reconnaissance patrol leaders, and the volume of material aid reached 8 million GDR marks in 1988. The program began in 1981, when Moscow requested that the GDR step in to help ship weapons and ammunition to Managua, as the previous path through Algeria was getting too perilous (64). With East German meticulousness, the files reveal in detail that the Sandinistas received shiploads of trucks, uniforms, submachine guns, hand grenades and anti-personnel mines.

The Sandinistas went shopping in the Soviet bloc: According to Defense Minister Humberto Ortega, the impoverished country got surface-to-air missiles from Czechoslovakia, RPG-7 rocket launchers from Bulgaria, and antitank guns from Algeria

(63). Already in late 1980, Ortega received enough from East Berlin to equip an army: 45,000 uniforms, 10,000 battle dress uniforms, and 3,000 binoculars (59). That was only the start: The core of the program was a training course for Sandinista officers. For a period of up to three years, young Nicaraguan soldiers were dispatched to East Germany. Ironically, the Nicaraguan officers were trained on the island of Rügen, in the huge Prora complex that had been built by the Nazis for their 'Strength through Joy' program.

Storkmann's article outlines this secret support and offers interesting points for further discussion. For example, he quotes East German General Fritz Streletz as insisting that every aspect of the cooperation was cleared with Moscow, echoing similar claims of subservience in other policy fields. Soviet Ministry of Defense officials, not the SED General Secretary, determined whether to accept or reject requests for military assistance (64). Yet, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev cut the military support to the Sandinista regime, East Berlin was happy to defy Moscow and even triple the military support for Managua (66). Erich Honecker ignored Gorbachev's policy change and hoped that the hardliners in the Kremlin would prevail. According to Storkmann, this refusal to follow Moscow demonstrates that the relationship was not one of complete submission.

This raises the question whether the GDR was able to steer an 'independent' line in Central America during the Gorbachev period. This is debatable: Honecker probably saw his policy as being in line with his long-time friends in the Soviet military and security apparatus. He defied Gorbachev just like Honecker's Soviet friends defied the energetic reformer. The East German elites and their Moscow counterparts were so closely intertwined that even though there may have been tactical disagreements, the hierarchy was always settled. Storkmann confirms that Warsaw Pact states were strongly discouraged from coordinating military assistance to third parties amongst themselves. The decision had to be made by bilateral agreement with Moscow.

For East Berlin, the support for the 'international revolutionaries' enhanced the regime's standing in the world and in the Eastern Bloc. The German Communists felt they had nothing to do with the dark legacy of German militarism. By contrast, West Germany at the time voluntarily declined to supply weapons to crisis regions. The GDR had no qualms about militarizing Central America and providing training and weapons to the Sandinista government while officially claiming to support civilian causes only.

Storkmann's article conveys the picture of clandestine military support in clear facts and figures. At one stage, Nicaragua became East Germany's second-largest recipient of foreign aid. It would have been helpful to see the full list from the files. We are left guessing which country might have been number one (Cuba?). There is also little effort to put the currency figures into context. Was the assistance a significant factor in the military budget or was it comparatively 'cheap' to ship equipment to Central America? In the USSR, many newspaper articles at the end of the Gorbachev period underscored the high costs of subsidizing revolution abroad. How does the support for the Sandinistas (and comrades in Ethiopia and Mozambique) figure into the economic collapse of East

Germany? And how significant was the material support for the government in Managua? Was it crucial for the survival of the regime? East Germans who worked in the 'Carlos Marx' hospital remarked that the GDR even sent toilet paper from East Berlin, and the operation of the facility was greatly hampered by the fact that nobody in the GDR had inquired which voltage was in use in Nicaragua. The result was that expensive diesel fuel was necessary to keep emergency generators running constantly.<sup>1</sup> As for the barrio in Managua that proudly carries the name of the extinct Communist German state, its inhabitants have to comb through the local landfill to make a living.<sup>2</sup>

Storkmann's concisely written article is a valuable contribution to the discussion on the 'war by proxy' during the superpower confrontation. He allows readers to draw their own conclusions. What did the United States and West Germany know about this secret program? Further archival research could provide more answers as well as allowing an assessment of the global implications of the military support.

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<sup>1</sup> Sabine Zimmermann, Dr Carlos Marx in Nicaragua, Mai 1998, Ausgabe 287.  
<http://lateinamerikanachrichten.de/index.php?/print/2249.html>

<sup>2</sup> Klaus Ehringfeld, Die DDR lebt – in Nicaragua, Handelsblatt, 23 November 2011.  
<http://blog.handelsblatt.com/global-reporting/2011/11/23/die-ddr-lebt-in-nicaragua/>