

INTRODUCTION

In April 2011 in Matagalpa, at the Centro Cultural Heroes y Mártires in the city center, a food competition takes place. Shortly before Easter week, the event promotes traditional Semana Santa dishes. Under Nicaraguan flags and a photo remembering the final Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) offensive in Matagalpa in June 1979, women present their food to the jury and visitors of the fair.¹ Outside, a large statue of the Nicaraguan revolutionary leader Augusto César Sandino overlooks the scene. The colorful dishes are carefully decorated: *sopa de queso* mixes with *buñuelos*, tamales with fish, and pineapple desserts with milk pudding. All these dishes belong to Central and Pacific Nicaraguan food culture that since Spanish conquest has incorporated a large variety of cultural influences. The jury wanders around, tasting the different dishes, while musicians and the local mayor take over the stage. The mayor summarizes: “We have deep roots. We must remember, for example, that corn, corn is a fundamental grain, the grain of the gods, they say, as a grain original to our America, original to Nicaragua. This corn, among our other foods, is the fundamental one that has allowed us to exist.”²

At the end of his speech he argues staunchly that it is necessary to rescue Nicaraguan culinary traditions for future generations. According to him, ancestral culinary knowledge represents an important cultural heritage and has formed part of Nicaraguan food sovereignty. In 2011 Nicaragua was among the first Latin American countries with a food sovereignty law (approved in 2009). Nevertheless, malnutrition still affected more than one million Nicaraguan people. In the northern departments of Nueva Segovia, Jinotega, and Madriz, more than 27 percent of children under the age of five were suffering from chronic malnutrition.³ These people lacked the money and the ingredients to prepare the typical dishes presented at the festival.

After the jury concludes its tour, I leave the event and wander around the plaza. Between the cathedral and the restaurants and shops surround-

ing it a different culinary landscape becomes visible: small stands selling chips, ice cream, hot dogs, and *sopa maruchan* (an instant soup produced by the Japanese firm Toyo Suisan, which has appeared in different Latin American countries since the 1970s). This scene shows two seemingly opposed culinary worlds: the world of “traditional” Nicaraguan food and the world of global fast food.

In between these two worlds, however, Nicaraguans have carved out spaces to create their own food practices and traditions. They have invented new recipes, made substitutions for scarce products, and even incorporated into their diets foreign foods acquired through international aid. Sometimes, they also rejected substitutes or new foods because of their taste, texture, or high price. While Nicaraguans struggled with dietary choices during periods of food insecurity, nutritionists, medical professionals, and politicians debated the best strategies for improving the Nicaraguan diet. Their visions of the ideal Nicaraguan diet changed significantly from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Access to food became a central political matter during the second half of the twentieth century. Depending on the particular political circumstances, Nicaraguans depicted foreign influences and “traditional” foods in many different ways. Corn, for example, acquired dual meanings. It was a traditional food related to preconquest history as well as a revolutionary food that represented national self-sufficiency in times of counterrevolutionary aggression. For the Sandinistas, corn linked the precolonial past with their political revolution in the late twentieth century. As the opening vignette shows, FSLN politicians well into the early twenty-first century continued to make connections to Nicaragua’s pre-Hispanic food practices. However, the Ortega government’s food policy was far less radical than the Sandinista policy of the early 1980s.

After the Sandinistas lost the 1990 elections, Nicaragua was governed by a broad oppositional alliance—the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO), the National Opposition Union, and two subsequent Liberal Party presidents until 2006. At that time, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, the former coordinator of the revolutionary government junta in the 1980s, was reelected, and he has governed the country ever since. The FSLN, however, had changed significantly in the meantime. For over a decade it has promoted an ambiguous form of Christian socialism and has abandoned earlier Sandinista ideals such as a redistributive policy and anti-imperialism. At the same time, the government limited electoral democracy and changed the constitution’s prohibition on a president’s reelection, which has enabled Daniel Ortega to continue in the presidency after his original term would have ended in 2011. Both political opponents and international observers

accused the government of electoral manipulations at the local and national levels. Nevertheless, the government won over supporters through its social policy directed toward poor Nicaraguans. Backed by Venezuelan economic support, the FSLN promoted social reforms in health, education, and agriculture that benefited its followers and reduced poverty. In 2017 Nicaragua was the country with the third highest economic growth rate in Latin America.⁴

Nevertheless, recent statistics and oppositional press reports indicate an increasing number of undernourished people.⁵ The deep economic crisis in Venezuela from 2013 onward has weakened the Ortega government and affected Nicaragua's economy. In its last report on global food security, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) diagnosed a food crisis in Nicaragua for 2018.⁶ It is very likely that the nutritional situation has worsened between 2016 and 2019 although the Ortega government has not published any recent information.

In April 2018 a broad protest movement challenged the Ortega government. At first, people protested against a reform of the pension system. In response to the violent repression of these protests, Nicaraguans organized further marches, occupied university buildings, and blocked important roads throughout the country. Protesters mobilized with the slogan "Ortega y Somoza son la misma cosa" (Ortega and Somoza are the same thing) for mass demonstrations in April and May 2018. State and partisan violence against these protests claimed more than 320 lives by early 2020, and 96,000 Nicaraguans have left the country.⁷ Although the regime had stabilized once again by July 2018, it has been unable to silence the protesters completely. At the time of writing (late 2019), the political future of Nicaragua remains highly uncertain.

The Ortega government still faces opposition, along with the increasing challenge of supplying Nicaraguans with enough food. In 2018 the economy shrank by 3.8 percent, and unemployment was on the rise. In addition, a drought seriously affected food production in the Central and Pacific lowlands, also known as the dry corridor.⁸ These economic and political conditions provide a striking parallel with the final stages of the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970s. For almost fifty years Nicaraguan political leaders have struggled to ensure a stable food supply despite natural disasters, adverse economic conditions, and unequal land distribution.

The focus in this book is on the overlooked story of how food and its scarcity shaped contemporary Nicaraguan history between the 1950s and 1993. Insufficient access to food contributed to both the rise and the demise of the Sandinista revolution. The dictatorship of the Somoza clan (1936–1979) promoted agro exports, which accelerated land conflicts and

affected basic grains production. Contrary to other historical accounts that depict the 1972 earthquake as the decisive moment for the weakening of the Somoza regime, in this account I argue that the dictatorship was already weakened by the crisis of the Nicaraguan food system during the early 1970s. From then on, tensions over food prices contributed to the erosion of the dictatorship. After the 1972 earthquake, massive aid misappropriations demonstrated the fraudulent character of the regime, and although it weathered the storm, its power was seriously undermined. Despite increasing social tensions, the regime continued to promote US culture including food practices although most imported foods were an option only for small minorities within Nicaraguan society.

The success of the 1979 Sandinista revolution generated enormous hope for social change. To make food accessible for all Nicaraguans, the revolutionaries introduced a new distribution system. They supported basic grains production and promoted corn as a revolutionary grain. Corn represented an ideal revolutionary food because it established historical continuity between the country's Mesoamerican past, a past free from colonial rule, and the 1979 revolution liberating Nicaragua from US imperialism. The Sandinistas chose corn as the emblematic local grain for their food campaigns based on its strong presence in Nicaraguan literature, music, and art. At the same time, they attempted to steer Nicaraguans away from mass consumption by promoting austere and frugal consumption practices that favored local products. By the 1980s food policy and consumption were intrinsically linked, as the promotion of self-sufficiency required changes in daily personal consumption. Although Sandinista political propaganda insisted on giving priority to locally produced food, consumers did not change their habits as fast as the government wanted. They continued to demand wheat, powdered milk, Maggi soups, Gerber baby foods, and breakfast cereals. All of these foods were imported and, except for wheat, produced by foreign multinational companies.

From the early years of the revolution, external aggression by the United States accelerated the need for self-sufficiency measures. However, the Contra War soon undermined efforts to increase local food production. By 1984 Nicaragua had converted into a "shortage economy" affected by the chronic lack of food and consumer goods. At the same time the Sandinistas failed to adequately address specific regional needs and thus failed to convince large sectors of the Nicaraguan peasantry to follow the new strategy. Disappointed by low prices for basic grains and slow agrarian reform, peasants increasingly joined the Contras.⁹

As a result of the war, the US trade embargo, and Sandinista economic policy, the Nicaraguan economy entered a serious crisis in 1985 from

which it never fully recovered. People struggled to provide three daily meals for their families. Malnutrition and the scarcity of basic foods were widespread. By 1988 people were exhausted; they wanted an end to the war and increasingly lost faith in the revolutionary project. Ordinary Nicaraguans were forced to reduce their consumption to the bare minimum, but some Sandinista leaders displayed luxury goods in public, which was another important cause of disillusionment.

Contemporary observers were surprised when the FSLN lost the 1990s elections to the oppositional candidate Violeta Chamorro. The new government reestablished close relations with the United States. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) reappeared on the scene and provided conditional support for a neoliberal restructuring of the economy. Simultaneously, a large influx of expensive consumer goods and cheap imported food started in the early 1990s generating debates about globalization. Although consumer credit was reintroduced, expensive products such as large refrigerators, color TVs, and premium liquor brands remained inaccessible for most Nicaraguans. During the early 1990s, many Nicaraguans survived on limited diets only alleviated by international food aid and remittances from emigrated family members.

REVALUING NICARAGUAN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Researchers and intellectuals have struggled over historical caesura and elements of continuity in recent Nicaraguan history. At first they identified the revolution as an event that interrupted the long tradition of dictatorial rule and US dominance over the country.¹⁰ As I argue, a rupture also occurred in food supply and consumption. The Sandinistas conceived of Nicaragua as a self-sufficient country and prioritized the consumption of local foods.

Scholarly works on Nicaragua experienced a boom with the Sandinista revolution. In the early 1980s Nicaragua was at the center of global attention. Thousands of solidarity activists traveled to the country along with international experts interested in the revolution's social projects. The revolution attracted historians, political scientists, and economists who analyzed the revolutionary changes. This first generation of researchers reported on the FSLN, mass organizations, media, gender relations, economic organization, agrarian reform, and culture. Many works focused on Pacific Nicaragua, and anthropologists and historians discussed the situation at the Caribbean Coast separately. In particular, the works on the Contra War show evidence of the Cold War political polarization. Testimonies published during the 1980s highlighted the heroic fight for the revolution's survival but remained silent on political doubts, fatigue, or disillusionment.¹¹ When the revolution experienced a serious crisis in the late 1980s, interna-

tional interest faded, only to experience a short revival after the Sandinista's historic electoral defeat.

The electoral loss in 1990 provoked a new wave of disagreements about the revolution and the reasons for its downfall. The struggle over the revolution was a struggle over memories, accelerated by political divisions within the FSLN. After 1990 several former FSLN leaders published their autobiographies. Given the incomplete holdings of the Nicaraguan state archives, these publications have become an important source for historical research. In addition, researchers have collected testimonies from groups whose memories remained at the margins, such as Contra members, peasants at the agrarian frontier, and middle- and low-rank Sandinista supporters.¹² The testimonies of a heroic revolutionary struggle gave way to new, more ambivalent memories. With increasing temporal distance and the growing authoritarianism of the Ortega government, issues came to light that were unutterable in the 1980s, among them accounts of abuses committed by the Sandinista police and army, the corruption and authoritarian behavior of the FSLN leaders, and ongoing food scarcity as well as gender inequalities.

The authoritarian tendencies of the Ortega government after 2007 have led to more critical evaluations of revolutionary history.¹³ Again, the debate on continuities and caesura in contemporary Nicaraguan history broke out. Some scholars have pointed out that social organizing after 1979 has provided an important foundation for community participation and social movements up to the present. Others have highlighted enduring trends such as the concentration of wealth and power, informal political agreements, and strict control over police, army, and public administration throughout the last century of Nicaraguan history.¹⁴ The political struggle over the revolution's heritage is still ongoing, but recent historical works have moved on to other areas such as the health sector, foreign policy, and the solidarity movement.¹⁵

I argue that social and economic history are important for explaining political changes. We need more studies that follow up on the research from the 1980s. This means analyzing, for example, long-term economic transformations and the history of enterprise, labor movements, the social basis of the FSLN, and corruption.¹⁶ My analysis of food policies shows that the revolutionaries were unsuccessful in finding a balance between the needs of urban consumers and those of rural Nicaraguans, between industrial agriculture and small farmer production, and between agro exports and basic grains cultivation. The historian Hilary Francis has recently argued that the Sandinistas failed to take into account Nicaraguan diversity in terms of sexuality and peasants' desires.¹⁷ This is also true for the area of food. By ig-

noring the special needs of people in the Caribbean and rural communities, state food distribution alienated these sectors from the revolution.

Until now historians have mainly situated the Nicaraguan revolution within the contexts of US dominance and the Cold War. In this book I argue for including other foreign actors into Nicaragua's revolutionary history—namely, relief agencies, European development assistance, and international organizations. It was their staff, together with Nicaraguan actors, that negotiated and implemented food policy in the field, far away from headquarters where new strategies for global food problems had been designed.

Traditionally, historians have analyzed the revolution's history using categories such as mass organizations, the state sector, students, peasants, and elites. The consumer as a category and a political figure has been absent in scholarly analyses, but here I introduce the consumer as a social identity to be used in food struggles, as an ascription that became increasingly important in supply politics, and as an important historical actor. Distribution rules, as well as the food offered and its quality, frequently clashed with consumers' desires. Faced with adverse conditions Nicaraguans carved out in-between spaces to defend their food choices. By doing so, they creatively incorporated new ingredients and found alternative solutions for scarce products.

How did competing visions of consumption as well as the scarcity of certain food products contribute to the demise of the revolution? Broad definitions of consumption and consumer cultures are necessary for such an analysis. In this sense, consumption includes related rituals, emotions, discourses, and sociability. In anthropological research the emphasis has been on the symbolic dimension of consumer goods, as people use them to spread messages about their social status and lifestyle.¹⁸ The same is true for food items: the ingredients of meals and the choice of dishes reveal information about wealth and social aspirations. To understand how food cultures changed, sometimes based on local creativity and sometimes based on global nutrition transitions, we need to apply transcultural approaches.

The stories of Nicaraguan food consumption resist easy categorizations, such as the homogenization of consumer habits through globalization. Books such as *The McDonaldization of Society* have strongly promoted this perspective, which is still present in contemporary debates.¹⁹ In Nicaragua, fast food ascended in the 1950s but was first promoted by the local enterprise Pollo Tip Top, which adapted US trends to Nicaraguan consumption patterns. At the same time, local fast food sold at the street *fritangas* dominated urban public spaces.

Food insecurity, migration, and food aid also inspired Nicaraguans to design new recipes or to try different combinations of ingredients. For ex-

ample, they invented dishes such as potato pizza with chicken, soy cookies, and hamburgers with corn tortillas in place of wheat bread. In many cases, scarcity jolted creativity into motion—or as one interviewee expressed it, “in times of crisis, creativity keeps us afloat.”²⁰ Historians and anthropologists have made a strong case for a more nuanced analysis that would take into account the large corpus of theoretical works on cultural change. Alluding to the concepts of hybridity, creolization, and transculturality, these scholars depict changes in food habits as a continuous process of negotiation.²¹ Reactions vary to standardized global food such as the processed food distributed by multinational firms or food aid rations: some people resist its introduction while others integrate it into the preparation of traditional dishes or they invent brand new recipes. In this sense, the anthropologist Richard Wilk has argued that globalization actually produces local culture such as the emergence in an improvised way of new styles of food, music, and clothing. Hence, essentialism of local food cultures has to be avoided. Transcultural approaches emphasize the ways in which cultural exchange creates new dishes and cooking styles.²² Although some transcultural theorists have generated the impression that in a globalized world everything was available to everybody, this was certainly not the case, as power asymmetries persisted.²³

During severe food crises in Nicaragua, however, creativity reached its limits. People survived on monotonous diets of tortillas, beans, reptiles, or bananas. This happened, for example, when people lost land during the agro-export boom of the 1950s, after the 1972 earthquake, during the Contra War, and in rural communities in Northern Nicaragua in the early 1990s. The micro level of daily consumption was situated in a wider structure of power relations that limited consumers' options. In his reflections on food and power, anthropologist Sidney Mintz distinguishes between an inner and an outer sphere of consumption. The “inner sphere” of daily consumption routines was surrounded by the “outer sphere” of economic, social, and political conditions that set limits to consumers' decisions through working hours, purchasing power, or war. For example, on plantations or in institutional feeding, food was introduced by force. Depending on the geographical location and the work regulations of a plantation, workers had no choice in terms of their food rations and the products offered at the plantation store. Inmates had to accept the food served in prisons or hospitals.²⁴

The plantation economy radically changed Caribbean economies and food cultures. The presence of slaves, Chinese migrants, and foreign merchants also influenced local food cultures. The Caribbean has been an important cultural contact zone where people invented new technologies and songs as well as new patterns of social and economic organization.

Consequently, it was also a zone of significant culinary exchanges that has inspired research on global food cultures.²⁵

The Nicaraguan Caribbean should be included in ongoing historical scholarship. It occupies more than 50 percent of national territory but has remained for long periods at the margins of the mestizo nation.²⁶ Its separate history of colonization and its ethnic heterogeneity have characterized the region until today. Consequently, the stronger state presence in the region since the 1960s met with resistance from the indigenous and Creole communities. People perceived mestizo state representatives as outsiders attempting to implement projects designed in Pacific Nicaragua. Unlike in the rest of the country, tensions over land or food prices did not develop into broader social protests. As a result, the Sandinistas never built up a strong basis of support at the Coast, and they ignored regional particularities. People here viewed state intervention in the food supply more critically than in the rest of the country.

Culinary culture at the Caribbean Coast also differs profoundly from that in Central Nicaragua in terms of consumption habits. While mestizo Nicaraguan nutrition is based on maize, beans, and rice as basic staples, food cultures at the Atlantic Coast integrated roots, tubers, spices, and seafood from the wider Caribbean region. While Central Nicaraguan culinary habits affected Coast regions between the 1960s and the 1990s, the influence of Caribbean food on Central Nicaragua remained limited.

Contrary to Mexican or Peruvian food, Nicaraguan cuisine has never received large global attention. Instead, it was the political turmoil that suddenly captured the world's attention. The story of a corrupt and aged dictator challenged by young guerrilleros in olive uniforms quickly circulated around the globe in the late 1970s.

FOOD AND COLD WAR IN GLOBAL SOUTH COUNTRIES

Nicaragua represents the many small countries with dependent economies in the Global South that experienced regime changes and became Cold War flash points in the twentieth century. Food and consumption had a strong Cold War dimension. Both superpowers were eager to show that their political model was superior, and in this competition, access to consumer goods became an important indicator.²⁷ In Latin America, Cold War tensions intensified after the United States supported a coup against a left-wing government in Guatemala in 1954 and after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Since then, the US government has tried hard to prevent radical groups from gaining support in Nicaragua and other Central American countries.²⁸ The distribution of food aid was one means by which the United States tried to stifle political radicalization and ensure stability.

During the early years of the Cold War, many Global South countries struggled to supply their growing urban population with sufficient food and to overcome dependency on a few export commodities. High-yielding seeds seemed to offer a way out but also bore the risk of dependency on foreign seed and fertilizer companies. Since the 1950s a paradoxical coexistence of food aid, demands for self-sufficiency, and the spread of Green Revolution technologies has emerged in numerous Global South countries. During the 1950s and 1960s, for many African and Asian countries, the early Cold War years overlapped with decolonization. New political leaders took over the government in the postcolonial nations while developing a common identity as “Third World” countries. Political independence was linked to economic independence and the control of food resources.²⁹

In Latin America the situation was different. Most countries—among them Nicaragua—had already become independent during the early nineteenth century. Hence, debates over self-sufficiency in Latin America revolved around economic independence. Leading theorists of dependency theory argued that Latin American economies needed to break with the colonial legacy of agro-export dependency. Since the 1950s the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), the UN economic commission for Latin America, promoted import-substituting industrialization within the framework of dependency theory. By building up the local production of cars, household appliances, and cement, Latin American nations would avoid further imports and promote economic development with less dependence on agro exports. For example, in Argentina and Venezuela politicians promoted self-sufficiency as an important goal of economic policy. For these countries with strong industries and a large internal market, this was far easier than for small economies that were more dependent on agro exports such as Nicaragua.

During the post-Second World War years, a focus on self-sufficiency has coincided in many countries with increased dependence on international food aid. From early on, food aid was intrinsically linked to Cold War conflicts; thus, it converted into a strong instrument of foreign policy. The 1966 US Food for Peace Act declared food aid an instrument of development aid, and it allowed the inclusion of other commodities beyond surplus production. In the course of the 1960s, Asian countries became the main recipients of US food aid while Latin America also gained ground.³⁰

Food aid in Central America began with milk distribution. With the foundation of the UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 1946, a new actor appeared on the global scene that strongly engaged in school milk programs on multiple continents. In Central America from the 1950s onward, FAO and UNICEF advocated on behalf of

milk powder.³¹ Food aid expanded throughout the 1970s but escalated in the 1980s when the region became a prime location for Cold War conflicts. Researchers during the 1980s focused mainly on the political implications of US food aid.³² Consumption habits received less attention. I argue that the impact of food aid on consumption habits should be researched as food aid was a powerful force in changing global consumer preferences.

As part of its Cold War efforts to expand its influence, the United States exported high-yielding modern agricultural techniques to Global South countries, including Nicaragua. In what was eventually known as the Green Revolution, US scientists had been working on the development of high-yielding seeds and plants since the nineteenth century. The breakthrough occurred in the 1940s when the North American biologist Norman Borlaug bred high-yielding and disease-resistant wheat varieties. In Nicaragua the use of Green Revolution seeds expanded under the Somoza regime and was supported by US aid. This is in line with historian Nick Cullather's understanding of the Green Revolution as a combined US development effort in the 1950s and 1960s. The aim was to guarantee the supply of food for the world's growing population and to contribute to stable nation-building and the modernization of the peasantry. Green Revolution methods required large investments for seeds, irrigation technology, and fertilizers, thus favoring large producers over individual peasants. In Nicaragua, as elsewhere in Latin America, the Green Revolution strongly benefited large landholders. It fostered the agro-export sector, contributing to the enrichment of the business elites. President Anastasio Somoza Debayle proudly referred in his speeches to high-yielding seeds and the application of fertilizers, although these supplies had been financed to a high degree by Alliance for Progress money.³³

The application of Green Revolution strategies varied in different places and time periods with ups and downs according to donor strategies, available resources, and public debates on hunger. The Green Revolution reached its global height in the 1970s. After growing criticism of its ecological consequences, however, international donors' support for Green Revolution projects declined during the 1980s. In Nicaragua, part of the Sandinista leadership promoted an agricultural strategy influenced by Green Revolution premises: large-scale production relying on agricultural supplies and technology. The Cold War dimension of development aid became visible again as Eastern bloc aid supported many of these large agricultural projects.

External financial aid and development assistance were important for the survival of the revolution between 1979 and 1989. The Sandinista revolutionaries were successful in attracting support from external donors for

many of the government's social projects. Diverse donors, such as Western European countries, international organizations, Latin American nations, and the Eastern bloc contributed to health, education, and agriculture projects. After the 1985 US trade embargo, development aid also provided the resources for importing basic goods that had become scarce in Nicaragua.

Especially in the early period of the revolution, agency was not exclusively in the hands of the external donors, as some authors of development literature have suggested.³⁴ The Sandinistas used international conferences as a forum to launch political initiatives. They also organized international meetings in Nicaragua and capitalized on the presence of foreign delegates and international donors for their political campaigns. With the looming economic crisis, however, the Sandinista project depended even more on external support, which required adapting to the agendas of political leaders from both Cold War blocs as well as different international organizations and NGOs. Although publicly rallying for autonomy, in fact the Sandinistas pursued a policy of diversified dependency. As I argue in this book, Sandinista food policy combined both idealism and pragmatism. Sandinista politicians successfully promoted self-sufficiency as an important strategy in the fight against hunger in the Global South. At the same time, however, they were aware that Nicaragua's economic situation made it impossible for them to reach self-sufficiency within a short time. The pragmatic way out was to support both agro exports and the cultivation of basic grains and to acquire as much external funding as possible. Throughout the 1980s, statistics on deficiencies in caloric consumption were used to support arguments for international food aid.

FROM THE INVENTION OF THE CALORIE TO GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY

The late nineteenth-century discovery of the calorie has shaped global evaluations of the nutritional situation until today. Historical research has revealed that the calorie was converted into a powerful political tool during the first half of the twentieth century. After its discovery in the United States in 1896, the unit of measure soon became an instrument for defining living standards, minimum wages, and food rations. The calorie prompted the first "scientific" comparisons between the diets of different social groups and countries. Measuring calories formed part of a general trend to map the world by numbers and statistical charts.³⁵

Consequently, food policy relied on consumption surveys, tables with the caloric value of different foods, and dietary recommendations—a trend reinforced by the discovery of vitamins. Hence, some governments incorporated special ministries of food, which became a playground for nutritional scientists. In other cases, such as Nicaragua, the government created special

institutions for nutrition in response to pressure from international actors. Scientists, doctors, nutritionists, and health planners constructed dietary ideals throughout the twentieth century. Although scientific publications promoted the new requirements for good nutrition as objective truth, they actually reflected middle-class experts' contemporary ideals.³⁶

Latin American governments had become aware of nutrition problems beginning in the 1930s. Several countries established national nutrition councils, as governments were concerned about high child mortality levels and workers' low living standards. The initiatives mainly came from larger Latin American countries with reform-oriented governments such as Chile, Peru, or Uruguay.³⁷ In Central America similar concerns arose later as authoritarian regimes dominated the 1930s political scene. There, the Guatemalan reform government of Juan José Arévalo (1945–1951) finally launched an initiative for a regional nutrition institute, the Instituto de Nutrición de Centroamérica y Panamá (INCAP), the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama. Founded in 1949, its four main tasks were: (1) to elaborate a diagnosis of the regional nutrition situation, (2) to conduct research to find solutions for local nutrition problems, (3) to act as an advisor to regional governments, and (4) to facilitate the education of Central American experts. INCAP initiated the first scientific nutrition survey in Nicaragua in the 1950s, followed by a large Central American study in the 1960s.

Scientists, intellectuals, and politicians evaluated Nicaraguan food in new and sometimes contradictory ways between the 1950s and the 1980s. Scientists expressed their concerns in accounts of deficiencies of protein, calories, and nutrients while intellectuals praised emblematic dishes, special flavors, and historical tradition. After the revolution, the government no longer ignored malnutrition and introduced a political evaluation of Nicaraguan diets. Sandinista leaders promoted affordable prices and locally produced basic grains. All of these actors inscribed their moral values on new dietary ideals.

Anthropological researchers have questioned whether hunger is a clearly definable state and instead suggest understanding it as an unstable phenomenon that can be expressed in many different forms.³⁸ However, quantifiable definitions are still attractive as they nurture the illusion that technical solutions can resolve the problems. As historical source for analyzing nutrition habits, however, statistical data poses two challenges. One is the general concern as to whether numbers can describe hunger, malnutrition, and consumption in an adequate way. One of the main global actors for distributing a quantitative approach to hunger and elaborating global mappings is the Food and Agriculture Organization. Until very recently,

the categorization of a country as “food insecure” depended on average caloric intakes alone.

During the 1970s, international actors introduced the concept of food security to the debates on malnutrition, but in Nicaragua the concept did not influence food politics before the 1979 revolution. FAO was one of the main actors diffusing the concept of food security on a global scale. In the early 1970s, the World Food Crisis had brought the subject of hunger back to the global political agenda. In 1974, the FAO convened the World Food Conference in Rome to open a forum for debate on food problems. One important outcome was the rise of the concept of food security in global politics.³⁹ As the Sandinista government cooperated closely with the FAO in the early 1980s, food security became a part of Nicaraguan policy. In 1987 the Nicaraguan constitution included food security—in the form of a state guarantee for adequate availability and equitable distribution of food—as a political right for all Nicaraguans.⁴⁰ In internal political debates, however, the concept of self-sufficiency remained more significant.

THE HISTORICAL STATISTICS, SOURCES, AND THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Statistics inform us about large trends in food production and consumption, but the numbers fail to capture heterogeneous local realities, flavors, plant varieties, and people’s perceptions of the nutritional situation. Statistics do not differentiate between bean varieties, for example. For Nicaraguan consumers, however, there was an important distinction between cooking with local red beans or being forced to use imported beans that they strongly disliked. Statistics were also designed for Central Nicaraguan consumption habits and did not include Caribbean staples. Thus, statistical averages often hide regional disparities as well as inequalities in inter-household food distribution.

The lack of resources and qualified personnel as well as the occurrence of natural disasters also pose significant challenges to reliable statistical data for Nicaragua.⁴¹ For researchers in the past and the present, this situation constitutes a dilemma as the data is in many cases incomplete and contradictory. As it was beyond my aims and capacities to engage with an intense documentation of all statistical data, I finally made the decision to work mainly with FAO statistics as they were available for the whole research period.⁴²

The source material for this book draws on a large variety of archival sources that I collected both inside and outside of Nicaragua. At the time of my research in Nicaragua, documents on Nicaraguan food policy after 1979 were unavailable in the state archives, which prevented my analysis of internal government correspondence on the matter of food policy and

supply issues.⁴³ I followed two strategies to compensate for this deficiency. First, I consulted the archives of actors engaged in projects to support Nicaraguan food policy, such as the FAO, the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), and German and Swiss development assistance archives. Second, I focused on grey literature and press coverage to shed light on government campaigns, political priorities, and institutional settings.

In the book I have followed a chronological structure to examine how food and consumption shaped Nicaraguan history from the 1950s to the early 1990s. The six chronological chapters are followed by a separate chapter on the Nicaraguan Caribbean, in which I examine the region's unique history and local opposition to Sandinista food policy. In the epilogue I discuss how the Nicaraguan revolution contributed to the recognition that food security is a basic right and the rise of peasant movements for food sovereignty.

In the first chapter, on the Somoza dictatorship, I argue that urbanization and the agro-export economy challenged the production, distribution, and consumption of food in Nicaragua beginning in the 1950s. Corn, rice, and beans were basic staples of the Nicaraguan diet, combined in many ways in traditional dishes and daily cooking. When it was moved to marginal and less fertile soils, basic grains production became insufficient to feed the growing urban population. Because of their work obligations, urban Nicaraguans consumed more processed foods and street food in order to save time. High food prices created social tensions within Nicaraguan society. These were temporarily alleviated by US economic aid in the 1960s. In the late 1960s, however, the United States lost interest in the Alliance for Progress, and the world food supply entered a crisis. Both of these factors significantly affected Nicaragua.

Beginning in the 1960s, nutritionists and doctors perceived that malnutrition was a serious health problem and a threat to national development. The focus of the first nutritional surveys was on quantitative evaluations of the Nicaraguan diet in calories, vitamins, and micronutrients. This language challenged the intellectual discourse of a rich and varied Nicaraguan cuisine. It also ignored people's creativity in providing simple foods with flavor in times of scarcity. The hospitals filled with patients suffering from malnutrition, but politicians paid no attention to the problem. Foreign actors intervened through food aid, basic grains production projects, and nutrition education. The nutritional surveys demonstrated, however, a stagnation of the nutrition situation. More than 50 percent of Nicaraguan children suffered from malnutrition; average caloric intakes varied between 1,800 and 2,100 kilocalories.

Access to food became a key problem in 1970s Nicaragua, as demonstrated in Chapter Two. International actors used the first nutrition surveys to demand measures from the Somoza regime to improve the nutritional situation. Although the government had introduced some nutritional institutions around 1965 because of this international pressure, politicians continued unwilling to take food policy seriously. They mainly used the efforts of international organizations and NGOs as examples of the regime's successful governance. Between 1965 and 1970, food donations increased and temporarily eased the pressure on the Nicaraguan food system. At the same time, food aid strengthened the consumption of imported grains, thus increasing foreign dependence. Rising food prices in the early 1970s provoked social protests and controversies over the agro-export focus in Nicaraguan society.

During these controversies, the popular consumer with rights became an important social category. The repression of social protests further radicalized urban and rural people. During the severe food crisis after the 1972 earthquake, the regime misappropriated foreign aid and consequently lost support among elites and the middle class. The 1972 earthquake also increased already existing social gaps. During post-disaster reconstruction, Managua became a more divided city. Advertisements for imported goods invaded newspapers and public spaces, but for most Nicaraguans these products remained unaffordable. While the regime publicly celebrated luxury dinners, ordinary people lacked access to food. This increasing chasm between rich and poor strengthened the position of the revolutionaries.

In Chapter Three the focus is on how, between 1979 and 1982, the Sandinistas combined idealism and pragmatism to improve food distribution, strengthen basic grains production, and promote local foods. They envisioned Nicaragua as a self-sufficient revolutionary country but were aware of economic dependency on agro exports and hence established alliances with large-scale private producers and foreign development aid. The Sandinistas' willingness to take food policy seriously inspired support from a wide range of actors, among them international organizations, food activists, and diplomats. The initiative to request foreign support came in all cases from the Sandinistas. Food was part of their public diplomacy campaign for revolutionary Nicaragua, especially after US president Ronald Reagan canceled the loans for wheat imports in early 1981.

The Sandinistas implemented fundamental reforms in a short time, but they also faced enormous challenges. The Somoza regime had left a difficult heritage of high debts and an economy oriented toward agro exports. A major dilemma was the need to rely on export production for financial reasons while politically wanting to support basic grains production. In the case of

land redistribution, the revolutionaries did not fulfill the peasants' hopes for individual access to land, which became a serious problem later on. The inefficiency of large state farms affected the availability of milk and meat. Finally, the food program was split between different ministries and government institutions, which weakened its impact. Hence, although ordinary Nicaraguans' access to food improved, they still experienced uncertainties because of speculation and the temporary unavailability of certain foods.

In Chapter Four we follow the Sandinista campaigns for self-sufficiency that went hand in hand with increasing US aggression. Self-sufficiency required Nicaraguans to switch to locally produced foods and consume less imported products. Hence, the revolutionaries gave new political meanings to food and consumption. The consumer was an important figure in these campaigns: he or she was a frugal, disciplined individual who subordinated personal desire to revolutionary survival. At the same time, ordinary Nicaraguans used the figure of a consumer with rights—already present in 1970s social movements—to frame their demands for an improved food supply.

From 1982 onward, natural disasters and the Contra War significantly affected the already limited food supply. The Sandinistas strengthened rationing, introduced supply priorities, and increased revolutionary vigilance. Rationing and food speculation increased tensions among different social groups and regions within Nicaraguan society. People had to invest more time in acquiring sufficient food and to revive traditional survival methods. At the same time, an enormous gap in the food supply between rural and urban areas persisted, which further alienated rural people from the revolution. In failing to address women's double burden and to campaign for an equal distribution of household work, the Sandinistas missed out on a chance to transform gender relations in Nicaragua more profoundly. Overall, the Sandinista campaigns prompted mixed responses, as they failed to take into account regional and social diversity as well as gender inequalities. The government also failed to fully understand people's food priorities and desires, which limited the success of its campaigns.

Chapter Five is a chronicle of the growing disillusionment in the years 1985 and 1986 when the economic crisis worsened and the Contra War began to seriously affect the national food supply. During this period Nicaragua became more dependent on external aid and food donations. The US economic blockade had shrunk economic possibilities to a minimum. At first the strategy for diversified dependency once again proved successful, and the Sandinistas rapidly procured donations and established new commercial links. However, the general supply situation remained difficult, speculation continued, and wages lost purchasing power because of acceler-

ating inflation. As a result, the Sandinistas established their first economic adjustment package, which among other things, devalued the currency, reduced the budget for social projects, and eliminated food subsidies. In the end, these reforms did not alleviate the crisis.

Also, the government's relationship to the peasants remained contradictory, as an important part of the Sandinista leadership favored large-scale food production based on Green Revolution technologies. During the economic crisis, the gap increased between their ambitious visions and actual local realities. The improvement in land distribution in 1986 came too late for many peasants who by this time had started supporting the Contras. From 1985 onward the Sandinista policy turned ever more into crisis management, which disillusioned both Nicaraguans and external advisers.

In Chapter Six, I explain how the 1988 adjustment programs also alienated Sandinista allies from the revolutionary project. Scarcity, hyperinflation, and a natural disaster culminated in an overall crisis. Critical voices became louder although they seldomly resulted in open protests. Despite widespread scarcity, some Sandinista leaders displayed luxury consumption in public. Consequently, they lost credibility when calling for personal austerity and revolutionary discipline. The transition back to a capitalist market economy began with the 1988 economic reforms. Severe budget cuts and the dismissal of state employees as well as the strengthening of market mechanisms in food distribution put an end to the vision of a self-sufficient Nicaragua with democratic access to food resources. During transition Nicaraguans suffered increasingly from hunger, especially in the northern rural regions, and the Sandinistas did not recognize this publicly until after the elections. All of these factors contributed to their electoral defeat in 1990.

During the whole transition period from 1988 to 1993, food policy deteriorated into crisis management. The governments handled emergency aid but lacked the capacity for any ambitious reform projects. The new UNO government neglected food policy and put off international donors with its lack of interest. Despite significant international aid the situation did not improve for ordinary Nicaraguans, who suffered from price shock and malnutrition. The new political and economic elites promoted US consumer ideals as a model and fostered the foundation of shopping centers as well as the granting of loans. Once again, controversies about consumption and US influences broke out in Nicaraguan society. At the same time, nutritional campaigns lost political militancy. They promoted local food as healthier and cheaper and assigned individual responsibility to people for improving their dietary choices.

In Chapter Seven, I argue that Caribbean people rejected Sandinista food policy to a much greater degree than Pacific Nicaraguans did. Long-term residents, new settlers, and local indigenous communities reacted negatively to state intervention in the Coast's food supply. Food prices increased at the Coast more than anywhere else in Nicaragua because of inadequate transport infrastructure and broken international trade relations, and this prompted more negative feelings. In addition, the Contra War seriously affected local food production. Moreover, the Sandinistas did not take local culinary habits into account until negotiations on regional autonomy started.

The Coast's negative reactions to the revolution have deep historical roots. The Caribbean has a different history of colonization than Central Nicaragua. In addition, it is a region with a very heterogeneous population. British and Caribbean cultural influences dominated local power relations until the nineteenth century. The booming plantation economy and lumber industry attracted numerous US firms to the region, which led to a broad availability of imported goods from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a period that local people still remembered with nostalgia during the 1980s. From the 1960s onward, settlers from Central Nicaragua influenced local food production and consumption. By contrast, Pacific people only seldom incorporated Caribbean dishes into their diet. The autonomy process strengthened the documentation of local recipes and gave new value to Caribbean food culture. Nevertheless, wood and seafood extraction has remained a challenge for the local food system across the different political regimes.

In the epilogue, I show that the Sandinista revolution left an ambivalent legacy for future food policy. After food security was established in the constitution under the Sandinistas in 1987, it was easier to establish a food sovereignty law. More important, the revolution had empowered peasants to mobilize for their own concerns and organize a peasant-to-peasant education network. These peasant networks, connected throughout Central America, contributed to the rise of the global peasant network called *La Vía Campesina*, which promoted the concept of food sovereignty at a global scale. This concept took up important elements of Sandinista food policy, such as the preference for local production and agrarian reform. However, the concept also advanced beyond the limitations of Sandinista food policy in promoting peasants' autonomy and control over seeds and water.

The Nicaraguan food sovereignty law that was approved on June 18, 2009, includes some of these elements of food sovereignty but was deradicalized by FAO and the new Ortega government. Since the 1980s FAO has established close links with government officials in promoting a food

security policy. Part of the Sandinista leadership had favored industrial agriculture in the 1980s, and some of these leaders went on to shape food policy in the early twenty-first century, which facilitated cooperation with FAO. Despite the new food sovereignty law and the Zero Hunger program established in 2007, many challenges to food security continue, including access to land, high food prices, and ecological problems related to soil degradation and natural disasters as well as resource extraction at the Caribbean Coast.