

**G**ENERAL Anastasio Somoza has been well exposed for his brutal suppression of the popular opposition to his dictatorship in the central American state of Nicaragua.

Most of the country's 2.5 million citizens back the guerrillas who, in the past 12 months, have tried to dislodge the President from power.

But 53-year-old Somoza continues to rule, thanks to the National Guard which is responsible for the indiscriminate killings of the elderly, women and children in a strategy aimed at terrorising the population into quiescence.

What gives one man total power to terrorise a nation? Somoza has discredited the theory that he is a puppet of the US. For belatedly, Carter has withdrawn patronage from Somoza—yet he continues to rule and is determined to remain in office until 1981. What, then, is the source of his power?

**T**HE SOMOZA family's wealth is conservatively put at \$500m. The President himself admits to a personal fortune of \$100m. The foundation of this vast wealth is ownership of land.

Somoza owns about 40% of Nicaragua's land, including 500,000 acres of rich farmland. In total, the area is about the size of Wales.

With this astonishing monopoly control over natural resources, Somoza's family has helped to keep the peasants in poverty over the past four decades. The peasants earn about £75 per annum, and suffer some of the worst conditions in the western hemisphere in terms of health, nutrition and literacy.

Somoza built a business empire on his landed wealth, including the national airline, a shipping line, TV station, bank, construction companies—literally scores of firms. He now employs more people than the state!

**T**HE SOMOZAS have controlled Nicaragua ever since the President's father took control—with US support—in a coup in 1936. When Somoza Senior was assassinated in 1956, his eldest son took over until he died in 1967—whereupon brother "Tacho" assumed power. He, in turn, now appears to be grooming his 28-year-old son, a major in the National Guard, to take over the political reins in the future.

Against such entrenched power there was never any chance of the exploited peasantry successfully launching a revolution. Somoza's big mistake, however, was to alienate the middle class businessmen after the 1972 earthquake which killed about 10,000 people and razed the capital, Managua, to the ground.

For the re-construction programme provided the prospects of huge profits, and President Somoza was determined to take a large share of the action.

As the owner of valuable sites in the suburbs of Managua—upon which the new capital has now been built—he was able to divert foreign aid into the family coffers.



An elderly man sits on a barricade in Esteli with his trusty old rifle and waits to do battle with the National Guard. **FRED HARRISON** analyses the roots of the corrupt power which has reduced Nicaragua to a state of chaos.

## The Roots of Corrupt Power

As the owner of the country's only cement-producing factory, he was able to charge monopoly prices.

As the political dictator, he could determine who received the building contracts. . . .

Because of Somoza's outrageous greed, he succeeded in upsetting the conservative businessmen who are—or ought to have been—his natural allies. Instead, they joined forces with the urban workers, students and peasants to present a united opposition to the President. Somoza himself was affronted.

Blandly, he claimed to have saved the people after the earthquake. "I would be eternally grateful to a man like me," he affirmed.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE PEOPLE, however, were not grateful. Armed with primitive weapons they took part in a popular uprising last summer which ended in a bloodbath—theirs.

The National Guard took no prisoners: people were shot on the spot, some of them dragged from their beds to be executed in the streets outside their homes, in full

# Somoza: the Making Of a Blood Sucker

view of their relatives.

Carter, who had committed a blunder by sending Somoza a letter congratulating him for a minor concession on human rights, finally had to withdraw support in the face of international diplomatic pressure. Somoza no longer provided the political stability essential to US interests, but he stood firm and told Washington where to get off.

But how could he retain the loyalty of the 8,000-strong National Guard in the face of such widespread opposition among fellow countrymen?

One method, reports Frank Taylor, is "to cut them in on Government land deals."<sup>2</sup> The technique for making money out of land was quite simple, as Christopher Roper reported of the post-earthquake period:

**Another lucrative source of funds during this period of reconstruction has been to buy up property and then sell it to the Government. In several cases these land deals have involved millions of dollars.<sup>3</sup>**

**I**MPOVERISHMENT of the people has been systematic.

Last year the country's bishops issued a pastoral letter in which they denounced the concentration of land and wealth in so few hands. They said that the tendency, far from being reversed in the name of a fairer society, was increasing.

The uprisings, the people's response to the maldistribution of land and job opportunities, has been seized as a chance to enlarge the holdings of corrupt officials. Peasants suspected of helping the Sandinista guerrillas have been shot and their holdings confiscated by local authorities. . . . and the lion's share of this land appears to have gone to local judges.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the irony is that there is theoretically enough land in Nicaragua to provide everyone with a



◆ Anastasio Somoza

good living. A great deal of land stands vacant in a country which has a density of 37.3 people per square mile, the lowest in Central America.

"Nicaragua's unutilised tracts of land represent a great deal of potential wealth," according to a Government-sponsored advertisement in *The Financial Times* (2.5.74).

But because of the power derived from the monopoly control over natural resources and the grip which this provides over the capital necessary to develop virgin lands, the peasants are condemned to live in poverty.

Which is why so many of them turned to selling their blood, to supplement their meagre incomes.

Plasmaferesis, a blood-plasma manufacturing firm owned by the Somoza family, did a roaring trade in buying the blood of poor Nicaraguans for sale mainly to the US.<sup>5</sup> This trade in blood was vigorously denounced by Pedro Chamorro, the editor of *La Prensa*.

Chamorro was murdered last January. Nicaraguans strongly

suspect that the orders came from their President. The murder was a catalyst: it signalled the start of a nation-wide general strike, the first of this year's attempts to force Somoza to quit.

**E**VEN IF Somoza did resign and was forced to leave the country, he would not be impoverished.

He owns, for example, a 16,000-hectare farm in Costa Rica on which he wants to build a \$42m. coastline complex of hotels and sports facilities.

As for the peasants of Nicaragua, the unseating of the dictator would not improve the economic prospects for many of them. For Washington is determined to make sure that Somoza's successor does not undertake fundamental reforms.

Nicaragua is strategically important for the US. It is the country which might conceivably have a trans-isthmus canal built to connect the oceans. And if Nicaragua goes the way of Cuba the neighbouring right-wing dictatorships (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) would have difficulty in surviving.

So the search is on for a tame replacement for Somoza.

Which means that even in the post-Somoza era, the peasants will have to continue working for land reform, for it is unlikely that there will be any scheme to utilise the land according to criteria of both justice and economic efficiency.

A new man may lead the country, but the exploitative system will remain the same—operating to prevent the people from realising their full potential.

#### REFERENCES

1. Nicholas Asheshov's report, *Daily Mail*, 22.9.78.
2. *Sunday Telegraph*, 27.8.78.
3. *The Guardian*, 14.4.77.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Richard Gott's report, *The Guardian*, 16.1.78.