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# From Soldiers of War to Soldiers of Peace: La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo

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From Soldiers of War to Soldiers of Peace:  
*La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo*

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*“Yesterday’s soldiers of war can become tomorrow’s soldiers of peace...they too should be given the opportunity to engage in the process of peace.”*  
*-Frederico Mayor, former UNESCO Director General<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

Reconciliation, one told me, “is to throw away the land of the past, to forsake the hate that we have.”<sup>2</sup> “It is a friendship,” said another, “If I don’t have it, I can’t break the silence that I carry.”<sup>3</sup> The poetry of these words astonished me. Both quotes were of women ex-combatants, one had fought for the *Resistencia* and the other for the Sandinistas during the dreadful Contra War that beleaguered Nicaragua for much of the 1980s. Today, these women are fellow *Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo*, colleagues in a network of war veterans and community leaders working together to nurture structural and cultural peace within a nation that remains plagued by social injustice.

Founded in 1993, *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo*<sup>4</sup> began as a group of demobilized Sandinista and *Resistencia* soldiers who, acutely familiar with the horrors of war, hoped to cultivate a sustainable reconciliation within Nicaragua’s polarized post-conflict society. “War, for us, isn’t a job that you start and then forget, but rather something that carries pain and greater resentment,” one *Promotor* explained.<sup>5</sup> Fifteen years after the armed conflict’s official end, “the war on poverty, the war on hunger” remain enduring forms of violence that currently threaten Nicaragua’s precarious peace.<sup>6</sup> This project explores the *Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo*, documenting their

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<sup>1</sup> Education and Action for Peace Program, Demobilized Soldiers Speak: Reintegration and Reconciliation in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Mozambique. Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1996. iii.

<sup>2</sup> María Luz Centeno Herrera. Interview. 21 April 2006..

<sup>3</sup> Teresa de Jesús Lopez. Interview. 1 May 2006

<sup>4</sup> The Network of Peace and Development Promoters

<sup>5</sup> Uriel Antonio Carazo García. Interview. 1 May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

transformation from soldiers of war to soldiers of peace and their current struggle against the ever-ambiguous enemies that Nicaragua's current socio-economic situation present.

## MOTIVATIONS AND METHODS

While I lived and worked in Phnom Penh, Cambodia last summer, the country's violent past haunted me. The legacy of war there, though never openly acknowledged, permeated nearly every facet of Cambodian society. An International Peace Studies major, it was only until I had spent time in Cambodia that I truly began to understand the very lasting consequences of war. Increasingly aware of how ignorant America, so often the wager of war, was of this reality, my interest in post-conflict societies grew. I decided to study abroad in Nicaragua with the School for International Training the following spring with the hopes of learning how that country and its people had reconciled its own difficult past.

During my time there, I quickly recognized Nicaragua's war wounds to be buried far deeper than those of Cambodia. Although social divisions in Nicaragua remained apparent, I found myself often forgetting that the country had experienced a civil war just fifteen years ago. While Nicaragua made few attempts to hide this history, it, at the same time, did not personally share itself easily. Had Nicaragua moved on or did it continue to suffer in silence? Had reconciliation between the top translated into reconciliation between the bottom?

It was with such questions that I first met my independent study advisor, Zoilamérica Narváez and, subsequently, *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo*. Fascinated by the history of the organization and the innovative reconciliation model that

it presented, the ex-combatants of its ranks soon become the subjects of my research. I wanted to meet the members of the *Red* and learn of their personal transformations from soldiers of war to soldiers of peace, *reconciliados a reconciliadores*.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, fifteen years following the conclusion of the armed conflict, I wanted to hear their perceptions of Nicaragua today. Had the country achieved popular reconciliation? Was its peace sustainable? How did they, as Promoters of Peace and Development, envision their work within Nicaragua's current socioeconomic situation?

During the first week of my research, I conducted a mini-directed readings with Zoilamérica. Besides freshening up on basic peacebuilding theory, I needed to come to understand reconciliation within a Nicaraguan reality – what did reconciliation within this *Nica* context look like? And how did the model fostered and exemplified by the *Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* challenge convention?

After gaining this theoretical and historical background, I left Managua for the Northern city of Condega where I spent two nights (April 20-21) living with Ramón Padilla and his wife, María Luz Centeno. Both *Promotores*, Ramón and María Luz had fought on opposite sides of the war. Now the parents of six children, they proved to be living examples of popular reconciliation. Interviewing them both formally and informally about their experience within the *Red*, I also observed their daily life as *Promotores* and enemies reconciled.

After returning to Managua for a few days, I reunited with another *Promotora*, Doña Teresa Moreno in Estelí on April 29th. Hoping to learn more about the workings of the modern day network, Doña Tere introduced me to other *Promotores* and community leaders within her barrio. Traveling with me to Somoto on May 1<sup>st</sup>, through

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<sup>7</sup> The reconciled to reconciliators

Doña Tere, I came to meet other members of the Red working around the department of Madriz as well. Thus, my research in Estelí and Somoto, similar to that of Condega, consisted of observations as well as formal and informal interviews.

Returning to the capital on May 2, I formally interviewed one final *Promotor* on May 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Centro de Estudios Internacionales in Managua. What follows is the culmination of my research. Although I endeavored to remain as faithful to my subject's words as possible, I fear that no translation can do justice to the beauty and sincerity with which much of their words were delivered.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### **The Reality of War**

After the triumph of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) on July 19, 1979, the Nicaraguan population grew increasingly divided over the political, economic and social transformations that followed. This growing internal rift, amplified by the concurrent schism between the East and West, eventually erupted into a massive armed conflict. "Politically and ideologically split both for, and against, the Sandinista project", the emerging parties began to organize and promote themselves with the strength and encouragement of their international counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Fighting in defense of the revolution and the sovereignty of Nicaragua, the state's forces, the *Ejército Popular Sandinista* (EPS)<sup>9</sup> were opposed by an irregular army of counterrevolutionaries, called the

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<sup>8</sup> Agurto, Carlos García, et al. "From War to Demobilization in Nicaragua." Demobilized Soldiers Speak: Reintegration and Reconciliation in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Mozambique. Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1996. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Sandinista Popular Army

*Resistencia Nicaragüense* (RN)<sup>10</sup> that rejected the Sandinista's reforms as discriminatory, oppressive and inherently unnatural.

As the war between these two parties escalated, however, the origins of Nicaragua's polarization became overshadowed by the global implications of the national conflict. With the Socialist Bloc offering military and technical support to the Sandinista Popular Army and the United States government financing and training the Contra insurgency, Nicaragua was soon the battlefield of superpowers. The country's impoverished *campesino* population, however, found themselves caught in the resulting crossfire.

At the war's height, the Sandinista government was allotting half of its national budget to its armed forces.<sup>11</sup> The Sandinista Popular Army, thus, found itself in the position of defending a revolutionary program that lacked the financial resources to implement its social agenda. Consequently, the great majority of soldiers within the army, namely the rural and urban poor, reaped little benefit from the cause for which they fought.

Many members of the *Resistencia* encountered a similar predicament. Converted into the pawns of America's low intensity strategy, the Contra forces, largely *campesinos*, became the enforcers of a foreign policy that cared little about their way of life. Alejandro Bendaña writes,

The *campesinado* was, at the same time, the subject and object of the armed and fratricidal confrontation, but it was not he who provoked it. The authors were others, in Washington, who...put into execution a global plan to bring Sandinismo to an end, a

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<sup>10</sup> Nicaraguan Resistance

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, Brett Ashley. "Broken Promises: The Difficulties with the Demobilization and Reintegration Process in Nicaragua." SIT-Nicaragua, Spring 2004. 8.

plan that... answered to the Anti-Soviet policies of the American Administration.<sup>12</sup>

Knowing little about Communism or why they ought to oppose it, many Contra fighters joined the *Resistencia* more out of fear than personal conviction. Using intimidation to garner recruits, during the course of my research I met one *Resistencia* ex-combatant who had been kidnapped by the Contra, taken to the mountains and forced to fight.<sup>13</sup> That being said, I met another who joined voluntary in order to protect the rights that he believed the Sandinista government was denying the Nicaraguan people.<sup>14</sup>

With the Sandinista government requiring two years of military service of all men aged sixteen, the Sandinista Popular Army, in the same vain, also came to be composed of those who defended the Revolutionary cause and those who simply fought because that was the law. Of the Sandinista ex-combatants that I interviewed, one claimed to still be proud of his military service, describing revolution as “an experience that one lives, one learns and one loves.”<sup>15</sup> Another, though, admitted quite honestly that “here there was a war between Nicaraguans, between brothers, that wasn’t worth the pain.”<sup>16</sup> The nation’s conflict, thus, emerged as “a *campesino* civil war, between the poor of the city and the poor of the countryside” who, no matter their own personal loyalties, came to be abandoned by the causes they fought to defend.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ortega, Zoilamérica. Desmovilizados de guerra en la construcción de la paz en Nicaragua. Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1996. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Herrera. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Santos Yader González Romero. Interview. 3 May 2006.

<sup>15</sup> García. Interview. 1 May 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Isaías Ramírez. Interview. 30 April 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Ortega, 2.

## **The Road Towards Demobilization**

Although it did not begin to negotiate with the Nicaraguan Resistance until 1988, the Sandinista Government became involved in the international peace process long before. Beginning in 1983, the Sandinista government interacted first with the Contadora Group (Mexico, Panama, Columbia and Venezuela) in their initiatives to prevent the spread of war in Central America. Contadora was followed by the Costa Rican sponsored Esquipulas Accords of 1986 and 1987 which, like their predecessor, also fell through.

With its economy in shambles and its population socially traumatized, the Sandinista government eventually decided to forego regional peace efforts and commence bilateral talks with the Nicaraguan Resistance in 1988. Resulting in the Sapoá Agreements, the Sandinistas promised to accelerate the approaching national elections and extend political and economic concessions to the opposition. With the Cold War fizzling after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States government ceased its funding of the Nicaraguan Resistance the following year.

After the presidential victory of Doña Violeta Chamorro in 1990, plans were reached to sharply reduce the size of the Sandinista police and armed forces and completely demobilize the Nicaraguan Resistance, under the auspices of the United Nations and Organization of American States. An agreement made between military chiefs of the Sandinista and Resistance armies on April 18, 1990 clarified the roles of these international entities, guaranteed “territorial safety zones and security” for demobilized members of the Resistance and, finally, established a definitive cease-fire.

The Resistance, however, remained hesitant to disarm until the Managua Declaration was made on May 4, 1990. In addition to reiterating previous commitments, the Managua Declaration included provisions that ensured the political and social reintegration of *Resistencia* ex-combatants, promising to establish specified Poles of Development that would facilitate this resettlement process. Not creating concrete policies to execute these proposals, however, many members of the Nicaraguan Resistance demobilized to find that the social services promised to them never materialized.

The Managua Declaration also restated the government's intention to reduce the size of the state's armed and security forces, which it did in three main stages between the years of 1990 and 1993. With the Sandinista Popular Army's officers and permanent members receiving retirement packages depending on their rank and date of discharge, the conscripted and Reserve forces collected little benefits. The discharged security forces of the Ministry of the Interior, later the Ministry of Government, found themselves in a similar position. Although most had completed military functions, these retirees were still nominally civilians and, therefore, largely ignored in demobilization negotiations.

### **The Challenges of Reintegration**

Transitioning into civilian life proved exceptionally difficult for Sandinista and *Resistencia* ex-combatants because the Chamorro administration failed to live up to its end of the demobilization bargain. After turning in their weapons, most *desmovilizados* found themselves without the economic and social programs that had been assured to

them. One recalled, “there was always rhetoric about programs...but most never materialized.”<sup>18</sup> “Free from the constraints of the old East-West division but not from the consequences of the North-South divide,” ex-combatants, in their struggle to integrate into civil society, therefore, were left to fend for themselves.<sup>19</sup>

As their frustrations with the Chamorro administration mounted, groups of *desmovilizados* from both sides decided to rearm. “Demanding minimal social benefits and a chance to have a dignified livelihood,” these individuals fought for land allocation, jobs, health care and housing, much of which had already been promised by the government.<sup>20</sup> One *Promotor* remembered,

There was the *Recontra*, there was the *Recampa*...there were deaths on one side and there were deaths on the other...there was a necessity. The Resistance demobilized, the Army demobilized, but what did they [the government] do for them? Nothing.<sup>21</sup>

Emphasizing the failures of Nicaragua’s reintegration strategy, “as soldiers they felt that this was the only way they could get the government’s attention and compliance.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Appreciating the Complexities of Peace**

Following demobilization, “there was no coherency between fiscal policies, policies of development and policies of peace.”<sup>23</sup> Assuming that reintegration would stem from economic growth, the government’s structural adjustment reforms and

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<sup>18</sup> Merlo, Genaro Perez. “The Reintegration Process of the Nicaraguan Resistance.” Demobilized Soldiers Speak: Reintegration and Reconciliation in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Mozambique. Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1995. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Bendaña, Alejandro. “Demobilized Soldiers in the Construction of Peace.” Demobilized Soldiers Speak: Reintegration and Reconciliation in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Mozambique Pg. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Cortez, Bolívar Téllez. “The Reintegration of Soldiers of the Sandinista Popular Army.” Demobilized Soldiers Speak: Reintegration and Reconciliation in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Mozambique. Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1995. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Teresa Moreno. Interview. 30 April 2006.

subsequent reductions of social spending and services, only drove the country into further conflict.<sup>24</sup> The nation's rearmament phenomenon, thus, demonstrates that

...demobilization is not synonymous with reintegration any more than the absence of war means peace. More sacrifices are demanded in the post-war period, which is not a "post-conflict" setting, but rather a stage characterized by complex and prolonged processes of social, economic and psychological reconstruction.<sup>25</sup>

The great flaw of Nicaragua's reintegration process, therefore, proved to be the government's narrow vision of violence and consequent disregard for the complexities of peace.

Because violence cannot be separated from its structural and cultural components, peacebuilding must attend not only to the immediate conflict at hand, but also to the institutional and societal roots of such conflict.<sup>26</sup> Nicaragua's official peace process, however, endeavored to do no such thing. Doing little more than confiscating the weapons of the warring parties, the Chamorro government failed to address the economic or social origins of the Contra War. Following the demobilization, such societal rifts and economic disparities endured as a result. That it to say, although the war had ended, examples of cultural and structural violence still thrived. There existed, "a great poverty in all sectors...a lack of medicine, of food."<sup>27</sup> Nicaragua was "a divided family."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cortez, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ortega, 18

<sup>24</sup> Cortez, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Bendaña, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Galtung, Johan. "Cultural Violence." *Violence and its Alternatives: A Disciplinary Reader*. D. Manfred B. Steger and Nancy S. Lind. NY, NY; St. Martin's Press, 1999. 41

<sup>27</sup> Ramón Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

## LA RED DE PROMOTORES DE PAZ Y DESARROLLO

### The Beginnings

To respond to such conditions, one *Promotor* told me, “in order to survive we had to fight, but not with arms, on behalf of our families, our communities, our society.”<sup>29</sup>

With ex-combatants from both sides equally struggling, *Resistencia* and Sandinista *desmovilizados* decided to demand that their needs be met, “better as brothers than apart.”<sup>30</sup> And so, in 1994, the *Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* came to be born.

It is imperative to note that, at such beginnings, the Sandinista and *Resistencia* veterans did not seek or even hope to reconcile with their enemy. Their decision to collaborate was strictly a strategic one – working together to address the problems of reintegration would grant the *desmovilizados* a stronger negotiating position with the Chamorro government.<sup>31</sup>

Although their cooperation was a matter of necessity, the animosity between Sandinista and *Resistencia* ex-combatants remained high. As one *Promotor* told quite frankly, “To join together with someone who shot bullets at you is a difficult thing!”<sup>32</sup> During the first few meetings between the *desmovilizados* of the Army and the Resistance, another *Promotor* remembered, “each of us carried our pistol, each of us

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<sup>28</sup> Romero. Interview. 3 May 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Herrera. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Ortega, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

carried our backpack...everyone stayed with their side.” “All of the wounds were still open,” he explained.<sup>33</sup>

We had a violent attitude. When we arrived at discussions with the state, like the government of Doña Violeta de Chamorro, we did not come to offer suggestions or to chat. Rather, we arrived with a military attitude, a military character, the Contra...just as much as the members of the Army. We told them, “This, I don’t like this!”...We didn’t come to say hi to her. No. “We have a network”... [we said]... “And we don’t like that you’re not supporting us...Uphold the law because we don’t want to have to make use of other means. The truth is, that was our attitude at the beginning of the program.”<sup>34</sup>

As she began working with members of the *Resistencia*, one of the *Promotores* that I interviewed recalled the rancor that she still carried. Having lost a brother during the war, she couldn’t help but question if she was now collaborating with the person that had killed him. At the same time, however, when she met disabled *Contra* veterans, she found herself wondering whether she, herself, had been responsible for their injuries.<sup>35</sup>

As their cooperation continued, the *desmovilizados* of the *Red* began to re-encounter each other as colleagues rather than enemies. “We were the same Nicaraguans, the same *pobres*,” one *Promotor* told me, “The problems of health, of education, of unemployment [affected] one just as much as the other.”<sup>36</sup> Working together to address such issues, “we were generating *confianza*, moving closer together, losing our fear.”<sup>37</sup> The hostilities that had existed before began to fade and there emerged, in its place, a common commitment to work for social change.

I, with pain, gave birth to my son and lost him. You, with pain, gave birth to your son and lost him...all for a land called

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<sup>33</sup> García. Interview. 1 May 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Moreno. Interview. 30 April 2006.

<sup>36</sup> García. Interview. 1 May 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Nicaragua. Why are we going to continue killing ourselves psychologically?<sup>38</sup>

Over and over, *Promotores* would tell me, “*Eramos los mismos Nicaragüenses*, we were the same Nicaraguans.”

### **Becoming Agents of Peace**

During this time, many *desmovilizados* began to attend workshops sponsored by the *Programa de Educación y Acción para la Paz*,<sup>39</sup> the initiative of a local nongovernmental organization, *Centro de Estudios Internacionales*, of which Zoilamérica Narváez is now the director.<sup>40</sup> Endeavoring to equip ex-combatants with skills that would help them in their government lobbying efforts, the program offered capacitation sessions about “the reconciliation of conflicts, the mediation of conflicts, community development, personal development...the ethics of nonviolence, self esteem.”<sup>41</sup> According to one *Promotor*, “this is what brought us to transform ourselves, this type of sharing, this type of attitude.”<sup>42</sup>

Yet although the members of the Red had begun to reconcile amongst themselves, there still existed “hate, distrust and insecurity” within society at large.<sup>43</sup> Thus, there developed within the members of the *Red* a desire to set the example “for society, for the community and for our own government and political parties” that popular reconciliation was feasible. They were “a group of people that began to join together and understand

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<sup>38</sup> Moreno. Interview. 30 April 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Education and Action for Peace Program

<sup>40</sup> Center for International Studies

<sup>41</sup> García. Interview. 1 May 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

each other,” and then, “carry that message to the communities.”<sup>44</sup> One *Promotor* explained, “We reconciled ourselves and had to help others reconcile themselves.”<sup>45</sup>

In this vain, the *Promotores* established *Escuelas Comunitarias de la Construcción de Paz*<sup>46</sup> in 1997. At these community peacebuilding institutions, the *desmovilizados* imparted the lessons that they had learned during their own experience with the *Red*. Besides contributing to the cause of popular reconciliation and development, these schools also facilitated the reintegration of ex-combatants within their own communities.<sup>47</sup> Converting from community outcasts to community leaders, *Promotores* were soon called on to mediate local conflicts such as land disputes or incidents of domestic violence. One *Promotora* recalled, “Instead of being *guerrilleros*, we were *pacificadores*...before we were organized for the war and now for the peace.”<sup>48</sup> “In all areas where there was war, there were *Promotores*.”<sup>49</sup> With the establishment of *Escuelas Comunitarias de la Construcción de Paz*, the membership of the *Red* multiplied, growing to include parents, teachers, students, local authorities - anyone and everyone who was interested in contributing to the peace and development of the community.

### **Flexibility and Foresight**

Today, these schools have been integrated into the organization’s latest initiative, The Community Conflict Monitoring System. It is through this effort that the *Red* endeavors to be preventive rather than reactionary, attempting to keep up to date with the

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<sup>44</sup> García. Interview. 1 May 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Romero. Interview. 3 May 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Community Schools of the Construction of Peace

<sup>47</sup> Programa de Educación y Acción para la Paz. 1991-2000: Nueve años aportando a la construcción de la Paz en Nicaragua. Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 2000. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Moreno. Interview. 30 April, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

current concerns of their fellow community members and identify future sources of conflict. Conducting biannual surveys, members of the *Red* begin by polling their neighbors about everything from CAFTA to health care, the cost of transportation to the frequency of domestic violence. Besides sharing this information with local authorities and other nongovernmental organizations, the members of the *Red* also design and give community workshops that respond to the issues presented. It is in this manner that the *Red* stays flexible, corresponding its efforts to the changing needs of individual communities.

#### PRAXIS IN PERSPECTIVE

John Paul Lederach writes that the challenge of peacebuilding is “to transcend what exists while creating innovative responses to the needs the real world presents.”<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, this is exactly what *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* managed to do. Overcoming the fierce social divisions of the time, the *Red* united to confront the socioeconomic challenges of post-demobilization Nicaragua. Since then, it has evolved into an extensive organization with mechanisms to monitor, mold and mobilize its efforts according to Nicaragua’s changing reality. The *Red* gains this flexibility because it is not a solution in and of itself but the means to solutions, first to the challenges of reintegration and now, the struggles of the modern day.

The failures of the Chamorro government’s “peace efforts” highlight the importance of understanding violence in its entirety - bearing in mind its direct, structural and cultural manifestations. The emergence of *Recontras* and *Recompas* in post-

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<sup>50</sup> Lederach, John Paul. The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 86

demobilization Nicaragua only proves that taking the arms away from soldiers without addressing the underlying attitudes or circumstances that motivate them to take up arms in the first place cannot and will not build sustainable peace. Just as conflicts must be resolved, the convictions and circumstances that breed violence must be transformed. These solutions must be fluid, able to navigate the ebbs and flows of the ever-changing post-war setting. As *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* demonstrates that contingent to the struggle for reconciliation lies the struggle for greater social change, with reconciliation demanding and propagating social change and social change necessitating and facilitating reconciliation.

If violence, as Johan Galtung suggests, is at its core “needs deprivation”, responses to violence should consist of avenues through which divided societies may unite and address such needs together.<sup>51</sup> Peacebuilding, while encouraging the renewal of relationships, must also emphasize the discovery and establishment of social spaces that would permit such unions to occur.<sup>52</sup>

Within Nicaragua, *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* became this space, joining *Resistencia* and Sandinista ex-combatants under the banner of a common cause. Relational spaces, according to Lederach, create, maintain and sustain connections between conflicting parties by keeping such groups in “creative interaction”.<sup>53</sup> By providing this means of civic participation, relational spaces serve, not only as alternatives to direct violence, but forums in which examples of structural and cultural violence may be encountered as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Galtung, Johan, 43

<sup>52</sup> Lederach, 76.

<sup>53</sup> Lederach, 85.

In Nicaragua, the *Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* became the means by which *desmovilizados* could respond to their post-transition frustrations through civil rather than military channels, thus discouraging rearmament and further violence. In doing so the *Red* enabled ex-combatants to discard their military identity and forge a new civilian one. As ex-combatants came to identify themselves as civilians, so too did they come to regard their former enemies in the same way. One *Promotor* remembered, “they weren’t military and nor were we. We were civilians who needed to reinsert ourselves into society...and from there began our transformation.”<sup>54</sup>

## LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

The reconciliation model presented by *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* proved innovative in two major respects. Besides demonstrating that the reconciliation of the present does not require the reconstruction of the past, the experience of the *Red* affirms that ex-combatants are very capable of being both the subjects and the agents of the larger peace process.

### **Changing the Rules**

In the field of conflict resolution, there exists the tendency amongst some to assign peace with a formula, designating specific steps that “need” to be taken in order for reconciliation to be achieved.<sup>55</sup> Within such a framework lies the impression that a post-conflict society can move on only after it has confronted its recent history of war. Before they can reconcile with each other, it is assumed that people first must reconcile

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<sup>54</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Ortega, viii.

with their own proper pasts. The example of the *desmovilizados* in Nicaragua, however, proved the contrary.

During its initial reconciliation workshops the *Programa de Educación y Acción para la Paz* tried to operate under the traditional approach, but

This attempt to procure pardon and “heal wounds” (supposedly the basis of reconciliation) did not give the results hoped. The recently demobilized did not want to address the past and, much less, “their past”. Nobody wanted to open the wounds of that painful stage.<sup>56</sup>

What the *desmovilizados* did want to do was address the social and economic challenges of their reinsertion. Ultimately reconciling themselves during the process of this common struggle, their example indicates “that the reassimilation of the past is not a precondition, but a product of reconciliation.”<sup>57</sup>

While completing my research more than fifteen years following their demobilization, I still found that many ex-combatants still were hesitant to speak of their past. When I asked about their involvement during the war, they offered me very generalized answers and almost always referring to the universal “we” instead of speaking individually about themselves. Rather than “coming to terms” with their past, it seemed to me that most of the people that I met had simply come to separate their identities then from their identities now.

In one of my interviews, a *Promotor* who had fought with the *Resistencia* recalled meeting a Spanish woman at a conference a few years ago who had worked in Nicaragua as an *internacionalista* during the 1980s. Questioning him about his participation during the war, this particular woman was curious to know whether or not he, as an ex-

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 47

combatant had come to regret his involvement with the *Contra*. Upset by this, the *Promotor* made it very clear that he was not at the conference to discuss what had happened ten years ago, but rather the work that the *Red* had completed since then. “That was the past,” he said.<sup>58</sup>

### **Exceeding Expectations**

As the history of Nicaragua illustrates,

In and of themselves, cease-fires, elections and political power-sharing will not produce democracy and development. Institutional arrangements in each country remain fragile, as negotiated agreements at the top can rapidly unravel or indeed fail to hold much consequence for those at the bottom. Herein lies the importance of promoting peace-building and reconciliation from below...<sup>59</sup>

Often treated as “obstacles” to this process, “rarely are ex-combatants perceived as a resource, as a promoter or a participant capable of contributing to the definition and implementation of a lasting peace.”<sup>60</sup> The *Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo* challenged this stereotype, proving that ex-combatants are not only capable but ideal for grassroots peacebuilding. Existing as living and breathing examples that popular reconciliation is possible, the peace building efforts of *Promotores* goes to show that “veterans have a special role to play in the rebuilding and transformation of the social fabric of divided and devastated communities.”<sup>61</sup> Overcoming their stereotype as threats to the reconciliation process, the ex-combatants within the *Red* affirm that soldiers of war can become soldiers of peace. “I have converted from a military person, a person

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<sup>58</sup> Romero. Interview. 3 May 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Bendaña, 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> Ortega, vii.

prepared only to fire a gun, to a person reconciled...and from a person reconciled to a reconciliator.”<sup>62</sup>

### THE TASK AT HAND

The conditions in which the *Red* operates today are not all that different from those of its founding twelve years ago. Although the wounds of war are certainly less fresh now than they were back then, the prevalence of social and economic injustice has only grown. Nicaragua, today, for all intensive purposes, exists as a nation reconciled, yet the *Promotores* I interviewed maintained this country still lacks a sustainable peace. Demonstrating an impressive comprehension of structural violence, members of the *Red* explained that, at present, “there isn’t war, but there isn’t peace.”<sup>63</sup> Although Nicaragua might feign a relative peace, at its core, “there isn’t social peace, there isn’t a peace of equality, there’s a great disparity between your rights and mine.”<sup>64</sup>

For *Promotores* within the *Red*, the socio-economic problems that modern day Nicaragua presents have often proved difficult to address because they are not in the people’s hands necessarily, but “the hands of the government authorities.”<sup>65</sup> Their challenges today far more ambiguous than their challenges of the past, I was eager to

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<sup>61</sup> Bendaña, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

learn more about how *Promotores*, fifteen years following demobilization, responded to this reality.

During the course of my research, I noticed that some common themes emerged. The emphasis that many *Promotores* placed on the giving and receiving of knowledge was inspiring. The people that I met were hungry to empower themselves and eager to impart these lessons learned to others. One explained, “it’s important that I keep learning, that I keep moving forward because, for me, to be a *Promotor* is the least that I can do.”<sup>66</sup> Two *Promotores* that I met, not finishing their primary school education because of their involvement in the war, were now studying law at the local university.<sup>67</sup>

To be a *Promotor*, one told me, “is to understand the current situation a little better...to participate, to keep social problems in mind.” Besides being socially conscious, *Promotores* felt called to be active members of their communities. I spoke with one city official who mentioned that the members of the *Red* not only were intimately acquainted with the reality of the municipality, but chose to “involve themselves in a direct way” within that reality.<sup>68</sup>

While in Estelí, I actually met one *Promotor* who literally walks from house to house within her barrio, meetings with individual families to discuss the public health issues that affect her community. This particular *Promotor* proceeded to tell me that acting within “*terreno de fuego*”<sup>69</sup> was part of her job description.<sup>70</sup> I, of course, use “job description” loosely because all *Promotores* work on a completely volunteer basis.

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<sup>66</sup> Moreno. Interview. 30 April 2006.

<sup>67</sup> García. Interview 1 May 2006 and Romero. Interview. 3 May 2006

<sup>68</sup> Ramilio Sánchez. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Translates into “land of fire”, but is similar to “the line of fire”

<sup>70</sup> Rosa María Moreno. Interview. 30 April 2006.

Another one of the *Promotores* I interviewed shared that, during her time with the *Red*, the most important lesson she's learned is the importance of accepting the things that one cannot change and confronting the things that one can.<sup>71</sup> In the face of Nicaragua's current socio-economic troubles, there is obviously much that the *Promotores* cannot do. That being said, I, too, came to see that the *Promotores* are still resolved to do one of the things that they can - capacitate themselves and fortify their communities.

In his book, The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace, John Paul Lederach writes that while in Central America he came to appreciate the talent of *know-who*.

When people in everyday settings where I was working had a conflict, their first thought was not "what is the solution?" It was, "who do I know who knows the person with whom I have the problem who can help create a way out?"<sup>72</sup>

In their efforts to strength and organize their own communities, I began to understand that *Promotores* are endeavoring to expand their *know-who* networks.

Today, *Promotores* have become "point-people" within their communities, knowing the person, who probably knows the other person that can probably help a fellow neighbor out. Having established relationships, not only with fellow community members, but also local government and non-governmental authorities, it is in this way that *Promotores* hope to navigate and eventually transcend their current struggles. Competing with forces far greater than themselves, the members of the *Red* maintain that they can only face Nicaragua's current socioeconomic situation as "a people

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<sup>71</sup> Elba María Altamirano. Interview. 30 April 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Lederach, 77.

organized.”<sup>73</sup> And so, *La Red de Promotores de Paz y Desarrollo*, endeavors to confront the trials of the future in the same manner it has tackled the challenges of the past, “better as brothers than apart.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Padilla. Interview. 21 April 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

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