

Tacho I Tacho II

RICHARD ELMAN

SOMOZA. *By Bernard Diederich. E.P. Dutton. 352 pp. \$19.75.*

This book is subtitled "And the Legacy of U.S. Involvement in Central America." It would be more accurate to say its subject is the history of a dynasty that ruled Nicaragua for more than forty years. The first Anastasio Somoza, Tacho I, learned English when he fled his country and came to the United States after knocking up a family maid. Before becoming the head of Nicaragua's National Guard (a United States creation), he was, among other things, a used-car salesman and a counterfeiter. Once in power in Nicaragua, Tacho I quickly made the country into a profitable family business. He is best known for having ordered the assassination of Augusto Sandino, who had come down from the hills to Managua to settle his differences with the government.

Most writings about Nicaragua make it seem as if nothing happened between Sandino's insurrection against Tacho I in the 1930s and the Sandinist popular revolt of very recent history. One of the

strengths of Bernard Diederich's account in *Somoza* is the attention he gives to the many failed plots and insurrections and strikes against the Somozas during the bloody years of their rule. Tacho I was unrelenting toward the remaining elements of Sandino's army, but he also found himself opposed by conservatives, by students and by members of his own Air Force and National Guard.

Diederich's writing is sometimes uneven and is occasionally marred by the penchant for anecdotes characteristic of *Time* magazine (for which he has been Mexico City bureau chief), but there is much direct and careful reporting of the revolution itself, going back to the earliest actions of the Sandinist National Liberation Front (F.S.L.N.) and culminating in the last days of the dynasty, when Tacho II was in his bunker and the people were in arms everywhere. In some of this account, Diederich offers us the best record we have in English of the collapse of the dynasty and the painful birth of the new Nicaragua.

I have a very vivid recollection of a press conference with the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua in which Diederich demanded to know, with an indignation inappropriate for a *Time* correspondent, when the United States was going to withdraw its support for the massacre

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of Nicaraguans by Somoza and his son; and it was Diederich who was chosen by the world press to hand over a letter of protest to Tacho II on Nicaraguan television after the assassination of ABC reporter Bill Stewart.

Finally, a book like *Somoza*, by including so much more of Nicaraguan history than other recent books, manages to make us see what an immense accomplishment the Nicaraguan revolution actually was. □

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