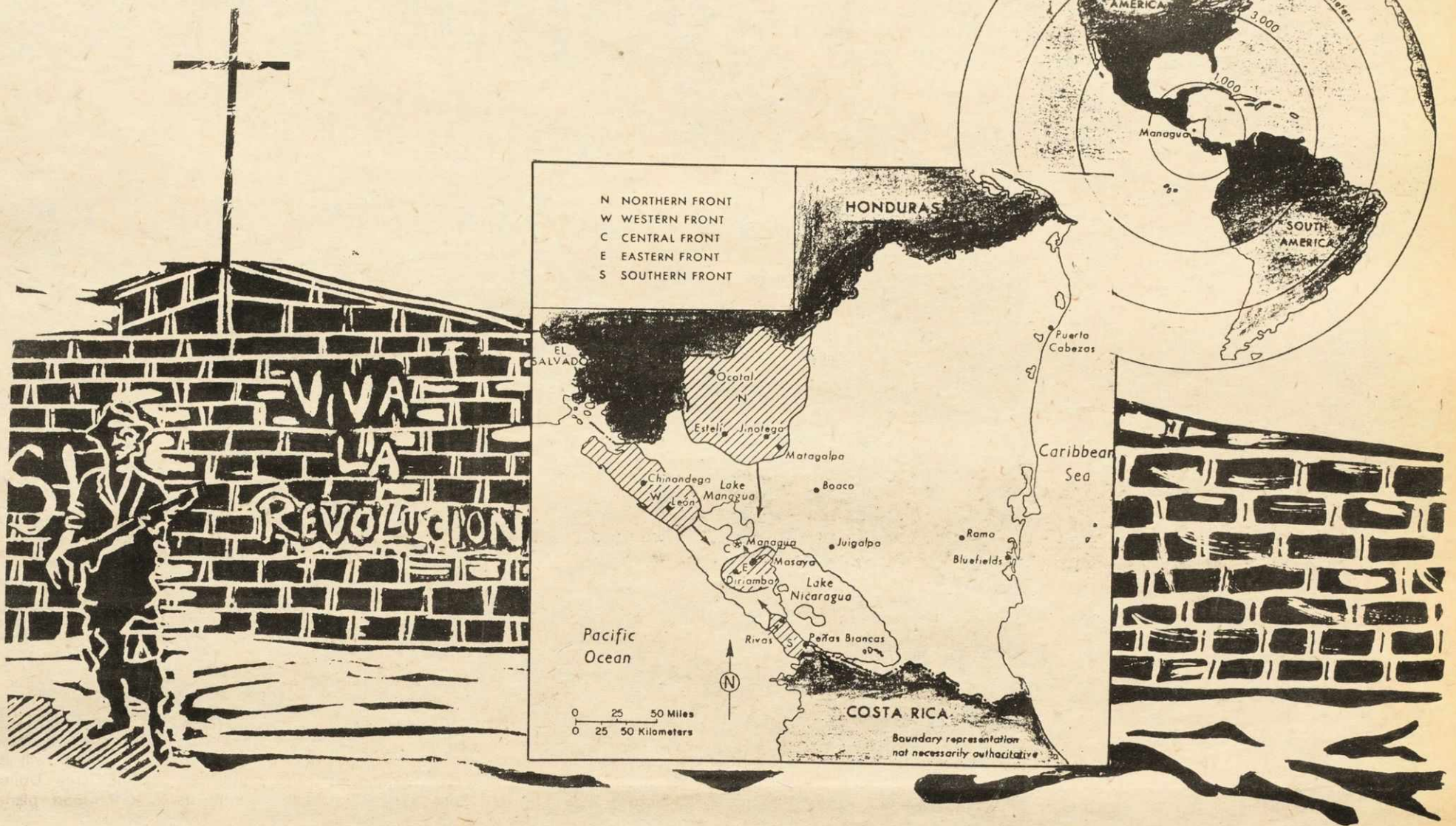


Revolution revives ailing culture



by Sarah Cox

It is the day after a bombing attack on Nicaragua's major port and Nicaragua's culture minister is quickly surrounded at a Vancouver conference on north-south dialogue.

Wearing jeans and a scruffy brown suede jacket, Ernesto Cardenal is barely distinguishable from the people who cluster around him. His rapid Spanish and the direction of their st— toward a black beret, long silver hair, and grey eyebrows poking above dark rimmed glasses—are the only indications that this man is a reknowned politician, poet and priest.

The question on everyone's mind is the same, the answer unexpectedly direct.

"El CIA," Cardenal tells them. "The CIA attacked the port." He

speaks softly and without anger. Moments later the crowd is ushered back into the conference room and Cardenal takes his place among the row of well dressed panelists from around the world to discuss the possibility of culture in an underdeveloped country.

When Cardenal begins speaking, whispers rustling through the audience die down. He avoids mentioning the latest attack on Nicaragua's struggling revolution and plunges into an explanation of how Nicaraguans are rediscovering their authentic culture—"a culture against underdevelopment, a culture against dependence, the culture of a revolution."

Poverty and illiteracy stunt all Latin American culture, explains

Cardenal, but Nicaraguans fought and died to overcome these barriers and create a different kind of society.

"After the triumph of the revolution it was a natural phenomenon that the spontaneous boom of culture was started by the people."

The first victory against cultural underdevelopment was a literacy campaign which reduced illiteracy from 50 per cent to 13 per cent, Cardenal says. The five month campaign was conducted in four languages, including the languages of the Mosquito and Suma Indians.

"Education for them is bilingual because we want their culture to be preserved. The ministry of culture is promoting their crafts, their folklore and their

traditions."

Before the revolution, the introduction of beverages like coca-cola and the substitution of plastic for Nicaraguan textiles eroded traditional culture, says Cardenal. Even the national palace is "a grotesque imitation" of the Parthenon, he says.

"We used to have a false culture as an underdeveloped country. This is not true just for us but for all Latin America."

But fundamental changes over the last four years have given Nicaragua an authentic culture, says Cardenal.


What was once a luxurious theatre is now an affordable "popular" theatre where ballets are performed and artists display their work. Films are being made in Nicaragua for the first time

and some have even won international awards. Mobile cinema units are bringing film to remote areas and theatre groups are flourishing, he says.

Cardenal, who gave up a secluded life writing poetry to become a minister, stresses the importance of making poetry accessible for everyone. The Indians' poetry is taught in schools, and poetry workshops are held everywhere, he says.


But Cardenal modestly takes no credit for the cultural victories of the revolution.

"I'm fulfilling my task of minister of culture because I think it's the will of God," he says. "This moment when Reagan is attacking I just can't run away and write poetry. Culture is a weapon we have and Reagan doesn't."



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