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Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein, fighter in Nicaragua: "July 19 was the best day of my life"

And when you forge the bonds of friendship in the war, in the insurrectional struggle, in that beautiful period of building the Army, they are ties that are not erased, for me they are eternal; and I think for them too.



43 years after the victory of the Sandinista Revolution, this Venezuelan writer, researcher and political analyst recounted in an interview with Sputnik his participation in the Southern Front, with an internationalist contingent sent from Cuba by Fidel Castro.



Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein was interviewed by Sputnik in Caracas – Photo Hernán Cano, Sputnik Mundo

He also detailed how after the triumph against the Somoza dictatorship this lieutenant of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) set himself the task of creating the Nicaraguan army.

The life of Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein has been associated since its birth with the socialist revolution. As a guerrilla father, he carved out his first steps in politics with the triumph of Salvador Allende in Chile, until [the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet](#) put an end to the experience of Popular Unity with the bombing of the La Moneda Palace and a bloody coup d'état.

Rodríguez Gelfenstein was a lieutenant of the Cuban FAR, an internationalist fighter in Nicaragua, a builder of the Nicaraguan army, and then ambassador to this country, in one of the few moments when the land of Sandino had some peace.

In dialogue with Sputnik, this researcher and writer passionately narrates the events that occurred exactly 43 years ago, when Cuban leader Fidel Castro proposed to him and a group of Latin American fighters the mission of going to fight in Nicaragua, which he accepted inspired by the Guevara maxim of "fighting imperialism wherever it is."

Since that day, Nicaragua has been an accumulation of indelible, eternal memories of enormous happiness that demand a continuous commitment to the revolution. "Just as we have Bolivar, Nicaragua has Sandino, and that creates an imprint, a way of being and looking at us," says Rodríguez Gelfenstein.

And he recalls that "it is not in Playa Girón where the first defeat of imperialism in America takes place, but in Nicaragua, when General Augusto César Sandino expels the invading Yankee army." Today, 4 decades after those turbulent years, "Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela have configured, not an axis of evil, but a triangle that continues with the tradition of anti-imperialist struggle," he emphasizes.



Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein: Fidel told us that the balance in Nicaragua had to be broken by the Southern Front. Photo Hernán Cano/ Sputnik

— How do you link up with the Sandinista Revolution?

— My dad was imprisoned in the National Stadium of Chile after the coup d'état against Salvador Allende. Then he left for Peru, and could not return to Venezuela because he had pending cases from when he had been in the guerrillas. Under these conditions, after several offers, he chooses to go to Cuba. I was 17 years old, and when I arrived in Havana I requested to have military training, and together with a group of Chilean comrades, because I was also Chilean, we received military training in the regular army of Cuba. It was the time when almost all the Cuban military was going to fulfill internationalist missions, for example, in Africa, and many of us requested that they send us to one of those missions, but Fidel, with his infinite wisdom, said no, let's wait, that the time was coming for us, that we were not Cubans.

- Sorry for the interruption, were you an officer of the Cuban Armed Forces?

— Yes, at that time I was a lieutenant, I was the head of an artillery battery and I was in charge of 64 soldiers, 6 122 mm howitzers, and I fulfilled functions like any regular officer of the Cuban army. That was already 1979, I was 22 years old.

- *So, your moment came with Nicaragua. How do you find out you're going to fight with the Sandinistas?*

— I was returning to my unit from a maneuver in a firing range, it was more than 11 o'clock at night, and while we left all the weapons protected, with all their security measures, it was done to us at 1 in the morning. When I leave everything ready and the soldiers lie down to sleep, I go to the General Staff of my regiment and report that everything was in order and everything was safe. And I retire. When I had walked about 40 meters an officer comes running and tells me that I had to return to the General Staff. I thought the worst. And then they informed me that an order had arrived to present myself to the General Staff of my division, in Havana, at 5 in the morning and that we were going to a maneuver to Camagüey, where the main polygon of the Armed Forces was. I was 40 kilometers from Havana, bearded, full of mud. I couldn't go like this. They put me in a truck to get to the first town and then asking for the queue I arrived at my mom's at 2 thirty in the morning, who lived two blocks from my house. My mom wakes up, and asks me what I was doing at that time, I tell her that I was summoned to a maneuver and that I should leave soon. And my mom, who never knew why, told me, "No, you're going to Nicaragua."

— At 5 a.m. Lieutenant Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein arrives in Havana...

- I arrive, and other comrades from other divisions begin to arrive. We are informed that at 6 o'clock we should be in the Army General Staff. And the first surprising thing was that there were not only officers, there was a lot of movement, a lot of stealth, and we started to see officers from the special troops of the Ministry of the Interior. They meet us, they tell us that we are going to go to a school, I learned later that it was one of those schools where guerrillas were trained, and they inform us that we had to prepare because we would go to Nicaragua. And at night Fidel came to ask us about the mission.

- *What was the mission you set for them?*

Fidel's idea is that there was a balance in Nicaragua that was not broken and that to break that balance had to be broken in the Southern Front, creating a large contingent that would initiate an offensive that would break with the traditional form of combat that the Sandinistas had, who beat and retreated. For Fidel it was necessary to "hit and stay, occupy the territory". He said that, when a large contingent of internationalist fighters arrived, Somoza would sell the idea that he is fighting against international communism to

ask for help from the whole world. This would force Somoza to concentrate most of his military force on the Southern Front, loosening the tension that the other guerrilla fronts had and allowing the Sandinistas to go on the offensive. That was Fidel's great strategic conception. He told us: "You have to enter, advance as far as you can, dig trenches, stay there, resist and create a liberated territory." That was the mission that he himself set for us.

— *When do you arrive in Nicaraguan territory?*

— We left Havana on June 16 [1979], slept in Panama on June 17, and on June 18 arrived in Nicaragua on a flight of a Panamanian Air Force plane that Omar Torrijos put in. We arrived at a paddock that they had enabled to land, about 20 kilometers from Nicaragua in Costa Rican territory, because there had been an agreement between Fidel, General Torrijos and the president of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Carazo, who was an enemy of the Somoza dictatorship.

When we arrived at the place where we were concentrated in Cuba, which was called Punto Cero, a legendary site in the history of the Latin American revolutionary movement, we knew the history of Sandino's resistance and the defeat of the United States in Nicaragua. We knew about the FSLN because the Cuban press was informed of the actions being carried out, but it was general information. But for us it was like going to Uruguay or Honduras, because in Cuba we were formed an internationalist spirit and we had the conviction that we had to fight against imperialism, as Che said, wherever it is. And it was Fidel, who went there daily, who explained to us what was happening in Nicaragua, the political situation, the issue of the internal unity of the Sandinista Front, the general conception of the war. I tell you more, at that time there were no projectors, one of those days Fidel grabbed a chalk and drew the map from memory. Where we were going to arrive, he detailed the hills, the river, the nearby towns, the road, an incredible level of detail, all from memory, so much so that when we arrived we said: "Fidel was here." And no, he was a genius.

- *They arrive on the 18th, and what are they with?*

— On the same 18th I have my first combat, which was crazy, because the head of a column without authorization from the superior command tried to take a totally bare hill, and sent the Sandinista troops to cross the river and advance. And the machine guns swept them away. I was there directing the artillery fire and they gave me the order to withdraw

over the radio. There were dozens of casualties that day. That was my baptism of fire in the Southern Front, in a contingent where there were Chileans, Uruguayans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Sandinista fighters who were training in Cuba and who sent them back, but subordinate to us. It was a very curious thing, a real internationalist contingent.

— *You were in combat for a month until the Sandinista victory, how do you remember it?*

— This is a look from the perspective of the knowledge I have today, at that time I was a low-ranking officer who had a mission to fulfill and who did not have the overall vision. At some point it became clear that the balance was going to be maintained, we had no ability to break it, but they did not have the ability to defeat us. Especially because we had open logistics, we had the border with Costa Rica and everything came in there, we could continue to supply ourselves with ammunition, weapons, food, everything. And, indeed, Somoza concentrated, first, the EEBI, which was the Basic Infantry Training School, an elite force whose head was his son; and then the little aviation that Somoza had was concentrated in the Southern Front, the artillery too, they had a battery of multiple rocket launchers that had been sent by the military of the Argentine dictatorship. It was a month of tug-of-war, but what Fidel predicted finally happened.

- *How was the victorious march to Managua?*

— We started the march north after noon on July 19, because once we were given the order to prepare to go to Managua we had to store the ammunition, put it in a box, secure it for the trip, we had mortars buried, etc. And it was a very slow march, because people went out on the road to greet us, they gave us mangoes, coffee, they wanted to get on the trucks with their children. We moved forward, but they give us the order to deviate and go to the city of Granada, which was the cradle of the Nicaraguan oligarchy, a very reactionary city, and I believe that the Sandinista Front wanted to make a show of force. So we slept there, and left very early for Managua. There, in the final stretch we made to Managua, the massiveness of the people in the streets was impressive. In the end, we were told that we should go to what was called "Somoza's bunker", the National Security Office, there we left the artillery, the trucks, the ammunition, and the comrades began to go to the square because it was known that in the square a great act of celebration was being put together. And that day, which was July 20, was shocking, the guerrilla fronts, the national leadership of the Sandinista Front, the Government Junta of National Reconstruction and the people totally overturned were in the square.



- *How do you feel about that day?*

- I say that was the most beautiful day of my life. For the march, for that village bath, for the happiness of the elderly and children, for seeing so many happy people, and for feeling that we had managed to help disappear the ignominy of decades. And there begins another story, since the guerrilla army had to be transformed into a regular army. And who were the ones who knew? We, because we had training from military academies.

"What was that process like?"

— We, the gunners, had to form the artillery school, plans were made, schools and the structuring of the Armed Forces that was needed to defend that country. That was the task of July and August. And on August 27, Nicaragua commemorated the heroic day of Pancasan, in which they celebrated important struggles that had occurred in the past and that is a very important anniversary for the Sandinista Front and it was decided that year to make the first military parade of the then Sandinista Popular Army. Then, the tankers began to fix the tanks, we the artillery and the infants taught the soldiers, who were guerrilla boys, to march for the parade, en bloc. And the parade was impressive, it had been just over a month since the triumph of the revolution. So we began the military training, the methodology, the study of what is called the theater of military operations, the study of the terrain and the enemy, the capacity of our troops, and that year 79 was of that. Already at the end of '79, in December, the first demonstrations of counterrevolutionary action began to take place.

- *Were there still remnants of Somocism?*

- No, there was nothing left of Somocism. But there was a right that was anti-Somoza and that was also part of the Governing Board of National Reconstruction. And in the first days of December of '79 I was sent with an artillery battery to reinforce an infantry battalion on the border with Honduras, because there were provocations by the Honduran army. They send us to make a show of force. We even made a move there that was extraordinary, because we closed the road that trucks travel throughout Central America, and with the infantry battalion, the artillery and the trucks loaded with soldiers we left the road to a side road and re-entered later, so we did it again and again. The next day the newspapers reported a large contingent of thousands of soldiers arriving at the border, and it was just us.

- *When did you decide to leave Nicaragua?*

— I stayed until the year 83, I went through several destinations, we restructured the army, I went to work in the General Staff, then in the General Staff of the Air Force and in the end I was sent to a school created for the training of sergeants. But there were already in Nicaragua Cuban officers with a lot of experience, they were our teachers, the head of the mission was a colonel and all the others were colonels and lieutenant colonels, even our first chief had fought in the Cuban Revolution against Batista. There had already been made a structure of the mission according to the requests that the Sandinistas had made according to the army they wanted to have. Then, the 80s arrived, I was part of the contingent of the Communist Party of Chile and in the restructuring that we did I was in charge of political relations, not public. And salvadoran collaborators come to us and contact us to have a meeting with a leader from El Salvador. We go, and the meeting was with Schafik Handal [1930-2006. Leader of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)]. Schafik tells us that progress was being made towards building the unity of all forces, that an organization, the FMLN, was being created, and that an offensive was being prepared for the first days of the year 1981, and he asks us for help, because the Communist Party had great experience in the mass struggle, workers and great capacity for organization, but not military. And so we supported the construction of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Liberation, which was the armed wing of the Salvadoran Communist Party. And so I was 3 years, because when the war begins the General Staff of the FMLN continues to function in Managua, with Schafik, until they create conditions and move that structure. But our sights were on Chile, on the struggle against the

dictatorship, so we began to put pressure on our leadership to leave. In 1982, the first comrades who returned founded the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front, I returned to Cuba in 1983 and entered Chile in 1984.

- And what balance do you make of these long 43 years?

— Nicaragua has a very particular magnet, which makes you always be linked. I have many great friends there, notice that the generals of today's army were combatants 43 years ago, they were soldiers. And when you forge the bonds of friendship in the war, in the insurreccional struggle, in that beautiful period of building the Army, they are ties that are not erased, for me they are eternal; and I think for them too.

In all these years, there are three well-marked stages. From '79 until they lost the elections in '90, a stage of revolution under harassment, aggression, blockade, with armed mercenaries, they had almost no time for peace, in the midst of a war supported by the United States, and yet all the social and economic levels of Nicaragua grew. Despite the devastation of the war, the revolution made that country literate. And in the second stage, where neoliberalism was enthroned, in the 90s, all this regressed. Nicaragua is the only country in the world where two literacy campaigns had to be carried out, because when Sandinismo returned in 2007 it had to be started again.

Since 2007, different international organizations began to talk about the Nicaraguan miracle, but in 2018 there is an attempted coup d'état instigated, organized and financed by the United States and Europe, and everything that had been going well stopped, so much so that the aftermath of that coup attempt continues to be suffered. Nicaragua is now entering a fourth period that we can call a period of recovery, the fight against poverty and resistance.



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