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**Author:** Verena Baier

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## Sometimes the Past is Just Around the Corner: Impressions from Berkeley

Verena Baier - University of Regensburg

verena.baier@ur.de

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In the 1980s Berkeley was one of the centers of US-Americans' Nicaragua solidarity work, which supported the Sandinista Revolution. Today remnants from back then can not only be found in UC Berkeley's extensive archives but also hidden throughout the city. PhD researcher Verena Baier explored them while on a research fellowship there in 2019/20.



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*"The strongest impression I got in a 15 day stay in revolutionary Nicaragua this past August was that I hadn't left Berkeley, just changed the dominant language. I felt a warm bond of comradeship. [...] Nicaragua itself is today "The Hope of Central America, the Light of the World." Isn't that image of a beacon one we have too, here in the Free Republic of Berkeley?"[1]*

These are the words of Ted Vincent, a volunteer from Berkeley, who went to Nicaragua in 1985 to explore and support the Sandinista Revolution. In "Reagan's America" of the 1980s, revolutionary Nicaragua offered a modicum of hope for many US leftists, allowing them to flirt with a socialist revolution abroad at a time when nothing similar was possible at home.

Reading these lines, which I found in UC Berkeley's archives, I knew that I was truly in the right place to fulfil my

research objectives.[2] I was here to find out more about how Nicaragua was remembered by people whose lives became entangled with the “Nicaragua case” during the 1980s, how people in the United States used different images of Nicaragua to make sense of their own society at home, and which role the Nicaragua movement of the 1980s played within larger social movements in the US. It was clear, then, that despite the geographical distance, US-American and Nicaraguan societies were transnationally entangled and that processes of cultural translation were at play.

As Ted Vincent’s words indicate, Berkeley, with its longstanding image as a hotbed of left-wing activism, soon became one of the centers of US-Americans’ Nicaragua solidarity work opposing the policies of the United States’ government, which supported the counterrevolutionary Contra insurgency. And here I was, thanks to the generous Regensburg-Berkeley doctoral program and my wonderful and very welcoming host, the Institute of European Studies, ready to hit the archives at UC Berkeley and dig deeper.

During the next couple of months, sifting through the cardboard boxes of three different archival collections, the Nicaragua Information Center Records[3], the Pledge of Resistance Collection[4], as well the Sara Diamond Collection on the US Right[5], led me down an adventurous path that was both exciting and addictive.

Over in Berkeley, interesting new facts emerged, things I hadn’t known before: for example, that July 19 was declared “Berkeley Day of Solidarity with Nicaragua” in 1980. But more than that, I also had the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the people who once were part of a social movement, their actions, and interactions while living and working at the very location where things had taken place more than 30 years ago. I saw the colorful posters – now tidily folded into the box in front of me – announcing the July 19 festivities that had been put up all over Berkeley’s Telegraph Avenue in the 1980s; I could imagine the “salsa dance held that night at La Pena Community Cultural Center,” and feel the buzzing of the celebrations and “exciting demonstrations of solidarity with the Nicaraguan people”[6] in James Kenney Park on 8<sup>th</sup> Street.



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*Archival Documents, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley*

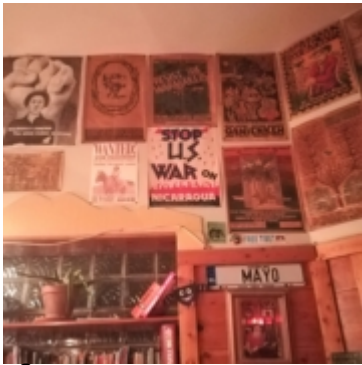
## **“It would be nice to leave all this activity with the 1980s”**

But not only the cardboard boxes were full of the histories I was so eager to explore; glimpses of this past were to be found everywhere in Berkeley. One night, when I went out to have a beer, I discovered that the bar’s wall was covered with posters from the 1980s Nicaragua solidarity campaign. Printed in bold blue and red letters, one read “Stop the US War on Nicaragua – No US Aid to Contra Murderers!” – a relic of the 1980s now gathering dust but still present in one of the darker corners of this quirky pub with its long history as a place for poetry and protest. I was fascinated to discover that traces of Nicaragua solidarity and activism still seemed to be hidden in many places I visited, and that many former solidarity activists are still living and carrying on somewhere in the Bay Area.

Across the Bay Bridge, San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood is home to the famous City Lights Bookstore founded by the late Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a prominent voice of the Beat Generation. This iconic store, which has not only remained a paradise for booklovers ever since it opened in 1953, was also an important haven and locus of information exchange for writers, readers, and activists in the US-Nicaragua solidarity movement. City Lights’ foundational link with Nicaragua was the long friendship between Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Ernesto Cardenal, the famous Nicaraguan poet, liberation theologian and political activist – and the fact that Ferlinghetti himself had traveled to Nicaragua multiple times (sending enthusiastic postcards to his pal Allen Ginsberg reading: “Dear Allen – Back from Nica [...] You should have been there. Great stuff going on. Love, Lawrence!").<sup>[7]</sup>

Everywhere I looked and went, I could find glimpses of how for many people “their” 1980s were just not over yet.

“It would be nice to leave all this activity with the 1980s” one activist wrote in a letter from 1989, “but unfortunately I don’t think that’s likely.”[8]



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*Nicaragua solidarity posters in a bar in Berkeley*

## Stories from the Archives

One of the archival collections, the Pledge of Resistance Collection, is located at the Graduate Theological Union, a private theological school north of the UC Berkeley campus. Although not many people from outside the institution visit, the atmosphere there was very relaxed and friendly. During the breaks, I was always looking forward to chatting with the archivist, who had many interesting stories of Berkeley during the 1980s and the protest movements of the past. What made work at the GTU even easier was that the archival collections I worked with luckily were already processed and neatly organized by a very diligent archivist.

Equally, the large reading room of the Bancroft Library, where I sifted through the records of the Nicaragua Information Center, became one of my most frequented spots at UC Berkeley (number one would then be the Free Speech Movement Café, to keep the caffeine level up!).

An entirely different situation awaited me in the Bancroft reading room (and I was relieved that said coffee haven was just around the corner). As I was told by the finding aid, “[s]ince [the Nicaragua Information Center’s] emphasis was upon [...] quick access to information [and] effective action, inconsistency and redundancy were acceptable, and even desirable, in the organization of the Center’s files and Library” and “changes in filing practices and strategies are obvious throughout.”[9] Since the archival collection’s curators wanted to stick to that internal structure, this “desirable inconsistency” also had its effect on me and my nerves – but I was all the more surprised and happy to find some true gems hidden behind some mysterious file descriptions.

The Nicaragua Information Center (NIC) was founded in 1980 as a campus organization at UC Berkeley. The

organization was active throughout the 1980s, publishing its own magazine *Nicaragua Perspectives* and the monthly *Nicaragua Bulletin*, starting a small resource library, and frequently organizing events both in the community and on the UC campus.[10] Nicaragua took up a large part of everyday life of the organization's members and affiliates, as they collected and shared information on Nicaragua-related activities in support of the Sandinista government and the people of Nicaragua, such as sheets for organizing a Nicaragua information party at home, what things to pack when traveling to Nicaragua, or how to prepare a public speech knowing that there will be Reaganites in the audience.

From their records, which a former member had donated to UC Berkeley in 1992, I learned how the organization had been eager to empower activists interested in supporting the Sandinista government and how different volunteers had communicated and interacted, shared texts and books, and created internal libraries and reading lists. Revealing the importance of this communication and collaboration, one volunteer wrote from Nicaragua, thanking the activists at home in the US: "This letter comes to you from Managua [...] I need to get this in the mail with a group leaving the country tomorrow. Thank you for your love and support which I feel constantly." [11]

This quote comes from one of those very special gems the Nicaragua Information Center Records had to offer. It is part of a small letter collection written by the author and activist, Rebecca Gordon, to the members of the organization during her stay in Nicaragua in 1984. Later, she published some of these letters as a book - *Letters from Nicaragua*[12], an autobiographical account forming part of the core sample of my project. These fragments of a book-in-the-making offer valuable insights into the production circumstances and the collaborative genesis of self-referential writings. This was a very lucky discovery that any researcher dealing with autobiographical writings dreams of.



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*The City Lights Bookstore, San Francisco*

Over the years, the NIC organization managed to increase its impact. Even Ronald Reagan mentioned them in one of his statements in 1986, complaining that “[t]here’s quite a network of those [peace activists]” and “the other day I had handed to me. . . a slick paper publication, a magazine. . . \$3.75 an issue. . . and this magazine is published by the Nicaragua Information Foundation (sic) and it is filled with propaganda.”<sup>[13]</sup> The president’s remarks led NIC’s Jim Eitel to state, with a knowing wink, that “Reagan said the magazine cost \$3.75. I don’t know if we should charge more or less for it now.”<sup>[14]</sup> This statement was, of course, also emblematic for the dissent between government officials and US leftists on the Nicaragua case.

It was not only the huge discrepancies between state officials and people on the left that became apparent through the archival material. Some findings in the archival collections also revealed an awareness of “the other side” within US society. Leftist organizations conducted studies on what individuals and organizations on the Right were doing, while the Right did research on leftist organizations and individuals. When it came to Nicaragua, each side seemed to be pretty wellinformed on what the ‘enemy within’ was up to. This brings to light the growing mistrust between the different socio-political camps of Nicaragua actions, which is especially interesting for my project as it not only looks at peace and solidarity activists, but also at non-state actors on the

political right and their entanglements with the Nicaragua case during the 1980s.

Unfortunately, this research thread I was following in the Sara Diamond Collection on the US Right got cut rather abruptly, when on Tuesday, March 3, the pandemic arrived in Berkeley.[15] In retrospect, I am very relieved that I had developed a working habit of documenting the things I found in the archives first, and then looking at them in detail later, because this allowed me to collect a big portion of the archival material before the lockdown began.



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*UC Berkeley Campus*

## **Doing Research amidst a Pandemic**

Beginning March 10, 2020, in-person classes were suspended at UC Berkeley. What followed was a very stressful and nerve-wrecking week of trying to collect as many of the remaining documents in the archives as possible. Then, one week later, the Bay Area shelter-in-place order went into effect. The once lively Berkeley suddenly became a very quiet, very cautious city.

In contrast to (as I learned from the news, and the many messages by panic-stricken family members and concerned friends from back home) many other parts of the US, Berkeley showed a very responsible and proactive approach to the COVID-19 crisis from the beginning: people were wearing masks almost from day one, makeshift marks on the ground in front of grocery shops showed the space needed for social distancing, hand sanitizers were available in front of most shops – but of course there were also empty shelves where toilet paper and disinfectants should have been.

The hardest thing for me was accepting that I'd have to stop now. There was absolutely no way to continue



working in the now closed archives. But on the other hand, I had a home, and the rent had been paid in advance, I took a really interesting course as a guest listener, there was a huge online archive left to explore, and I had made friends and met wonderful people I was not ready to leave behind just yet.

My world – like everyone else’s – was getting smaller. Its radius mostly narrowed down to my Southern Berkeley neighborhood. One sunny day in May, when strolling along the colorful streets of my district with its blossoming front yards, I came across another hidden glimpse of the past, right there around the corner of the house I was living in: I found Jane Norling and her traveling Nicaragua mural. Now peacefully resting in a Southern Berkeley backyard, the beautiful mural had once been part of the Nicaragua activism work of the 1980s, decorating San Francisco’s Balmy Alley in 1984. Norling had painted it as part of the Balmy Alley Mural Project demonstrating solidarity with the people of Central American. When the landlord tore down the fence it was painted on, she decided to rescue it and brought it to her Berkeley home, fence plank by fence plank, where it has been sitting for 30 years now, reminding her of the community of the Mission District in the 1980s and great times full of hope, whenever she looks out of the window.

In the challenging and confusing days of the pandemic and the heated political climate of the US, it was both heartbreaking and comforting at the same time to find such glimpses of the past everywhere, to trace stories and remnants of people that simply refused to give up the hope of making the world a better place – back in the 1980s and all the more today.



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*Jane Norling’s traveling Nicaragua mural, Southern Berkeley*

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- [13] [Publishers of Nicaraguan Perspectives: "President Ronald Reagan, March 11, 1986", Ctn. 9], Nicaragua Information Center records, BANC MSS 92/807 cz, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Punctuation (ellipses) as in original source.
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[15] <https://www.berkeleyside.com/2020/03/03/city-of-berkeley-reports-first-coronavirus-patient>

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About the author:

**Verena Baier**

Verena Baier is a PhD researcher in American Studies at the University of Regensburg. She is also coordinator of the the Doctoral College in the Humanities (Promotionskolleg der Philosophischen Fakultäten - PUR) at UR. She was the first doctoral researcher from Regensburg to be selected for the Berkeley-Regensburg Doctoral Exchange Programme. She travelled to California in autumn 2019 to conduct research on the Nicaragua solidarity movement. While there, she experienced Berkeley under pandemic conditions.

[Website](#)