Part I

Historical Cases

Chapter 2

“To Induce a Sense of Terror”: Caudillo Politics and Political Violence in Northern Nicaragua, 1926–34 and 1981–95

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“I'M GOING TO NARRATE A CASE TO YOU,” the young Nicaraguan merchant began.

One day I was going past the mountain of Pipián, in the jurisdiction of Somoto [in northern Nicaragua], accompanied by four other men, on a business trip. In one of the houses along the road lived a woman, and I asked her if she could serve us lunch. While she was preparing it, she told me the following:

One day Anastacio Hernández, a bandit chief, arrived in a neighboring village with five of his followers. He dismounted at one of the houses and pulled twelve human heads from his saddlebags. He put them on a table and later began to dance around them, a savage dance, leaping around. Later he invited a young woman from the house to dance the same macabre dance. The young woman, afraid of losing her life, began to dance with the
bandit Hernández. But he told her, "Your head will remain with these others here." And he killed her with a gunblast, whose bullet also happened to kill one of the soldiers accompanying him. Hernández coldly, ferociously cut off the head of the young woman and the soldier, tossed them in his saddlebags, and marched off with the four men who remained.

Under the headline "The Dance of the Decapitated Heads," this bizarre news item, relating a tale told by José Anastacio Castellón, merchant and resident of El Ocotal in the mountainous north, appeared in the Managua daily La Noticia on April 19, 1928. This story about a story about a very strange story surely seems too fantastic and too far removed from the events it describes to be credible. Yet José Castellón's tale corresponds closely with a substantial body of evidence. More than half a century later, Pedro Antonio Arauz, brother-in-law of the famed Nicaraguan patriot Augusto C. Sandino, described this scene:

Anastacio Hernández... with an overflowing barbarity used to cut off the heads of those humble peasants who refused to serve him and stuff them in his saddlebags. His group had three guitars and an accordion, and he found the greatest pleasure in arriving in the valleys and meeting with the pretty women to dance all night long. He would remove the heads he had cut that day from his saddlebags and put them on a table, in plain view of the owners of the house, in order to induce a sense of terror. He would threaten the women who refused to go to the dance, telling them, pointing to the table full of heads, "That's where you're going to end up."²

Fusing terror, sexuality, culture, and politics, such "dances" were one way the notorious Conservative gang leader Anastacio Hernández worked "to induce a sense of terror" in this place and time. Fortuitously for historians, in a country where most political deals have left no paper trail, and where archives have suffered destruction and neglect, the Hernández case became one of the best-documented instances of local-regional political violence in Nicaraguan history before World War II. Much additional evidence, including Hernández's prison declaration and twenty eyewitness depositions, produced and compiled by the United States Marine Corps and Nicaraguan National Guard in early 1928, amply confirm these two