NICARAGUA: THE SANDINIST REVOLUTION
by Henri Weber
(Verso Editions, distributed by Schocken Books; 144 pp.; $15.00/$5.50)

NICARAGUA IN REVOLUTION
edited by Thomas Walker
(Praeger Publishers; 396 pp.; $32.95/$14.95)

CRISIS IN CENTRAL AMERICA: FACTS, ARGUMENTS, IMPORTANCE, DANGERS, RAMIFICATIONS
by Cleto Di Giovanni, Jr., and Mose L. Harvey
(Advanced International Studies Institute in association with the University of Miami; 116 pp.; $6.95 paperback)

Holly Myers

On July 19, Nicaragua celebrated the third anniversary of the “triumph.” There were ceremonies throughout this impoverished nation of fewer than three million people. In Managua, Daniel Ortega, commander of the Sandinist junta, used the occasion to denounce the United States policy of belligerence and what his government views as outright aggression against a fragile regime. Thus, on a day suited to marking gains won under the revolutionary process, attention was called instead to the crucial role Nicaragua’s giant northern neighbor plays in its affairs.

A peace initiative earlier this year, which began with an address by Ortega at the United Nations and Mexico’s expressed willingness to act as intermediary in U.S.-Nicaraguan negotiations, was blown off course when U.S. attention shifted to the South Atlantic and Beirut. But if the matter is now of greatest urgency to the United States, it is to export-dependent Nicaragua, where the persistence of the status quo has been costly on both the economic and political levels. For rather than bringing the country’s resources to bear on the rebuilding of Nicaraguan society, the new government has diverted much energy to the task of defense.

Three recent volumes indicate the divergent perceptions of the Nicaraguan revolution that figure in the policy debate conducted in the United States. Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution and Nicaragua in Revolution offer background for the Sandinist victory as well as analyses of the present revolutionary government. The third book, Crisis in Central America, attempts to document the thesis that a noose is being tightened around Central America and the Caribbean basin by the Soviet Union. One is led to wonder whether the authors of this latter book visited the same quarter of the globe as the writers of the former two.

Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution, translated from the French by Patrick Camiller, is a concise review of the history and social conditions that precipitated revolt in Nicaragua, from the early, insistent U.S. intervention leading to the imposition of Anastasio “Tacho” Somoza as president in 1936. The history of the revolution includes the campaign of nationalist martyr Augusto Cesar Sandino in the 1920s and early ’30s, in whose name a new generation of nationalists founded the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in 1960. By the late ’70s this movement had fused with the national current of determined opposition to the Somoza dynasty, and in July, 1979, the FSLN emerged in a position of undoubted predominance.

Weber is particularly successful in portraying the complexity of the task that confronts the new government. He offers a clearly sympathetic, yet critical, assessment of their program to date, praising the government’s commitment to pluralism while also questioning its decrees that limit freedom of the press. Those decrees are at the heart of the controversy surrounding the continuing state of emergency. He discusses the evolving definition of popular democracy in Nicaragua and its relation to the new legal system, to trade unionism, and to suffrage. Weber sees genuinely democratic “tendencies” in this society, though democracy is at best extremely difficult in a country where democratic and liberal values never gained a footing among the ruling oligarchy. However, Weber maintains that the finest with which the government defends itself while continuing to respect dissenting voices—so long as they do not advocate armed counterrevolution—is vital to the long-term prospects of the Sandinist state.

Nicaragua in Revolution is a valuable resource for those seeking well-documented analyses of the emerging revolutionary state. More than two dozen essays by Latin Americans offer a comprehensive survey of the history and ideology of the insurrection, the division of power and interest in revolutionary Nicaragua, and their translation into basic policy in such areas as agrarian reform, health care, housing, foreign policy, and incorporation of the country’s Atlantic coast minorities. The role of such institutions as the Church and the media is considered, and the final essays place the new state in an international context, as it relates both to Central America and to the dominant capitalist order, especially in the U.S.

The introductory essays concern the character of the revolution and the U.S. response to change in Nicaragua. Ricardo Chavarría discusses the original cast of the insurrection, which, unlike the Cuban experience, is unlikely to be undertaken by an extraordinarily high level of community participation. Harry Vanden complements this characterization with a useful summary of the development of the revolutionary ideology, which he terms a melding of nationalist and Latin American thought into a “flexible and nonsectarian Third World Marxism” that was carefully applied to the specific conditions in Nicaragua.

William Leogrande traces the unflagging inept relations of the U.S. with Nicaragua during the insurrection, whose lowest point was Jimmy Carter’s August, 1978, letter to Anastasio Somoza congratulating him on human rights improvements even as he was waging war against his people. It makes for fascinating but disheartening reading to follow the efforts of the U.S. to control the situation until the bitter end, bouncing from a ludicrous OAS proposal—resoundingly rejected by all but Somoza—to a final proposal even the dictator would not accept. Leogrande states flatly: “Under Brzezinski, the [White House Special Coordinating] Committee pointedly ignored the recommendations of the State Department specialists. . . .” Finally, we contemplate the worthlessness of the U.S. aid package offered to the revolutionary governments: Sixty per cent of the funds were earmarked for the private sector; all goods bought with the funds had to be bought from the U.S.; funds were not to be used for educational projects because of the presence of Cuban teachers in Nicaragua; and 1 per cent of the total funds were to be used to advertise the U.S. aid program—in this a war-torn country whose population lacked the basic necessities of life.

In contrast to these sympathetic discussions is the shrill tract by Di Giovanni and Harvey. Crisis in Central America proceeds from the premise, stated in the foreword by former U.S. Ambassador to the USSR Foy Kohler, that the U.S. must “take measures necessary to save the situation in Central America. Its need is to keep to the long held convictions of the generations that preceded our own. . . .” The co-authors ignore the statistics they compiled, statistics that expose low literacy rates and short life expectations (including high rates of infant mortality), in order to conclude that the
basic problem of Latin America is the confrontation between leftists, dominated by "militant communist guerrillas," and temperate rightists. Unavoidably, even their paean to clear-thinking rightists contains a slight qualification: "They [the rightists] concede that there may be questions about the degree to which the population of the country's population benefited from this steady economic progress [in Central America]."

To Di Giovanni and Harvey the importance of the region is not economic but strictly strategic. Central America is the "strategic underbelly of our own country. Successful penetration of it... will endanger the United States' very existence as a great power capable of defending itself." Control of this region, a recognized U.S. policy goal since before the Monroe Doctrine, is now confronting a challenge from the Soviet Union. The book offers an extended analysis of the Soviet design to establish dominance in Latin America and simultaneously decries the lack of U.S. vigilance. For these men, Latin American history is being written solely in Moscow and Washington.

The short chapter on Nicaragua attempts to paint the Nicaraguan revolution a Russian red, ignoring the commitment of all sectors of Nicaraguan society to overthrowing the Somoza dynasty. The authors decry any relation with the East as a sinister manifestation of the Soviet plot, though the growth of economic and cultural ties and arms sales could as easily be interpreted as the development of normal relations between sovereign states. Would announcement of a radio cooperation agreement between Nicaragua and, say, Britain be suspect? And would a statement such as the Soviet ambassador's that the Soviet people "will support [Nicaragua] in its fight for peace, the defense of its country, and the reconstruction of the nation" seem an "augur of what may come" had it been uttered by any other ambassador? Countless indirect "hints" like these reveal to the authors the Soviet plan to extend "protection" to Nicaragua, and they see the Sandinistas as avidly pursuing the offer. The outcome can only be a dire military threat to the U.S. in Latin America.

This menace must be countered aggressively and contained now. The implication is that containment should be undertaken through any means available.

Di Giovanni and Harvey appear to inhabit a world in which the U.S. Marines still can turn the tide of events and in which countries merit consideration only as far as they figure in a current power play—a view that has found favor with the current U.S. administration. The dynamic Nicaragua presented by Weber and Walker, on the other hand, suggests that the U.S. would be better advised to formulate a policy that considers Nicaragua's history and its present desire to achieve independence and respect as a state among states. It remains to be seen whether these opposing viewpoints can be negotiated.

A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA, Vol. 1 edited by Edwin S. Gaustad (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; xi + 527 pp.; $15.95)

Gerald P. Fogarty

It is difficult to evaluate a collection of this nature. No two compilers would choose precisely the same documents in attempting to cover the entire spectrum of American religious history. The types of documents Gaustad has selected, however, illustrate the changing concerns of the discipline of American religious history since the publication in 1960 of Smith, Handy, and Loetscher's American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents. Gaustad is concerned not only with denominational and formal credal statements but also with native Indian rituals, personal narratives, and two issues not previously thought to be pertinent to the practice of religion—the rights of women and of minorities.

Gaustad begins his collection with documents on Native American religious experience, for this was the soil in which European religion was transplanted. He then moves to European Christianity after the Reformation, already exhibiting the variety of religious expressions that would flourish in the New World. In presenting transplanted European Christianity, Gaustad weaves together official credal documents and personal narrative. He balances John Winthrop's lay sermon with John Rolfe's account of his love for Pocahontas, the soaring reasoning of Jonathan Edwards with the human sensitivity of a Dutch Reformed pastor named Megapolensius in what is now Albany. Thus the story comes alive; it is about people and not merely about creeds. Gaustad's judicious selection of documents from all the colonies serves to remind the reader that while Virginia and New England were indeed important, there were still other colonies and other denominations, whether