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The Sandinistas' Sister-in-Arms

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By Art Harris

NEW YORK, Oct. 3—She walks down the stairs in Gloria Vanderbilt jeans and a green cashmere sweater. The cheekbones are high, with a wisp of blue shadow about dark brown eyes. Her nails are lacquered pearl and her voice is husky from inhaling too many Marlboros and exhaling revolution.

She smiles.

You can see how her charm could become the flirtation that left a Nicaraguan general with his throat slit in her bedroom.

Ever since Nora Astorga, Nicaragua's deputy foreign minister, lured a top Somoza general to her home in 1978 and left his corpse behind, vanishing into the jungle to carry a rifle for the Sandinistas, she has become the stuff of legend.

To the left, she is a hero who risked her life to swap a life of privilege and motherhood for an AK-47 in order to save her country. To the right, she is viewed as a ruthless femme fatale, Freud's worst macho nightmare. As one joke banded about Managua put it, "There is one question you don't ask Nora Astorga: 'Your place or mine?'"

She hears the joke and smiles.

But it does not surprise her as she stretches out on a couch in the rambling Westchester County home of Nicaragua's U.N. ambassador and sips strong café negro. Far worse was said about the twice-divorced mother of five when the White House rejected her last April as Nicaragua's ambassador to the United States.

"I don't see myself as a calculating monster," says Astorga, 35, comparing herself to Judith of bib-

Nora Astorga: The Ardor of A Revolutionary

lical fame who murdered King Holofernes after he subjugated the Jews.

No matter whose version is preferred, the allusion to Judith evokes the incredible horror of man's betrayal by a woman. Classical paintings conjure the parable with gory scenes of Judith holding a severed head aloft, dripping blood, mocking man's weakness and raising the ultimate question: Is all fair in love and war? And is it fair for a woman

to fight on both battlefields at once?

Last night, after a long day on the front lines of the public relations offensive Nicaragua is staging at the United Nations and throughout the city, it was poker-faced junta coordinator, Daniel Ortega, who held down the official receiving line at a trendy New York Athletic Club reception hosted by lawyer Michael Kennedy.

But across the room, a swelling crowd of women talked about Astorga beneath ceiling murals of men wrestling, boxing, and running track. A piano player was singing, "I Love You Just the Way You Are."

"Oh, God," said Susan Horowitz, a political activist who champions liberal causes. "To try to get the guy to bed, and then kill him! Fantastic. It's like a western. That's my dream, to do that to Reagan, George Bush, go right down the line. I've got to meet this Mata Hari."

Among the crowd were celebrities like Abbie Hoffman, actor-producer Michael Douglas, Mike Wallace, Shana Alexander, judges and rabbis, doctors and lawyers. None sparked Freudian debate like Astorga.

"From a purely esthetic standpoint," sniffed one investment banker, "I'd say she's not worth getting killed for."

"I think she's great looking," snapped his wife, eyeing the crowd build-up. "I'd say the women are more interested in her than the men."

"That's because they all want to do what she did," he replied.

Nearby, Horowitz, a stunning, intelligent-looking woman with long brown hair accompanied by husband David Horowitz, president of MTV, was chiding feminists for denying they use sexuality to get what they want. "I know I do," she said.

"So many women on the left deny they'd ever use their sexuality because they assume it's not in keeping with women's liberation," she went on. "But I know a lot who use their looks and wiles, even though they'd never march into the Wonder Woman foundation and say, 'Hey, I got this guy to do something for me because I gave him the hint I'd do something for him in return.'"

She saw Astorga as an inspiration for the New Woman. "She's the most exciting modern female revolutionary around. I love it."

Under fire by CIA-backed contras and President Reagan for unfair elections, exporting revolution and other assorted ills, Nicaragua is fighting back here with a war of words.

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