

Rafael Leónidas Trujillo

Dictionary of Hispanic Biography, November 6, 1996

Born: October 24, 1891 in San Cristobal, Dominican Republic

Died: May 30, 1961 in Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic

Nationality: Dominican (Dominican Republic)

Occupation: President (Government)

In an area notorious for its dictators, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo ranks among the most infamous. Extravagant, tyrannical, and vain, the self-proclaimed Benefactor of the Fatherland, Rebuilder of the Financial Independence of the Republic, First Journalist, Chief Protector of the Dominican Working Class, and Genius of the Peace, Generalissimo Doctor Trujillo was military dictator and ultimate ruler of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo's regime stands out as one of the longest in the history of Latin America. By the time of his death, "the Dominican Republic was not only ruled by Trujillo, it was his property," a *Newsweek* writer commented.

Despite Trujillo's personal crusade for wealth, power and self-aggrandizement, some observers have claimed that his regime did accrue material benefits to the Dominican people. To this extent his rule has been described as "enlightened"; certainly, the façade of the Dominican Republic was a striking contrast next to neighboring Haiti and Cuba. As Trujillo's obituary in the London *Times* rationalized, "It was above all an efficient dictatorship--efficient in its organization of widespread social services and efficient in maintaining itself in power for a long period." The price, however, was "a degradation of the human spirit such as has rarely been seen in the modern world."

The true facts surrounding Trujillo's background and adolescence are rather clouded. Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina was born on October 24, 1891, the third of 11 children, in San Cristóbal, a poor agricultural village on the Dominican Republic's south coast. Official eulogists erroneously claimed that Trujillo was of noble descent, his forebears including a French marquis and a Spanish army officer. Trujillo himself denied his partially Black heritage; during his rule it was an act of treason to make such a declaration. His father, José Trujillo Valdez, was a humble postal clerk who was rumored to supplement his income by rustling cattle. In San Cristóbal, Trujillo received a rudimentary education. At the age of 16, he worked as a telegraph operator and later as a guard on a sugar plantation. During this period he was allegedly a member of "The 44" gang, who indulged in theft, forgery, and blackmail; a fire in the Dominican Supreme Court Building in 1927 destroyed any evidence of Trujillo's holding a criminal record.

Ascends to Power

Official Marine records show that Trujillo received his commission in the National Constabulary and took his oath on January 11, 1919, during the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916-1924. Described by Ian Bell in *The Dominican Republic* as "a man born to command," Trujillo's ascent through the military ranks was meteoric. Trained by U.S. Marines, he graduated from the Haina Military Academy in 1921 and assumed the rank of lieutenant colonel in 1924 (some sources say 1926). In 1927 he was promoted to brigadier general and assumed command of what would become the Dominican Army a year later.

Trujillo's chance to seize power arose in 1930 when President Horacio Vásquez was opposed by a small band of revolutionaries. As Chief-of-Police, Trujillo declared his "neutrality" and Vásquez was forced to resign. By May, Trujillo had maneuvered himself into the presidential seat. The sole candidate in the presidential election, he procured 95 percent of the vote, ensured by acts of intimidation and violence. Trujillo's hold on the presidency

was consolidated after a hurricane devastated the capital, Santo Domingo, on September 3, 1930, and killed two thousand people. His indisputable organizational skills facilitated the rapid reconstruction of Santo Domingo and the imposition of a tightly controlled economy. *Time* acknowledged that Trujillo "had a natural talent for autocratic management."

Terror and Development under Trujillo

Trujillo secured his supremacy through the systematic elimination of all his opponents. Benefitting from the confusion created in the aftermath of the 1930 hurricane, his political adversaries began to disappear; there were unexplained suicides, strange car crashes, summary arrests, and executions. Opposition parties were eradicated, the press censored, the right of assembly denied, and independent trade unions abolished. Trujillo founded and became chief of the Partido Dominicano, the sole political party in the Dominican Republic. He personally dominated every aspect of power and control, ensuring complete loyalty through bribery, terror, and blackmail.

One of Trujillo's most horrific outrages was the Haitian massacre of October 1937. Between 5,000 and 25,000 Haitian squatters on the Dominican border were slaughtered at Trujillo's behest in an onslaught that lasted for 36 hours. While the atrocity received comparatively little attention from the international media, it was enough to make Trujillo relinquish the presidential title in the 1938 "elections" and installed a puppet president, Jacinto Peynado, followed by Manuel de Jesús Troncoso de la Concha from 1940 to 1942.

While Trujillo resumed the presidency in 1943, there would be other nominal presidents during his dictatorship, including his brother Hector in 1953, and **Joaquín Balaguer** in 1960. When Trujillo was not titular president he endowed himself other titles, such as Chief and Benefactor, or Commander of the Armed Forces. Trujillo was always absolute ruler; as a London *Times* reporter concluded, "his precise title did not matter.... Wherever it came from, the voice of command was the same."

"I wish there were a Trujillo in every country of South and Central America" stated Allen Ellender, a U.S. Democratic senator, in *Time* magazine. Under Trujillo's strong-arm management, the Dominican Republic was visibly modernized, particularly development of the sugar industry, grazing, manufacturing, and infrastructure: roads, schools and hospitals were built. Trujillo even managed to liquidate the Republic's debts within 17 years of assuming power. As a result of this achievement he declared that the Dominican Republic was "absolutely free, absolutely sovereign, absolutely independent," as Bell noted in *The Dominican Republic*. Literacy levels were raised from 30 percent to 96 percent. However, some observers contend that the Dominican people never really benefitted from Trujillo's schemes; the ambitious public works program was accompanied by his own private investment program where, by 1939, his income was \$200,000 a month.

Corruption and blatant nepotism were features of Trujillo's dictatorship, and he and his family accumulated small fortunes. Selden Rodman noted in *Quisqueya* that in the 1950s Trujillo ranked among the world's two or three richest individuals. He personally owned 12 palaces and ranches and was the largest landowner, while family members were given outrageous titles and positions, monopolized the salt, tobacco and beer industries, and acquired approximately one third of the Republic's cultivated land. During Trujillo's silver jubilee year in 1954 the ruler decreed a "Fair of Peace and Fraternity of the Free World" at an estimated cost of \$35 million, a third of the nation's annual budget. His daughter María de los Angeles de Corazón de Jesús was crowned Queen Angelita I at the opening of the fair in December 1955. His son Rafael was commissioned as a colonel in the Dominican Army when only four.

Trujillo's regime was characterized by an absurd level of sycophancy. Bernard Diederich wrote in *Trujillo: The*

Death of the Goat: "The cult of adulation had no limits. The capital city bore Trujillo's name, as did the highest mountain peak and hundreds of streets, parks and sites. The tropical landscape was literally dotted with his likeness in statues and on bronze plaques. Every town, sports event, or billiard game had to be dedicated to the Benefactor of the Fatherland and Father of the New Fatherland. The humblest dirt-floor hut carried the sign: "In this house Trujillo is Chief." In the streets of the capital, neon signs blinked the message "God and Trujillo."

Although Trujillo initially enjoyed a warm relationship with the United States, it soured toward the end of his regime. In 1956 Jesús de Galíndez, a Columbia University lecturer who criticized the Trujillo dictatorship in his doctoral dissertation, was kidnapped from New York and murdered in the Dominican Republic. Gerald Murphy, the U.S. pilot who claimed to have delivered Galíndez to the Dominican Republic, disappeared.

In 1960 Trujillo attempted the overthrow and assassination of president Rómulo Betancourt of Venezuela, who instigated an indictment against Trujillo for his human rights abuses. He also suspected Betancourt of being involved in a second invasion attempt to oust him. Trujillo found himself condemned and ostracized by the international community; the Organization of American States urged fellow members to break ties with the Dominican Republic. When he no longer found favor in the United States, Trujillo courted Moscow. However, the Trujillo edifice had begun to crumble and the Dominican Republic was heading for an economic crisis. In frustration, Trujillo turned his attack on the Roman Catholic Church. When six bishops proposed an amnesty for political prisoners, hundreds of people were rounded up by the police in an alleged conspiracy; Trujillo even entertained the idea of killing the Pope.

Trujillo was assassinated on May 30, 1961. Traveling to a midnight tryst with one of his numerous mistresses he was killed in an ambush headed by Brigadier General Juan Tomas Díaz. At the time of his death Trujillo was worth an estimated \$800 million. He was married three times--to Aminta Ledesma, Bienvenida Ricardo, and María Martínez--and had four acknowledged children.

Further Readings

Books

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- Wiarda, Howard J., *The Dominican Republic: Nation in Transition*, London, Pall Mall Press, 1969.

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- *Newsweek*, June 12, 1961, pp. 18-19.
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