

The Dominican Dictator: Rafael Trujillo

(1) The Dominican Republic suffered under the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo for thirty one years. With support of the United States General Rafael Molino Trujillo took control of the Dominican Republic in 1930 and ruled until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo amassed a huge fortune at the expense of his people while repressing all opposition. A movement of young Dominicans tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the dictatorship. However his rule was finally ended in 1961 when wealthy Dominicans unhappy with the dictator had him killed. In the twentieth century the Dominican Republic has not been able to establish a stable democratic government due several interventions by the US and the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.



(2) In the twentieth century the United States replaced the Europeans as key investors in Dominican sugar, coffee, cocoa, and bananas grown in its semi-tropical climate. The United States protected its economic investments by maintaining political control of the island. In 1906 the Dominicans signed a fifty year treaty with the US that gave the US control over the country's customs department. In 1916 US Marines occupied the country. In the 1920's when the US military left the Dominican Republic, they left in its place a US trained Dominican National Guard.

(3) When the United States pulled the Marines out of the Dominican Republic in 1924 they left Rafael Trujillo in charge of the Dominican National Guard. Trujillo began work as telegraph operator at the age of sixteen. In 1918 he was accepted into the Dominican National Guard created by the US. Trujillo rose in the National Guard's ranks in the 1920's as they fought against the Dominican guerrilla movement. Trujillo ran against incumbent Horacio Vasquez for president in 1930 and fraudulently claimed ninety five percent of the vote. Once in power he used the National Guard to terrorized and banish all civilian opponents. He also established a secret police forced called the SIM (Military Intelligence Service) which not only gathered information but engaged in torture and murder at Trujillo's request. He used the SIM to control the press, bribe businessmen, and create a climate of fear among Dominicans. His brutality was well documented. For example, "in 1937 El Jefe ordered the slaughter of 20,000 black Haitians who squatted on Dominican territory or who toiled as sugar cane cutters." He modeled his dictatorship after fascist Francisco Franco in Spain, whom he much admired. The Dominican capital Santo Domingo was renamed Ciudad Trujillo and in the capital neon signs flashed "God and Trujillo."

(4) Trujillo used his political control of the nation to amass great personal wealth. He took over plantations, and businesses. His family, relatives, and political supporters received lucrative jobs. Millions of dollars created in the Dominican Republic were used to throw lavish parties and the rest was stashed for safe keeping in foreign bank accounts. He welcomed US businesses and investors in the Dominican Republic and he maintained a pro-US foreign policy. Although many Americans did not like Trujillo's strong arm tactics, after World War II many Cold-War politicians in the US supported Trujillo as a leading Latin American anti-communist. US Secretary of State Cordell Hull summed up this attitude when he said of Trujillo, "He may be a son-of-a-b****, but he is our son-of-a-b****."

(5) Although the cult of Trujillo was strong among some Dominicans, many Dominicans hated "El Jefe" (the chief as he was called.) The first organized



opposition developed late in the 1940's. Exiled Dominicans flew fourteen sea planes into the Dominican Republic on June 14, 1949 in the hopes of ousting Trujillo. The Luperon Invasion, as it was called, was quickly crushed by the Trujillo's army and air force. During the 1950's small groups of young Dominicans formed underground organizations dedicated to overthrowing the Trujillo regime. Some of the rebels were from the poor who suffered economic hardship during the Trujillo years. Others were "educated and well positioned youths, shamed and chagrined by their parents nauseating surrender to Trujillo...Students, businessmen, doctors, farmers, and even seminarists were meeting in eight-and ten-member cells."

(6) Among the anti-Trujillistas were left wing Dominicans who were inspired by the revolution taking place in Cuba by Fidel Castro against the Batista dictatorship. When Cuba fell to the Fidel Castro in 1959, many exiled Dominicans sought help from the revolutionary government of Cuba. These exiles launched an invasion of the Dominican Republic from Cuba on June 14, 1959. Their attempt was ill fated as the Luperon invasion had been ten years earlier. They were quickly defeated by the Dominican air force that intercepted them as they landed on Dominican beaches. The surviving rebel invaders were rounded up by Trujillo's military and tortured and killed at a nearby military base.

(7) The failure of the Dominican invasion did not end opposition to Trujillo. The Catorce de Junio Movement (14th of June Movement) , named after the failed invasion continued to spread. Small cells worked within the Dominican Republic and exiles sought help from liberal President Bentancourt in Venezuela. In January of 1960 the rebels planned their next attempt against Trujillo. The conspirators hoped to assassinate the Dictator on January 21st at the cattle fair that he annually attended. However, a day before the assassination attempt the head of the SIM struck arresting many Dominicans associated with the June 14th Movement. "Hundreds were rounded up by SIM agents and dragged to La Cuarenta to be tortured in the electric chair, and then thrown naked into the La Victoria prison... The beautiful Mirabel sisters, Maria Teresa and Minerva, were arrested along with their husbands, two of the leaders of the June 14th Movement."

(8) Despite the failures of the more radical Dominicans to unseat Trujillo, the Dictator in the 1950's began losing support from his traditional allies including , the Catholic Church, the US government, and members of the Dominican elite. In 1960 the SIM accused five Catholic priests of conspiracy and bomb making with the Anti-Trujillo movement. Three of the priests were deported and the Catholic Church protested by sending a pastoral letter to the dictator calling on Trujillo to halt the "excesses, dry the tears, heal the wounds." The once supportive Catholic Church now clearly demanded human rights from the Trujillo regime. Although Trujillo still had supporters in Washington, a number of people in the Eisenhower administration feared that Trujillo's iron hand was leading to a radicalization of the Dominican rebels. Relations between the US government and the dictator were further strained when Trujillo agents attempted unsuccessfully to kill Venezuelan president Bentancourt with a bomb. The US feared that the Dominican Republic would follow the revolutionary model of Fidel Castro's Cuba and so the US's CIA began contacts with more conservative Dominicans who opposed Trujillo. CIA agents made contact with once loyal Trujillistas who were now plotting an assassination of the dictator. The assassins were wealthy Dominicans who had personal grudges against the dictator, or who had family members who had suffered at the hands of the SIM. The conspirators even included several relatives of Trujillo and high ranking political and military officials. The CIA without wanting to appear involved with this group secretly supplied several carbine rifles for the assassins to slay Trujillo, and they promised US support for the new regime once the dictator was dead.

(9) On May 30th, 1961 the conspirators assassinated Rafael Trujillo, by firing into the dictator's car on a deserted patch of highway. The Dictator was dead. However, the coup attempt was not successful. The assassins went into hiding as Ramfis Trujillo, the dictator's son, assumed control of the Dominican Republic the following day. The following month almost all of the assassins were rounded up along with their families and friends. All were tortured and several committed suicide. In October, street riots broke out in Ciudad Trujillo and workers went on strike financed by the anti Trujillist National Civic Union. On November 18, 1961 the six remaining Trujillo assassins

were taken to Ramfi Trujillo's hacienda where they were tied to trees, shot, cut up and fed to sharks at a nearby beach. The following day Ramfi Trujillo fled the Dominican Republic under US military guard while the US Atlantic fleet arrived in Santo Domingo's harbor.



(10) Unfortunately the death of Trujillo and the exile of his son did not restore democracy to the Dominican Republic. The military still exerted strong control over the Dominican government as evidenced by four military coup d'état's in less than three years. Civil war had broken out among the various factions of Dominicans and on April 28th, 1965 US Marines landed in Santo Domingo taking control of the country. They were joined later that year by soldiers from the Organization of America States. A year later a weak civilian government led by president Balaguer restored some stability to the country. However, since that time the Dominican Republic has been plagued



by weak democratic institutions including: censorship of the press, political corruption, and several military attempts to take over the government. In addition, amidst political problems the Dominican Republic suffered a sharp economic decline with the drop in world sugar prices in the 1970's. The Dominicans have sought to solve their dilemma with loans from the International Monetary Fund. However, the price increases for basic foods and gasoline demanded by the IMF caused protest and riots in 1984 and 1985. Unfortunately, the Dominican Republic, like so many smaller Latin American nations, has not been able to sustain strong economic growth coupled with democratic institutions. Nor have they been able to create Dominican economic and political institutions without the investment and intervention of the United States.