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Contemporary World History

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12.6.03

The Era of Trujillo

The Vásquez administration shines in Dominican history like a star amid a gathering storm. After the country's eight years of subjugation, Vásquez took care to respect the political and civil rights of the population. An upswing in the price of export commodities, combined with increased government borrowing, marks the economy. Public works projects proliferated. Santo Domingo expanded and modernized. This brief period of progress, however, ended in the resurgent maelstrom of Dominican political instability. The man who would come to occupy the eye of this political cyclone was Rafael Trujillo.

Although a principled man by Dominican standards, Vásquez was also a product of long years of political infighting. In an effort to undercut his primary rival, Federico Velásquez, and to preserve power for his own followers, the president agreed in 1927 to a prolongation of his term from four to six years. There was some debatable legal basis for the move, which was approved by the Congress, but its enactment effectively invalidated the constitution of 1924 that Vásquez had previously sworn to uphold. Once the president had demonstrated his willingness to

disregard constitutional procedures in the pursuit of power, some ambitious opponents decided that those procedures were no longer binding. Dominican politics returned to their pre-occupation status; the struggle among competing caudillos resumed.

Trujillo occupied a strong position in this contest. The commander of the National, Trujillo came from a humble background. He had enlisted in the National Police in 1918, a time when the upper-class Dominicans, who had formerly filled the officer corps, largely refused to collaborate with the occupying forces. Trujillo harbored no such scruples. He rose quickly in the officer corps, while at the same time he built a network of allies and supporters. Unlike the more idealistic North American sponsors of the constabulary, Trujillo saw the armed force not for what it should have been--an apolitical domestic security force--but for what it was: the main source of concentrated power in the republic.

Having established his power base behind the scenes, Trujillo was ready by 1930 to assume control of the country. Although elections were scheduled for May, Vásquez's extension in office cast doubt on their potential fairness. This uncertainty prompted Rafael Estrella Ureña, a political leader from Santiago, to proclaim a revolution in February. Having already struck a deal with Trujillo, Estrella marched on the capital; army forces remained in their barracks as Trujillo declared his "neutrality" in the situation. The ailing Vásquez, a victim of duplicity and betrayal, fled the capital. Estrella assumed the provisional presidency.

Part of the arrangement between Estrella and Trujillo apparently involved the army commander's candidacy for president in the May elections. As events unfolded,

it became clear that Trujillo would be the only candidate that the army would permit to participate; army personnel harassed and intimidated electoral officials and eliminated potential opponents. A dazed nation stood by as the new dictator announced his election with 95 percent of the vote. After his inauguration in August, and at his express request, the Congress issued an official proclamation announcing the commencement of "the Era of Trujillo."

The dictator proceeded to rule the country like a feudal lord for thirty-one years. He held the office of president from 1930 to 1938 and from 1942 to 1952. During the interim periods, he exercised absolute power, while leaving the ceremonial affairs of state to puppet presidents such as his brother, Héctor Bienvenido Trujillo Molina, who occupied the National Palace from 1952 to 1960, and Joaquín Balaguer Ricardo, an intellectual and scholar who served from 1960 to 1961. Although cast in the mold of old-time caudillos such as Santana and Heureaux, Trujillo surpassed them in efficiency, rapacity, and utter ruthlessness. Like Heureaux, he maintained a highly effective secret police force that monitored (and eliminated, in some instances) opponents both at home and abroad. Armed forces personnel received generous pay and perquisites under his rule, and their ranks and equipment inventories expanded. Trujillo maintained control over the officer corps through fear, patronage, and the frequent rotation of assignments, which inhibited the development of strong personal followings. The other leading beneficiaries of the dictatorship--aside from Trujillo himself and his family--were those who associated themselves with the regime both politically and economically. The establishment of state monopolies over all major enterprises in the country brought riches to the Trujillos and their cronies through the manipulation of prices and inventories as well as the outright embezzlement of funds.

Generally speaking, the quality of life improved for the average Dominican under Trujillo. Poverty persisted, but the economy expanded, the foreign debt disappeared, the currency remained stable, and the middle class expanded. Public works projects enhanced the road system and improved port facilities; airports and public buildings were constructed, the public education system grew, and illiteracy declined. These advances might well have been achieved in even greater measure under a responsive democratic government, but to Dominicans, who had no experience with such a government, the results under Trujillo were impressive. Although he never tested his personal popularity in a free election, some observers feel that Trujillo could have won a majority of the popular vote up until the final years of his dictatorship.

Ideologically, Trujillo leaned toward fascism. The trappings of his personality cult (Santo Domingo was renamed Ciudad Trujillo under his rule), the size and architectural mediocrity of his building projects, and the level of repressive control exercised by the state all invited comparison with the style of his contemporaries, Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy. Basically, however, Trujillo was not an ideologue, but a Dominican caudillo expanded to monstrous proportions by his absolute control of the nation's resources. His attitude toward communism tended toward peaceful coexistence until 1947, when the Cold War winds from Washington persuaded him to crack down and to outlaw the Dominican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Dominicano--PCD). As always, self-interest and the need to maintain his personal power guided Trujillo's actions.

Although conspiracies--both real and imagined--against his rule preoccupied Trujillo throughout his reign, it was his adventurous foreign policy that drew the ire

of other governments and led directly to his downfall. Paradoxically, his most heinous action in this arena cost him the least in terms of influence and support. In October 1937, Trujillo ordered the massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic in retaliation for the discovery and execution by the Haitian government of his most valued covert agents in that country. The Dominican army slaughtered as many as 20,000 largely unarmed men, women, and children, mostly in border areas, but also in the western Cibao. News of the atrocity filtered out of the country slowly; when it reached the previously supportive administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States, Secretary of State Cordell Hull demanded internationally mediated negotiations for a settlement and indemnity. Trujillo finally agreed. The negotiations, however, fixed a ludicrously low indemnity of US\$750,000, which was later reduced to US\$525,000 by agreement between the two governments. Although the affair damaged Trujillo's international image, it did not result in any direct efforts by the United States or by other countries to force him from power.

In later years, the Trujillo regime became increasingly isolated from the governments of other nations. This isolation compounded the dictator's paranoia, prompting him to increase his foreign interventionism. To be sure, Trujillo did have cause to resent the leaders of certain foreign nations, such as Cuba's Fidel Castro Ruz, who aided a small, abortive invasion attempt by dissident Dominicans in 1959. Trujillo, however, expressed greater concern over Venezuela's President Rómulo Betancourt (1959-64). An established and outspoken opponent of Trujillo, Betancourt had been associated with some individual Dominicans who had plotted against the dictator. Trujillo developed an obsessive personal hatred of Betancourt and supported numerous plots of Venezuelan exiles to overthrow him. This pattern of intervention

led the Venezuelan government to take its case against Trujillo to the Organization of American States (OAS). This development infuriated Trujillo, who ordered his foreign agents to assassinate Betancourt. The attempt, on June 24, 1960, injured, but did not kill, the Venezuelan president. The incident inflamed world opinion against Trujillo. The members of the OAS, expressing this outrage, voted unanimously to sever diplomatic relations and to impose economic sanctions on the Dominican Republic.

The firestorm surrounding the Betancourt incident provoked a review of United States policy toward the Dominican Republic by the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The United States had long tolerated Trujillo as a bulwark of stability in the Caribbean; some in Washington still saw him as a desirable counterforce to the Castro regime. Others, however, saw in Trujillo another Fulgencio Batista--the dictator Castro deposed in 1959--ripe for overthrow by radical, potentially communist, forces. Public opinion in the United States also began to run strongly against the Dominican dictatorship. In August 1960, the United States embassy in Santo Domingo was downgraded to consular level. According to journalist Bernard Diederich, Eisenhower also asked the National Security Council's Special Group (the organization responsible for approving covert operations) to consider the initiation of operations aimed at Trujillo's ouster. On May 30, 1961, Trujillo was assassinated. According to Diederich, the United States Central Intelligence Agency supplied the weapons used by the assassins.