



Constructing the Past

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 15

2006

Blood, Power, and Privilege: Why the man who ordered the slaughter of a race was not racist

Elizabeth Johnson

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Elizabeth (2006) "Blood, Power, and Privilege: Why the man who ordered the slaughter of a race was not racist," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol7/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at Digital Commons @ IWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Constructing the Past* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ IWU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Blood, Power, and Privilege: Why the man who ordered the slaughter of a race was not racist

Abstract

This article argues that Trujillo's ordered massacre of the people in Haiti did not stem from his own racism. Rather, it argues that it was motivated by a desire to please the Dominican elite and a desire for personal power.

Constructing the Past

Blood, Power, and Privilege

Why the man who ordered the slaughter of a race was not racist

Elizabeth Johnson

Early French colonists on the island of Hispaniola, a mass of land in the Caribbean that is home to the countries Haiti and the Dominican Republic, devised an extremely complex system of racial classification that consisted of 128 categories. By classifying the island's inhabitants so specifically, white colonists hoped to solidify their own racial superiority.ⁱ Several centuries later, racial tension and categorization still reign supreme on this small island. Over the course of time, Haiti and the Dominican Republic have clashed on many issues of territory, culture, and race, all of which have left lasting scars. One of the most infamous conflicts that involved all these three is the October 1937 massacre of an estimated 25,000 people living along the border between the two countries, which was ordered by the president and de facto dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Leonidas Molina Trujillo. It is a fairly common assumption that this 5-day bloodbath was the result of Trujillo's own racist tendencies and personal hatred of Haiti. Although the enormously complex issues of race and nationality undoubtedly influenced Trujillo, to dismiss the 1937 slaughter as simply the genocidal act of a racist dictator is a gross oversimplification. Nothing in the history of Trujillo's personal or public life prior to this event indicates a virulent anti-Haitianism or even anti-Africanism. Rather, Trujillo was profoundly influenced by both the beliefs of the Dominican elite, whom he strove to impress, and his own overwhelming desire for power.

The citizens of the Dominican Republic celebrate their Independence Day on February 27, the day they received independence from the rule of Haiti in 1844, rather than the day when they ultimately achieved independence from Spain in 1865. Nearly a century later in 1937, Dominicans still harbored a certain amount of resentment toward their Haitian neighbors. This resentment manifested itself in numerous ways, but one of the most obvious manifestations was the ongoing dispute over the border territory between the two countries. At several points throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the official border was redrawn. In 1937, the most recent of these border negotiations had taken place only one year earlier, in 1936 when Presidents Trujillo and Vincent had "definitely arranged"ⁱⁱ the official boundaries of their respective nations.

While on a tour of the Dominican countryside in the autumn of 1937, Trujillo encountered a world where the racial boundaries, that were supposedly so important to him, ranged from blurry to nonexistent, and the political boundary that he and President Vincent had agreed upon was not widely enforced and unacknowledged. At the conclusion of his extensive tour of the Dominican countryside, at a dance held in his honor on October 2, 1937, Trujillo shocked many people when he made the following statement:

For some months, I have traveled and traversed the frontier in every sense of the word. I have seen, investigated, and inquired about the needs of the population. To the Dominicans who were complaining of the depredations by Haitians living among them...I have responded, "I will fix this." And we have already begun to remedy the situation. Three hundred Haitians are now dead in Bánica. This remedy will continue.ⁱⁱⁱ

Constructing the Past

He then concluded by explaining the specifics of what was to take place: he had given orders to his commanders at the border to kill several Haitians in each frontier town to make an example of them and encourage Haitians to leave.^{iv} Soldiers were further instructed by Trujillo to murder their victims using only knives and machetes, never guns, so that the incidents could be explained to the international community as an uprising of Dominican peasants. It truly is unclear whether or not Trujillo intended for the death toll to be higher or lower than it actually was (an approximated 25,000 deaths in five days, with thousands more seriously injured), but what is known is that he ordered a halt to the killings on Friday night, October 8.^v

When history remembers this atrocious event, the blame is usually placed entirely on Trujillo, whose supposed racism and hatred for Haitians caused him to order the massacre. Cultural works, such as the film *In the Time of the Butterflies*, portray Trujillo in this way. Moreover, historical works such as Michele Wucker's *Why the Cocks Fight* and Albert C. Hicks's *Blood in the Streets* do the same. Wucker argues that "it was his [Trujillo's] obsession with race that was behind the massacre," and even compares Trujillo to Hitler by pointing out that "In the months leading up to the horrible deed, Trujillo had tightened his ties with Nazi Germany."^{vi} Albert C. Hicks, author of *Blood in the Streets*, agrees: "As a dictator he [Trujillo] has proved himself a blancophile, bending his every effort towards populating his country with whites at the expense of blacks."^{vii} It must be admitted that on some level, these assertions are true. Trujillo did regard Hitler as a friend, and even set up a Jewish colony in the Dominican Republic in hopes of simultaneously pleasing Hitler and encouraging the whitening of the Dominican race through intermarriage with the Jews. It is not difficult to understand why Trujillo developed a reputation for racism, and Wucker and Hicks are not alone in their belief that the massacre was the result of Trujillo's personal racist tendencies. However, using racism as the sole explanation of what took place reflects an incomplete analysis of the facts of Trujillo's life; it ignores the influence of other people on Trujillo actions as well as his own personal motives.

Rafael Trujillo was born into a household that was not distinguished by either wealth or power, very dissimilar to the upbringings enjoyed by many of the elites who would come to hold positions of power in his government. He grew up in a lower middle class home outside of Santo Domingo, the nation's capital, in a family that had ties to Haiti; in fact, Trujillo's maternal grandmother was a Haitian. Rather than utterly renouncing all his ties to Haiti once he acquired power, Trujillo actually included his Haitian uncle, Teóduo Pina Chevalier, in his first presidential cabinet. According to Bernardo Vega, a Dominican lawyer and scholar, it was thought during the early years of the Trujillo regime that Chevalier would be named as Trujillo's successor if the latter did not run for reelection in 1934.^{viii} Chevalier eventually fell out of Trujillo's good graces (as did most members of Trujillo's family at some point, regardless of their ties to Haiti), but before he did, Trujillo "gave [him] a luxurious home."^{ix} Furthermore, a letter to Chevalier from one of Trujillo's constituents speaks of the fact that "President [Trujillo] has had the satisfaction of always being able to provide help" to Chevalier.^x Clearly, Trujillo did not hate the members of his family who had close ties to Haiti simply for that reason.

Trujillo's personal life reflects the fact that he was not resentful of all Haitians, but his public life and comments prior to 1937 are even more telling examples of how Trujillo was not a dictator who expressed overtly racist opinions in the same way that his contemporary Adolf Hitler did. In fact, Trujillo publicly voiced his desire for good relations with Haiti. In a 1936 interview with Lawrence de Besault for his biography, entitled *President Trujillo and His Work in the Dominican Republic*, Trujillo boasted that one of his most important achievements as

Constructing the Past

president was that he had “definitely arranged the question with Haiti regarding our frontiers,” and was proud that “the doubts and lack of confidence of the two nations occupying the same island have disappeared.”^{xi} In another interview, reprinted in the same book from a 1935 interview with Trujillo for a Dominican newspaper, Trujillo speaks of his “policy of offering foreign residents of our country the most liberal guarantees of work and security.”^{xii} It is clear from these comments that the image that Trujillo wanted to present to the public and to Haitians themselves was one of friendship with the neighboring country. Richard Lee Turits, a historian who has written numerous works on the massacre including *Foundations of Despotism* and “A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed,” agrees with this interpretation. “Before the massacre,” asserts Turits, “Trujillo presented himself to ethnic Haitians not as an eliminationist...but rather as a ruler granting state protection...to those offering political loyalty, agricultural production, and taxes to the regime.”^{xiii}

One obvious interpretation of these statements by Trujillo speaking of his desire for friendship with Haiti is simply that they are untrue, and it is not only possible but plausible that this is the case. Dictators as a group are not known for their honesty, and Trujillo, a man who maintained the fable that the massacre was merely the unfortunate result of agrarian conflict, was no exception. The two Trujillo quotes regarding relations with Haiti in the preceding paragraph were obtained from his biography, written by Besault, which has been criticized as being hopelessly (and quite unapologetically) biased in favor of Trujillo. A 1946 assessment of the Trujillo regime entitled *Blood in the Streets* castigates the biography as a book that is “fantastic as history and biography,” and subtly accuses Besault of being nothing more than Trujillo’s puppet.^{xiv} The book does undeniably portray Trujillo in an extremely positive light. However, Trujillo’s printed comments about his devotion to friendship with Haiti still are worthy of consideration. In the seven years of his regime prior to the massacre, Trujillo did not have reason to present false overtures of friendship to Haiti if he was entirely insincere in his statements.

Trujillo would not have needed to hide racist opinions if he in fact had them; on the contrary, it is likely that the Dominican elite would have supported him even more strongly had he been powerfully and publicly anti-Haitian and anti-black. Richard Turits speaks of the way in which Dominican intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to define the citizens of the Dominican Republic: strictly in terms of monoethnic, European roots while ignoring the country’s African heritage. During the 1920s in particular, elites were especially concerned with the denationalization of the Dominican frontier.^{xv} Denationalization refers to the absence of a clearly and specifically defined Dominican identity in the border region to contrast with, as well as discourage, the presence of Haitians, whom the upper classes of Dominican Republic society saw as inferior. An influx of Haitian immigration and lax enforcement of the border were seen as the major causes of this supposed state of “denationalization” and cultural ambiguity. According to countless oral histories given by both Haitian and Dominican survivors of the massacre, life in the pre-massacre border regions was not defined by race, culture, or nationality; rather, Haitians and Dominicans lived and worked together, and intermarried without fear of social stigma.^{xvi} Those who were officially Dominicans (by virtue of being born in the country) did not distinguish between themselves and recent immigrants. One Haitian refugee after the massacre described how he “was thought of as Dominican even though he had only arrived [in the Dominican Republic] six months ago.”^{xvii} Michele Wucker claims in *Why the Cocks Fight* that “Throughout the 1930s...Dominicans had been seeking ways to send the Haitians packing,”^{xviii} but given the multiple interviews asserting that Dominicans on the frontier did not draw much of a distinction between the Haitians and

themselves, this assertion seems unlikely unless Wucker means to refer only to elites (which she does not specify). It was this cultural intermingling that Dominican elites hated so passionately.

Trujillo strongly desired support from as well as power over the Dominican upper class, a desire that likely stemmed from his feelings of inferiority regarding his own poor upbringing paired with an insatiable appetite for dominion.^{xxix} This is why he included men like Julio Ortega Frier, Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle, and Joaquin Balaguer, all members of the elite with exceptionally anti-Haitian views, in his presidential cabinet.^{xxx} One of these men, Balaguer, would go on to hold many important government posts in the Dominican Republic, and even served five terms as president. During and for many years following the rule of Trujillo, Balaguer was one of the most fervent supporters of the justification of the 1937 massacre as the result of illegal and unwanted Haitian immigration.^{xxxi} Even though many of his official correspondences do not mention his feelings on the Haitian (and more broadly, African) race, Balaguer wrote a book entitled *La isla al revés* in which he made numerous claims asserting the inferiority of the African, and particularly the Haitian, race.

Haiti's former imperialism is something that Dominicans, and especially elite Dominicans, have not forgotten. "La isla al revés" in English means "The island upside down," and after reading only the first few pages, it becomes evident that in this title, Balaguer is referring to the unnatural dominance, growth, and role of Haitians on the island of Hispaniola. Balaguer complains about the black Haitians who "abandon themselves to their instincts," thus bringing about rapid "vegetative growth" that will "produce children who only increase the black population of the country and contribute to its racial corruption."^{xxxii} Balaguer also clearly voices his fears regarding the influence of "dirty" Haitians on the Dominicans living in the border regions. "Contact with blacks," argues Balaguer, "has...weakened our traditions. The morals of Dominican farmers, especially in rural regions where there is the most contact with Haiti, have obviously been brought down to the levels of their neighbors."^{xxxiii}

Some might make the argument that by including Balaguer and other anti-Haitian elites in his administration, Trujillo was tacitly creating a regime made up entirely of racist thinkers who would give voice to his own racist sentiments. In this way, Trujillo would be able to pursue racist policies without having to personally fear the political consequences of racism. These arguments are worthy of consideration, but ultimately *La isla al revés* shows two things about Trujillo: first, if he did personally share Balaguer's beliefs about Haitians, he never went to the trouble to be very vocal about it, and second, that Trujillo would have had nothing to lose by publicly voicing such beliefs. This book was first published in 1983, but was reprinted several times while Balaguer was serving one of the terms of his presidency. If the book had generated enormous public protest, it would not have been reprinted and Balaguer never would have been re-elected president.^{xxxiv} Clearly, Balaguer did not have to fear political repercussions of his anti-Haitian and anti-black discourse, and if this was not a concern for him in the 1980s, it is highly unlikely that it would have been a concern for Trujillo in the 1930s. What did concern Trujillo was not oppression of a race, but the maintenance of his own power, and he reserved particular scorn for revolutionaries. In a civic primer reprinted and translated in his biography, Trujillo asserts to all citizens that "If a man passes by your house who wants to change the present order, have him arrested....He is your worst enemy."^{xxxv} As far as available documents have shown, Trujillo made no such claims about Haitians.

As much of an anomaly as the massacre appears to be, given the family and prior political rhetoric of Trujillo and the peaceful cohabitation of the border on the part of Dominicans and Haitians, the public statements of the post-massacre Trujillo regime make it

Constructing the Past

appear as though such a conflict had long been on the horizon. However, although Trujillo and his officials dismissed the deaths as the result of a Dominican peasant uprising against illegal Haitian immigrants, there was still very little overtly racist rhetoric in Trujillo's public statements. In fact, Trujillo continued in his friendly overtures with Haitian President Vincent as the investigation into the massacre began, stating in one document that "the cordial friendship that has existed and still does exist between President Trujillo and President Vincent is the strongest force that will maintain harmony between the two countries."^{xxvi} Ultimately, Trujillo's camp conceived and stuck by the official story that "A few Haitian farmers crossed the border up north and tried to steal some goats and cattle from our farmers. There was a fight—very regrettable—and several were killed on both sides."^{xxvii} This was utterly false, as evidenced by multiple statements of witnesses and survivors of the massacre, who all testified that there was no fight between the Dominican and Haitian farmers on those days.^{xxviii} What is noteworthy about this deception, though, is that the official explanation of the event justified it in terms of immigration conflict, not racial conflict.

One crucial problem with making the argument that Trujillo was not racist and that his motivation for ordering the murders of Haitians along the Dominican frontier was not based in race is the consideration that the strongest evidence in favor of this assertion is the absence of certain types of sources. For instance, simply not being able to locate records in which Trujillo voiced "racist" comments does not mean that such documents do not exist. It is possible that such evidence exists and is not easily available to the general public, that it exists but has not yet been discovered, and that it existed at one time but has since been destroyed. These are problems that almost all historians encounter during the course of their research, but especially when one studies a dictatorship, since the absolute power of one man over an entire nation tends to have an enormous influence on which documents survive his reign and which are even allowed to be recorded in the first place. In addressing this possibility, I can do little but restate my belief that Trujillo would not have needed to hide his racism if he in fact held anti-Haitian beliefs. Perhaps in the future, newly discovered documents will disprove this essay's thesis, but at the present time it has been based on a careful analysis of the available sources.

Despite my attempts to carefully interpret the significance of Trujillo and others' statements, I cannot deny that the single greatest influence on my thesis has been my personal opposition to the use of words such as "racist," "sexist," etc., to explain a person's actions. The term "racist," I believe, often has a connotation of irrationality. This connotation ultimately causes members of society to believe themselves incapable of participating in such manifestations of hatred, and this mentality could arguably be called dangerous. In the case of Nazi Germany, for instance, blaming the Holocaust on Hitler's racism (and thus, irrationality) ignores the fact that millions of Germans were in agreement with Hitler's policies. Moreover, to insinuate that Trujillo was irrational in ordering the killings makes it seem as though he was not fully responsible for his own actions, and therefore not as culpable as I believe he was in reality. It seems that contemporary society must label people like Trujillo who do bad things because it is too difficult to accept the idea that maybe that person has no "excuse" (like being a racist) for their actions; it is too difficult to believe that a rational person would commit atrocities.

Miguel Aquino, author of *Holocaust in the Caribbean*, dedicates a chapter in his book to explaining what he perceives to be the megalomania of Trujillo. Whether Trujillo was in fact a megalomaniac is debatable, but his desire for power is not. His need for dominion paired with feelings of inferiority brought about by his humble upbringing caused him to simultaneously assert his leadership over the elite class as well as seek their approval through his actions.^{xxix}

Constructing the Past

Although the 1937 murders of tens of thousands of Haitians was a tragic and almost incomprehensible event, believing that it was only carried out because of the sinister whims of a racist dictator is both inaccurate and dangerous. Anti-Haitianism was never a clearly important aspect of Trujillo's personal political ideology, especially when Trujillo is compared to other important political figures such as Joaquin Balaguer. Irrespective of the causes that brought about the slaughter, the fact remains that this weeklong killing spree changed not only the lives of those who endured it, but also their entire culture. One man's racism is not enough to explain away such losses.

ⁱ Michele Wucker, *Why the Cocks Fight* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 34.

ⁱⁱ Trujillo's interview with Lawrence de Besault, in *President Trujillo and his Work in the Dominican Republic*, 30. Translator unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Lee Turits, *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in the Dominican Republic*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 162.

^{iv} Miguel Aquino, *Holocaust in the Caribbean: The Slaughter of 25,000 Haitians by Trujillo in One Week* (Waterbury, CT: Emancipation Press, 1997), 119.

^v Turits, *Foundations*, 167.

^{vi} Wucker, *Cocks Fight*, 51-2.

^{vii} Albert C. Hicks, *Blood in the Streets* (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946), 21.

^{viii} Lic. Bernardo Vega, *Los Trujillo se escriben* (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1987), 52. My translation.

^{ix} Letter from Trujillo to Chevalier (April 16, 1943) in Vega, ed., *Los Trujillo se escriben*, 52. My translation.

^x Letter from Trujillo's secretary to Chevalier (April 19, 1943) in Vega, ed., *Los Trujillo se escriben*, 54. My translation.

^{xi} Trujillo's interview with Lawrence de Besault, in *President Trujillo and his Work in the Dominican Republic*, 30. Translator unknown.

^{xii} Trujillo's interview with *Listín Diario* in Besault, *President Trujillo and his Work in the Dominican Republic*, 408. Translator unknown.

^{xiii} Richard Lee Turits, "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82:3 (August 2002), 609. Turits' interviews and general conclusions have been infinitely helpful sources, but a major drawback when using his work is that original transcripts of the interviews, which were conducted in Spanish and French, are not easily available to the general public. The problem with this is twofold: first, it is difficult for other historians to judge the quality of Turits' translations, and second, they are forced to rely upon the excerpts of the interviews that have been reprinted in Turits' published works. However, without access to the original transcripts and without the means to travel to the island of Hispaniola to conduct one's own interviews, there is little choice but to trust Turits.

^{xiv} Hicks, *Blood*, 137. Hicks certainly does not restrain his scorn for the Besault biography, but it appears that either he is mistaken in some of his facts about it or the publication information I obtained from the Besault book is incorrect. In the biography, Besault devotes a chapter to the argument that Trujillo ought to receive a Nobel Peace Prize for his negotiation of the border dispute between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In *Blood in the Streets*, Hicks dismisses this as ridiculous propaganda and a poorly-veiled attempt not only to ignore the 1937 massacre, but to suggest that Trujillo's actions were praiseworthy. However, according to the publication information, Besault's biography of Trujillo was first published in 1936, a year before the massacre even took place; Hicks sets the date of first publication as 1939. I believe it is more likely that this was an error on Hicks's part, and that Besault was at that point still somewhat justified in his proposal for Trujillo to receive the award.

^{xv} Turits, *Foundations*, 144.

^{xvi} Cuello, ed., *Documentos del conflicto Dominicano-haitiano*, 60-85. My translation. See also Turits, *Foundations*, 144-180.

^{xvii} José Israel Cuello, ed., *Documentos del conflicto dominicano-haitiano de 1937* (Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1984), 65. My translation.

^{xviii} Wucker, *Cocks Fight*, 47.

^{xix} Aquino, *Holocaust*, 97-107.

^{xx} Aquino, *Holocaust*, 97. See also Turits, "World Destroyed," 608.

Constructing the Past

- ^{xxi} Aliro Paulino, ed., *Balaguer: El hombre del destino* (Santo Domingo: Editora Nivar, 1986), 233-242. My translation.
- ^{xxii} Joaquin Balaguer, *La isla al revés*, 4th ed. (Santo Domingo: n.p., 1987), 41. My translation.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 45. My translation.
- ^{xxiv} Balaguer does include one interesting footnote in the fourth edition of the book (whether it appears in the earlier editions, I do not know). In this note, he condemns the 1937 massacre of Haitians as an act of genocide comparable to the massacre of Jews under Hitler, but then in turn decries the 1978-1982 policy of then-president Antonio Guzmán of opening the border to Haitians and predicts that the move will have grave consequences.
- ^{xxv} Rafael Trujillo, *The Civic Primer*, in *President Trujillo and his Work in the Dominican Republic* (United States: Washington Publishing Co., 1936), 361. Translator unknown.
- ^{xxvi} Cuello, ed., *Documentos del conflicto*, 87. My translation.
- ^{xxvii} Quentin Reynolds, foreword to *Blood in the Streets*, by Albert C. Hicks (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946), vi.
- ^{xxviii} Cuello, ed., *Documentos del conflicto*, 536-60. My translation.
- ^{xxix} Aquino, *Holocaust*, 97-107.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

- Balaguer, Joaquin. *La isla al revés (The Island Backwards)*. 4th ed. Santo Domingo: n.p., 1987.
- Cuello, José Israel, ed. *Documentos del conflicto dominico-haitiano de 1937 (Documents from the 1937 Dominican-Haitian conflict)*. Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1985.
- De Besault, Lawrence. *President Trujillo: His Work and the Dominican Republic*. United States: Washington Publishing Co., 1936.
- Hicks, Albert C. *Blood in the Streets: The Life and Rule of Trujillo*. New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946.
- Paulino, Aliro, ed. *Balaguer: El hombre del destino (Balaguer: Man of Destiny)*. Santo Domingo: Editor Nivar, 1986.
- Vega, Bernardo, ed. *Los Trujillo se escriben (The Trujillo Family Writes)*. Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1987.

Secondary Sources:

- Aquino, Miguel. *Holocaust in the Caribbean: The Slaughter of 25,000 Haitians by Trujillo in One Week*. Waterbury, CT: Emancipation Press, 1997.

Constructing the Past

Hicks, Albert C. *Blood in the Streets: The Life and Rule of Trujillo*. New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946.

Turits, Richard Lee. *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Turits, Richard Lee. "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82:3 (August 2002): 589-635.

Wucker, Michele. *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1999.