

Unmasking A Forgotten Tragedy: Trujillo-Era Anti-Haitianism And The 1937 Haitian Massacre

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Abstract

On October 2, 1937, Dominican military dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo demanded his army to massacre all ethnic Haitians living on the Haitian-Dominican frontier. After roughly a week of continued aggression, soldiers accumulated more than 15,000 Haitians to slaughter with machetes, marking one of the most detrimental human rights violations of the twentieth century: the 1937 Haitian Massacre. This paper uncovers the complex factors that gave rise to Trujillo's anti-Haitian agenda, which culminated in the 1937 mass killing. Specifically, illegal Haitian immigration to the Dominican Republic over the porous frontier threatened Trujillo's sovereignty. To solidify his rule in these bicultural border communities, he framed Haitians as a threat to Dominican modernization and racial purity, hoping to ignite a nationalist mission of expelling Haitians from the Dominican Republic. Since Trujillo was trained in the United States military, American entrenched institutional racism and intervention in Dominican politics influenced Trujillo's thinking, serving as a model for his own racist agenda. Ultimately, when most Dominican peasants and local officials on the bicultural porous border resisted his anti-Haitian laws, Trujillo resorted to violence to expedite his plan, leading to the 1937 massacre of Haitians. Today, a survey of existing literature on the Haitian Massacre, especially Dominican textbooks, continues to perpetuate racist exceptionalism and sugarcoat the 1937 atrocities. However, my intervention seeks to emphasize the true reasons that led to the massacre—namely Trujillo's power-hungry, racist agenda—in order to offer a counter-narrative that allows us to consider ongoing structural racism and the damage done to Dominican-Haitian border communities.

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I. Introduction

On October 2, 1937, Dominican military dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, demanded his army to massacre all ethnic Haitians¹ living on the Haitian-Dominican frontier. To differentiate between ethnic Dominicans and Haitians in the historically bicultural border communities, soldiers required frontier residents to pronounce words like *perejil* (parsley)² or *tijera* (scissors) (Turits, 2002, p. 616). In this often inaccurate test, the pronunciation of the Spanish “r” became an indicator of one’s ethnic identity—of who to execute and who to spare. Some Haitians tried to escape by swimming across the Dajabón River that divides the northernmost part of the two countries, but Dominican border patrol hunted most down (Turits, 2002, pp. 590-591). Others hid in bushes for days, waiting to emerge once anti-Haitian violence subsided. After roughly a week of continued aggression, Dominican soldiers accumulated more than 15,000 Haitians to slaughter with machetes, marking one of the most detrimental human rights violations of the twentieth century: the 1937 Haitian Massacre (Paulino & García, 2013, p. 111).

This research uncovers the complex factors that gave rise to Trujillo’s anti-Haitian agenda, which culminated in the 1937 mass killing. The common assumption among students and even some historians is that

¹ As Trujillo realized, Haitian and Dominican identities are extremely intertwined along the border, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. For the sake of clarity, when I use “ethnic Haitians” and “ethnic Dominicans,” I am referring to people whose ancestry originates respectively from the French colony of Saint-Domingue and Spanish territory of Santo Domingo. Since Columbus killed almost all Indigenous people in Hispaniola, “ethnic Haitians and Dominicans” refers mostly to descendants of enslaved African and European settlers. Using “ethnic” helps distinguish between national identities, which any person can receive by gaining citizenship. Moving forward, I will omit the “ethnic” for brevity.

² Because Dominican soldiers required all border residents to pronounce words like *perejil* (parsley), the 1937 Haitian Massacre is sometimes informally referred to as the “Parsley Massacre.”

Trujillo's intrinsic intolerance towards Haitians—a majority of which were of African descent—solely fueled his anti-Haitian agenda. While I do not deny Trujillo's bigotry, this paper reveals how the United States' entrenched institutional racism and intervention in Dominican politics influenced Trujillo's thinking and how he hoped anti-Haitian sentiment would serve his ultimate political goals. Specifically, using America as a model for his own racist policies, Trujillo hope to leverage an anti-Haitian agenda to strengthen Dominican borders and fortify his authority on the frontier in response to increased illegal Haitian immigration. However, when most Dominican peasants³ and local officials on the bicultural porous border resisted his racist laws, Trujillo resorted to violence to expedite his plan, leading to the 1937 massacre of Haitians.

II. Formation of Bicultural Frontier Communities

This essay begins in the colonial period to track the origins of the bicultural frontier communities on the island of Hispaniola⁴ that would eventually be devastated by Trujillo-era aggression and the 1937 Haitian Massacre. In 1492, conquistador Christopher Columbus encountered Hispaniola on a journey intended for India, marking the beginning of centuries of European colonization and exploitation of the New World. Columbus helped established Santo Domingo as a Spanish colony in 1496, but French colonists eventually took over the western half of the island in the 1660s, naming their colony Saint-Domingue. Because Old World diseases and colonial genocide killed all Indigenous people of Hispaniola, Spanish and French colonists almost exclusively relied on enslaved Africans brought over through the transatlantic slave trade to work sugar plantations and garner profits (Paulino, 2016, pp. 16-17). In fact, leading up to the Haitian Revolution⁵ in 1791, about 500,000 people made up the slave labor force, representing a vast majority of the island's population (Dubois et al., 2011, pp. 275-276). Adding to these numbers, Duke University Professor of Romance Studies Laurent Dubois (2011) explains, "during the second half of the eighteenth century, the pace of slave imports into the colony was...more than 30,000 people annually" (pp. 275-276). While Saint-Domingue's extensive slave labor force and massive sugar plantations made the colony one of the richest in the world, with Santo Domingo not far behind, the extreme exploitation of enslaved people produced radical resistance movements across Hispaniola (Dubois et al., 2011, pp. 273-275). Refusing to labor and generate capital for their oppressors, many enslaved Africans would escape their plantations to form independent societies, known as marronage communities, most notably on the mountainous border between the French and Spanish colonies (Paulino, 2016, pp. 15-16).

Even as Haiti (formerly Saint-Domingue) and the Dominican Republic (previously Santo Domingo) became sovereign nations in the early 1800s, these border marronage communities persisted. The generational interaction of former slaves from both the French and Spanish colonies prompted the syncretism of their languages and cultures, forming bicultural societies along the frontier (Turits, 2002, pp. 595-596). These border communities meant that there was never an abrupt, clear divide between the two nations of Hispaniola. In fact, Haitians would regularly cross the border to travel to large Dominican rural markets and visit family and relatives. The 1900s to the 1920s even saw a rise in illegal Haitian immigration since the Dominican Republic had an excess of land, relatively small population compared to Haiti, and generally more financial opportunities (Turits, 2002, p. 584). The minimal government regulation of the border—since the lack of roadways and mountainous terrain made extensive military transportation difficult—allowed for such large-scale illegal immigration (Turits, 2002, p. 600).

III. Rise of Trujillo and His Anti-Haitian Agenda

Given the shaky start to his rule, Trujillo consistently attempted to consolidate his power, especially on the bicultural porous border that fostered illegal immigration and challenged his authority. Trujillo, while born into a lower-middle-class family of Haitian heritage, climbed the ranks through military success, eventually becoming commander-in-chief of the National Army in 1927 under President Horacio Vásquez (Turits, 2003, p. 1). Using his authority over the military, Trujillo conducted a coup, allowing him to wrest control over the country in 1930. He reigned as a military dictator for thirty-one years with minimal opposition, but Trujillo's rule began with obstacles. Since he rose to power through force rather than by public choice in an election, many Dominicans

³ Dominican peasants were lower-class subsistence farmers that populated the rural Dominican-Haitian frontier. Although the word "peasants" has historically been used in the context of European history, historian of the Caribbean and Latin America Richard Lee Turits argues that this term can be mapped onto Dominican farmers, which other scholars, including I, have accepted.

⁴ Hispaniola is a Caribbean island that is shared today by the Dominican Republic on the east and Haiti on the west. In the colonial era, these countries were the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo and French territory of Saint-Domingue respectively.

⁵ Led by enslaved Africans and free people of color, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was a successful anticolonial uprising on Saint-Domingue that resulted in the abolition of slavery and the establishment of Haiti as the first independent Black republic in the New World.

did not accept Trujillo as their ruler, forcing him to resort to violence to initially establish his authority (Turits, 2003, p. 2). However, Trujillo quickly realized that this violence was unsustainable and that to ensure his longevity as a ruler, he would need to gain the genuine support of his citizens. Therefore, Trujillo formed a white supremacist cabinet of prominent intellectuals to help advise his policies, attempting to hide his Black Haitian ancestry to appeal to the racist Dominican elites with white European heritage (Turits, 2002, p. 608). While Trujillo was able to gain the support of the Dominican upper classes, the bicultural communities on the frontier—populated mostly by lower-class farmers of African descent—still served as a challenge to his authority, especially as the societies became refuges for illegal Haitian immigrants. Since the porous border prevented him from regulating the flow of people that entered his country and threatened his absolute power, Trujillo recognized that to secure his control over the frontier and its communities, he would have to expel Haitians through racist policies.

Claiming that illegal Haitian immigration would ruin Dominicans' racial purity and path to modernization to justify his anti-Haitian policies, Trujillo hoped to pit Dominican peasants against their Haitian counterparts to gain control over the porous border. Leading up to the Trujillo regime, the Dominican economy was fairly weak and archaic. It still lacked industrial capacity in urban centers and largely relied on peasants in rural areas, who would collectively and inefficiently farm to provide for the nation without much state intervention (Turits, 2003, p. 13). Recognizing their basic economy that was far from an industrial revolution, Trujillo hoped to unite all Dominicans under one state-led populist modernization mission (Turits, 2002, p. 604). Accompanying this effort was a goal of racial purity. Trujillo argued that Haitians' African ancestry would not only sully Dominicans' white European heritage but also hinder the Dominican economy from modernizing with their "savage" and "backward" nature (Turits, 2002, p. 599). By framing illegal Haitian immigration as an invasive attempt to Africanize the border, Trujillo hoped to fabricate an immediate state of emergency that would convince Dominicans on the frontier to betray their generational bond with Haitians and cooperate with Trujillo's plan.

However, Trujillo's claims that Haitians would ruin the Dominican goal of modernization and pure race were false. For one thing, Haitians and Dominicans' ability to thrive together in frontier communities since the colonial era challenges the validity of Trujillo's claim that Haitians were inferior and would hinder Dominican progress. In fact, it was the Black Haitians who were able to organize a large-scale rebellion against European colonists to free themselves from slavery—known as the Haitian Revolution—showing that Haitians, in actuality, encouraged progression (Dubois et al., 2011, p. 277). Moreover, the Dominican soldiers' trivial identification test during the massacre—resorting to a technique as futile as the pronunciation of the Spanish "r" to differentiate between ethnic Haitians and Dominicans—demonstrates how they lacked significant racial divisions. In fact, "ethnic Haitians with deep roots in the Dominican frontier pronounced 'perejil' fluently and often indistinguishably from ethnic Dominicans in the area," (Turits, 2002, p. 617) proving their minimal cultural and linguistic differences. With more Europeans settling in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic was generally a whiter nation than Haiti (Turits, 2002, p. 625). While Trujillo likes to call upon this colonial history to prove the racial purity of his nation, he failed to recognize the large population of enslaved Africans in Santo Domingo whose descendants contribute to the country's racial diversity (Paulino, 2016, p. 132). Even Trujillo, a person of Haitian descent, recognized that his claims were baseless and unreasonable since he asked his army to initially conceal his anti-Haitian plans, such as forced deportations, from the public (Hintzen, 2016, p. 38). Ultimately, by connecting his anti-Haitian policies to false economic and racial justifications, Trujillo aimed to make his justification more "noble" and significant for Dominican citizens, hiding his true power-hungry intentions for absolute control of the Dominican Republic.

IV. Resistance to Anti-Haitian Policies and Trujillo's Final Response

While most elites were receptive to Trujillo's racist plan, many Dominican peasants and officers on the border resisted his anti-Haitian laws, especially the European border colonization program, forcing Trujillo to re-strategize. For seven years leading up to the massacre, Trujillo imposed anti-Haitian laws to expel Haitians from the border through legislation rather than violence. In one such initiative named the European border colonization program, Trujillo's policymakers created colonies along the border and populated them with "European immigrants, imagining that European cultural influence would be required to 'civilize' the countryside...and thus to settle, claim, and develop frontier lands" (Turits, 2002, p. 602). Even though the colonization program started in 1907, before Trujillo's rise to power, his continuation and actualization of the border colonies demonstrate his dedication to furthering anti-Haitianism (Turits, 2002, pp. 601-602). This program of settling Europeans instead of Dominicans represents how Trujillo realized that the Dominican Republic was not as white as he expected, especially along the border. To fabricate racial purity, Trujillo desired to import whiteness and, with it, modern agricultural and economic techniques that could speed up modernization. Trujillo ultimately hoped to enforce his claim that white people were better for progress than those with African ancestry.

However, many Dominican officers and peasants refused to coordinate with the government to help establish these colonies, leading to the program's demise. Although the displacement of Dominican peasants to make room for European families definitely encouraged them to resist, some Dominicans detested the underlying

goal of the colonies: to slowly rid of Haitians on the border (Turits, 2002, p. 602). The Haitian-Dominican unity formed in the generational bicultural communities prompted many peasants and local Dominican officials to disapprove of foreigners forcibly replacing Haitians, who were often their friends and relatives. The fact that most Dominican peasants and local officers later refused to collaborate with Trujillo's army during the 1937 massacre and instead defended Haitians further depicts the strength of Haitian-Dominican solidarity and their rejection of anti-Haitianism (Turits, 2002, p. 591). Ultimately, Trujillo's failed colonization program forced him to re-strategize his anti-Haitian mission. He realized that he needed to gain the support of Dominican peasants in order to successfully attain control of the frontier and rid the border of Haitians (Turits, 2002, p. 603).

After more of his anti-Haitian policies failed despite re-strategizing to integrate border residents in his plan, Trujillo grew frustrated with his lack of support from Dominican peasants and local officers. Yale Professor of Ethnicity, Race, and Migration Amelia Hintzen (2016) reveals that in August of 1937, "Trujillo embarked on an extensive tour of the border provinces, reflecting his concern about political control in the region" (p. 41). Trujillo, too frustrated to continue relying on the defiant and disloyal local officials to help enforce his anti-Haitian policies, decided to check up on the border communities himself with his military. However, in the frontier town of Dajabón, watching Haitians and Dominicans coexist—essentially unaffected by his years of efforts to expel Haitians from the border—enraged Trujillo (Hintzen, 2016, p. 41). His ominous speech at Dajabón about stopping the "Haitian pacific invasion" and "thefts of cattle, provisions, fruits, etc." that he claimed Haitians were responsible for foreshadowed his ordering of the massacre just three days later (Turits, 2002, p. 613). Instead of legislation, Trujillo realized that a "dramatic act of violence was needed to break down the long-standing networks between Haitians and Dominicans" (Hintzen, 2016, p. 42). By scaring Haitians into leaving the Dominican Republic and forcing Dominican peasants and local officers into compliance, Trujillo hoped the massacre would expedite his racist plan of securing his authority on the border.

V. American Influence on Trujillo

While Trujillo is largely responsible for the emergence of nationalist anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic, it is important to acknowledge how America's entrenched institutional racism and intervention in Dominican politics contributed to Trujillo's anti-Haitian thinking. As American corporations grew interested in Hispaniola's lucrative sugar industry, the United States increasingly intervened in Dominican and Haitian politics, ultimately invading Haiti (1916-1924) and the Dominican Republic (1915-1934) (Hintzen, 2016, pp. 31-32). At this time, the United States passed numerous Jim Crow laws, codifying anti-Black discrimination and violence through segregation. The United States' domestic racism carried over to their rule of overseas territories like Hispaniola. Just as they held racist views at home, American colonial officers were intolerant to Haitians, the majority of which were of African descent (Paulino, 2016, pp. 41-42). For example, in 1921, American official Ferdinand Mayer, in a letter to the Secretary of State, highlights his internalized racial biases when trying to distinguish between Dominicans and Haitians:

[Dominicans], while in many ways not advanced far enough for the highest type of self-government, yet have a preponderance of white blood and culture. The Haitians on the other hand are negro...and are almost in a state of savagery and complete ignorance. (Calder, 1984, p. 249; as cited in Paulino, 2016, p. 48)

Trujillo joined the Dominican National Guard in 1919 under American rule (Paulino, 2016, p. 55). His training in a white supremacist environment of United States military and bureaucrats like Mayer inspired his internalized anti-Haitianism. In fact, not only did Mayer's distinction between Haitians and Dominicans echo the racial division that Trujillo tried to fabricate to justify his anti-Haitian mission, but Mayer's characterization of Haitians as savage and unintelligent also parallels Trujillo's eventual claim that Haitians were a threat to modernization. Ultimately, Trujillo's racist teachings under American rule encouraged him to pursue his political goals through an anti-Haitian agenda, demonstrating the United States' complicity in shaping such an authoritarian and racist ruler and, more specifically, the Haitian Massacre.

VI. Conclusion: Anti-Haitianism After the Massacre

With the 1937 massacre of Haitians, Trujillo hoped to expedite his plan of establishing his authority in bicultural frontier communities by stopping illegal Haitian immigration over the porous frontier. While six to ten thousand Haitians fled to Haiti during the initial days of the massacre, many returned to their generational homes on the frontier in an attempt to rebuild their cultural roots and communities (Turits, 2002, p. 622). Their return to the border indicates that Trujillo's plan to expel Haitians through the massacre was unsuccessful, demonstrating how Dominican-Haitian unity persisted.

While Trujillo's goal of racial purity failed since Black Haitians continued to enter the Dominican Republic through the frontier, he accomplished his plan of modernization. Through an authoritarian rule, Trujillo integrated the Dominican Republic into the international sugar industry by encouraging North American companies to exploit Dominican sugar plantations and labor, building infrastructure that connected the rural border communities to urban centers, and leveraging Haitians for Dominican economic growth (Hintzen, 2016,

pp. 34-35). Specifically, Trujillo forced many Haitians on the border into sugar plantations, once again tearing apart Haitian-Dominican frontier communities and beginning the process of linking Haitian identity to manual labor and sugar-cutting (Hintzen, 2016, p. 44). Despite not achieving all his political goals with the massacre, Trujillo's control over Haitian immigrants represents how he still gained more authority over border communities.

Ultimately, the minimal punishment Trujillo faced for the massacre allowed him to continue imposing racist laws in the Dominican Republic, leaving behind a legacy of anti-Haitianism that his successors followed. After Trujillo's assassination in 1961, President Joaquín Balaguer continued Trujillo's initiative of relocating Haitians to sugar plantations and attempted to conduct a series of forced deportations (Hintzen, 2015). Following Trujillo and Balaguer's model, anti-Haitianism in Dominican policy continues today. For instance, "in 2013, the Dominican Constitutional Tribunal ruled that anyone with Haitian parents born after 1929 could potentially lose their citizenship," (Hintzen, 2015) replicating Trujillo's involuntary deportations and oppression of Haitians less than a century before.

As exemplified in the 2013 law, the Dominican government continues to discriminate against Haitians today, fueling tension in Dominican and Haitian relations. Trujillo and his successors even deny the atrocities of the Haitian Massacre, painting "the incident as a necessary and measured response to the 'passive' invasion of Haitian culture that threatened the Dominican nation" (Hintzen, 2016, p. 42). As the victors rewrite history, the 1937 massacre remains a forgotten tragedy, overlooked in curricula and scholarship. By uncovering the undiscussed, true causes of the massacre and not glossing over uncomfortable yet important truths, my intervention offers a counter-narrative that cuts through Dominican exceptionalism to heal once vibrant border communities and dismantle lingering racist institutions. By highlighting the US's complicity in the Haitian Massacre, I also aim to inspire reflection on America's problematic colonial past, rupturing the exceptionalist notion that the United States was never a colonial empire.

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