

To be a woman: Gender and the death of the Mirabal Sisters

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Received 17 April, 2017; accepted 19 July 2017

Abstract

Traditional gender roles prove to be hard barriers to break. They cripple the feminine voice, and when used properly they promote a destruction of that very voice. However, there are stories of women breaking through the barrier that gender creates, pushing their voices to be heard for the progression of human rights. It is in the case of the Mirabal sisters that we see this demonstrated. The year was 1960 and it was well into the regime of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. Hundreds of people died and many were in prison for a cause that the Dominican people struggled with daily. A group of dissatisfied Dominican citizens worked cohesively to end the reign of Trujillo. The Fourteenth of June Movement were amid their plans for a revolution. At the face of this movement were the Mirabal Sisters, who fought alongside their husbands and comrades to overthrow Rafael Trujillo. However, before they could make legitimate change, the three sisters were murdered by a treacherous act. Although there is extensive research regarding the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, most historical interpretations of the Mirabal sister's murder focuses on how the deaths influenced the assassination of the dictator. Many scholars see the sisters as the flame that sparked the assassination of Trujillo, which is the predominant analysis of the murder. Nonetheless, this research is aimed at broadening the perspective towards the murder of the sisters; looking at cause rather than effect. In doing this, the research suggests that the role of gender was a major contributor to the motivation behind the murders. The article will explore the relationship that Trujillo had with women and how these relationships reflect his thoughts toward females. By understanding his views of women based on how he treated them, one can comprehend why the Mirabal sisters concerned him so greatly. Moreover, the role that the Mirabal sisters had in the rebellion contradicted traditional female roles which further disturbed the machismo that flowed through the dictator's blood. By researching the motive of the murders rather than the effects, the research hopes to expand the historical analysis of the Mirabal sisters' murder.

Keywords: Mirabal sisters, Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, Fourteenth of June Movement, gender

Introduction

Although there is extensive research regarding the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, most historical interpretations of the Mirabal sister's murder focuses on how the deaths influenced the assassination of the dictator Rafael Trujillo. Many scholars see the sisters as the flame that sparked the assassination of Trujillo. For instance, in the book *Trujillo: The Death of the Dictator* author Bernard Diederich states, "more than Trujillo's fight with the Church or the United States, or the fact that he was being isolated by the world as a political leper, the Mirabal's murder tempered the resolution of the conspirators plotting his end."¹ In other words, even though there was trouble with the church and Trujillo that caused public outcry and much of the world was already separating themselves from him is oppressions, it was the Mirabal sister's murders that encouraged an urgency in ridding the country of the man. Though this analysis holds ground in the case of the Mirabal sisters, it does little to look at the motives behind the murder. This research is intended to look at the murder

in a different perspective, focusing more on why Trujillo targeted the Mirabal sisters and his motives behind it.

The research is aimed at broadening the perspective towards the murder of the sisters. In doing this, the research suggests that the role of gender was a major contributor to the motivation behind the murders. Because Trujillo displayed characteristics of machismo, a masculine demeanor (something that will be considered more extensively in the article), the idea that women were such important figures in a resistance concerned Trujillo extensively. The article will explore the relationship that Trujillo had with women and how these relationships reflect his thoughts toward females. By understanding his views of women based on how he treated them, one can comprehend why the Mirabal sisters concerned him. Furthermore, the role that the Mirabal sisters had in the rebellion contradicted traditional female roles, and therefore caused much distain to the dictator. By researching the motive of the murders rather than the

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¹ Bernard Diederich, *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1978), pg. 72.

effects, the researcher hopes to broaden the analysis of the Mirabal sisters murder case.

Throughout history it is seldom that the acts of female revolutionaries are recognized. A common practice in Latin American culture is to subject women to living a life of caring for the home. The only value a woman has is the family she raises and the house she keeps.² A repercussion of this is that many women struggle to retain a sense of liberty in their country. The truth is that a woman is more valuable than by work she does in the household. There were many Latin American women who fought vigorously for the civil rights that tyrants tried to take from their people. They saw a struggle and participated in movements to help their country gain a better future. By freely speaking about the injustices of their countries, these women contradicted the Latin American women model.

The Mirabal sisters, of the Dominican Republic, were activists who saw the injustice that was overtaking their beloved country and fought to do something about it. Las Mariposas (The Butterflies), which was the sisters' code name, worked alongside their husbands and confidants with the notion that the Dominican Republic was in dire need of change. In the end, the sisters paid with their lives. Minerva, Maria Teresa, and Patria did not risk their lives for glory, but for the desire to live in a country that did not suppress its people. However, when women decide to stand up for something that they believe in, people tend to consider them out of place. In the case of the Mirabal sisters, the fact that they were women only hastened their deaths.

Rafael Trujillo's rise to the Presidency

Rafael Trujillo rose to presidency through his acclaimed work in the armed forces. He was not born into a home of the elite; therefore, he was forced to work for the high regard in which he was held. In *The Dominican Crisis*, author Piero Gleijeses suggests that it was the U.S occupation of the Dominican Republic that allowed him to rise to his place in society.³ Major Thomas E. Watson, who was part of the United States Marine Corps and a member of the Second Provisional Brigade in the Dominican Republic, described him in a favorable manner. It was his American superiors who considered him one of the best officers and would provide him with positive references. He quickly moved up the ranks in his military career, and within seven years he was general of the National Army.

² Nancy Robinson, "Women's Political Participation in the Dominican Republic: The Case of the Mirabal Sisters," *Caribbean Quarterly* 52, no. 2/3, Unraveling Gender, Development and Civil Society in the Caribbean (June 01, 2006): 172-83. Accessed August 23, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.csustan.edu/stable/10.2307/40654568?ref=search-gateway:5874a0f8ac4966e86dfb4fee1efc4a16>, 3.

³ Piero Gleijeses, *The Dominican Crisis: The 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt and American Intervention*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 21.

Because he was able to turn the Dominican military into one of the strongest militaries in the Caribbean, a defiant to the government at the time would request Trujillo's help in ousting existing President Horacio Vasquez.

Early in 1930, President Horacio Vasquez was becoming older and weaker, therefore a new administration was to take power. The suspected successor was someone who was thought to be disliked by Rafael Estrella Urena, a young politician and lawyer who helped form the Republican Party. Therefore, Urena found it vital to reestablish government in the Dominican Republic. Through secrecy and deceit, Urena and Trujillo came together on plans to overthrow the government upon President Vasquez's death.⁴ Trujillo agreed to help because he felt as though his glory days in the military were numbered; he even declared possible retirement after the President's expected death.⁵ However, Trujillo was a man who craved success. In his biography of the dictator, Robert D. Crassweller states that he had an, "... urge to build, to transform, to glorify."⁶ He had a desire for power and the overthrow presented an opportunity to attain that desire. Instead of working together, Trujillo decided to take the triumph himself. In the presidential election that followed the resignation of President Vasquez, Urena would second Trujillo's power; not elected President but placed as Vice President in Trujillo's first administration. On May 16, 1930, the young general was elected President Rafael Trujillo, which began the "Era of Trujillo" that lasted three decades.

The dictatorship

The Trujillo regime lasted from 1930-1961 as a period of constant terror and uncertainty. In his book, *Trujillo: Little Caesar of the Caribbean*, German E. Ornes gives a first-hand account at what life was like during the Trujillo regime. Three years before Trujillo's assassination, Ornes writes, "[Dominicans] look healthy, well-fed... and fairly competent. However, they do not have... a voice... Under a misleading surface of seeming peace and quiet, terror runs its red threads through the fabric of Dominican society."⁷ There was oppression in the Dominican Republic during the reign of Trujillo. This went as far as controlling what type of music was played on the radio.⁸ *La Voz Dominicana*, was a radio network owned by Trujillo, that

⁴ Robert D. Crassweller, *Trujillo: The Life and times of a Caribbean Dictator*, (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 61.

⁵ German E. Ornes, *Trujillo: Little Caesar of the Caribbean*, (New York; Edinburgh ; Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1958), 46.

⁶ Crassweller, 44

⁷ Ornes, 3

⁸ Yazmin Nunez, "The Dominican Republic During the Trujillo Regime," *Mount Holyoke College*, 2009, Accessed 2015.

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~nunez20y/worldpolitics/contact.html>.

documented little but praise for the President, preventing Dominicans from hearing broadcast news.

Everything that was said and done in the Dominican Republic revolved around Trujillo. Any celebration that brought Dominicans together, whether it be a birthday or a sporting event, had to pay homage to Trujillo.⁹ Moreover, the Dominican people had no freedom of speech. He used programs like the Military Intelligence Service (SIM), the youth that supported him, and education to oppress the people of his country.¹⁰ The fear of being watched, not to mention the threat of possible death, prevented them from speaking out against the government. It is not a hidden fact that Trujillo administered the deaths of several leading opponents. For instance, that of Virgilio Martinez Reyna, the principal lieutenant of Vasquez's successor who urged the displacement of Trujillo, and his pregnant wife.¹¹ Though Trujillo is not directly tied to this murder, as he wasn't to many, it certainly was motivated by the threat Reyna posed. Therefore, Trujillo was successfully able to construct a government where he was solely in power, and did anything necessary to remove possible threats.

History of the Mirabal family

From a town called Ojo de Agua on the north coast of the Dominican Republic, Enrique and Mercedes Mirabal raised four daughters on a farm they ran independently.¹² They also managed a coffee shop, meat market, and rice factory. They were a simple, middle-class Dominican family, looking to give their daughters the best in life. The girls, Patria, Dede, Minerva, and Maria Teresa, received an education at the Colegio Inmaculada Concepcion, a Catholic boarding school in La Vega. There the Mirabal sisters were cultured and educated, a rarity in a time when most women were not. The Mirabals raised their daughters to have minds of their own and to learn from the world around them.¹³ This attribute would eventually contribute to the onslaught of their death.

Patria was born on February 27, 1924.¹⁴ Patria was her given name in honor of her birthdate, the anniversary of the Dominican Republic's Independence Day. When she was seventeen, she married a farmer named Pedro Gonzalez and proceeded to have four children. She raised her family in the traditionally religious manner. Bélgica Adela, better known as Dede, was born February 29, 1925. She was not as politically involved as her three sisters were in the revolution to overthrow the Trujillo regime. She married when she was sixteen to Jaimito Fernandez and had three sons. Maria Teresa was born October 15, 1936 and was the

youngest of the Mirabal sisters. She attended the University of Santo Domingo, to study math. She married Leonardo Guzman, and together they had a daughter. She looked up to her older sister Minerva, and became involved in her sister's political activities. Although they all contributed some way in the efforts to overthrow the dictator, it was the middle sister that displayed great promise in the effort.

The sister that played a vital role in the destruction of Trujillo was Minerva. She was born on March 12, 1926. Many of her teachers claimed that she showed signs of great intelligence from an early age.¹⁵ By the time she was seven, she could recite verses by French poets. She attended the University of Santo Domingo to study law and became the first female law graduate in the Dominican Republic. It was there she would meet her husband Manuel Justo, and expand her knowledge of corruption of her country. She and Manuel had two children, Minou and Manolito. Minerva admired the up-and-coming revolutionary, Fidel Castro. It was Castro's work in the Cuban revolution that influenced Minerva and her husband to establish The Fourteenth of June Movement, an organization working to overthrow the Dominican dictator.¹⁶

The Fourteenth of June Movement

On June 14, 1959, troops from the Dominican Liberation Movement, which was made up of exiled Dominicans living abroad, were sent to the northern towns of Costanza Maimon to invade the Dominican Republic.¹⁷ This attempt was meant to topple the dictatorship; however, word had preceded events and Trujillo's army were waiting for the troops. Many of the men died during this revolution attempt and it played as the inspiration for the name of a political group organized for internal resistance. Manuel, Minerva's husband, was the president of the group. Leonardo, Maria Teresa's husband, was the treasurer. Therefore, the sisters had primary affiliation with the resistance. Many young middle class Dominicans were now opposing the regime and Trujillo proceeded to arrest them one by one to prevent a revolution. More than one hundred members of the movement were arrested, including Minerva, Maria Teresa, Manuel, Leonardo and Patria's husband and son, Pedro and Nelson. In doing this, Trujillo only ignited their will to fight against the harsh ruling of the dictatorship.

With their affiliation with the Fourteenth of June movement, the sisters were given a codename, Las Mariposas, meaning The Butterflies. This would be the

⁹ Ornes, 15

¹⁰ Crasweller, 112

¹¹ Crasweller, 71

¹² Maura Hanrahan, "Remembering the Butterflies." *Herizons* 19, no. 2 (2005): 12, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed October 7, 2016), Par. 2

¹³ Robinson, 5.

¹⁴ Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill), 2010.

¹⁵ Alvarez, chap 1.

¹⁶ Hanrahan, Par. 5.

¹⁷ Alvarez, *In the times of the Butterflies*.

name that they would be recognized by forever. The sisters did everything they could for the movement. Patria offered her home for meetings, while Minerva and Maria Teresa were actively involved in the planning of a revolution. They hid weapons in their home, and provided food and shelter for those who were running from the government, all out of regard for the future of the Dominican people.¹⁸ They were aware of the trouble and actively sought to fix it. However moral their actions were, it was still a man's world that they lived in. And when they stepped away from the womanly place in society, they found themselves regarded as more deviant than their male confidants.

Trujillo and women

Before there can be a discussion on why the Mirabal sister's gender was so influential to their death, there must be insight to Trujillo's thoughts and relationships with women. It is evident that the dictator strongly displayed characteristics pertaining to machismo. This is a conception that became dominant in the Latin American culture after it was colonized by the Spanish and the Portuguese.¹⁹ In his study, Nick Newman defines machismo as "a strong sense of masculine pride," or, "an exaggerated masculine identity."²⁰ Trujillo displays this characteristic in his journey to advance in society. He held himself assertively, showcasing an abundance of self-confidence, which ultimately allowed him to excel in the ranks of the military. He cared little about what people thought about him, which is why he had no problem taking the presidency away from Rafael Estrella Urena. He used people as tools to achieve his ambition for power. Yet the people he used most in his voyage to power were women, notably his wives. Because he used marriage as tools in societal advancement, it shows that Trujillo thought little about the emotions of women. By showing he had no consideration for the emotion of women, one can assume that he saw them as objects. Therefore, the assassination of three defenseless women was unproblematic to the dictator.

Trujillo's first marriage was in 1913 to a peasant girl named Amita.²¹ This was before he gained prestige in the military. After he gained his initial success, he realized that he needed connections to continue advancing. He was a strategic man and decided to set his sights on a marriage that would raise his social platform. He decided to divorce Amita in 1925, leaving her to raise their living daughter (their youngest daughter passed at a young age) alone. In 1927, he married Bienvenida Ricardo Martínez, a girl from

an elite Dominican family. Bienvenida was not the young beautiful women that Trujillo predominately surrounded himself with. She was a little overweight and held a stern smile. However, she was a dedicated wife and stood by her husband in his rise to the presidency.²² He believed that being married to a peasant girl would not award him prestige and elite status, something that worked tremendously to achieve. The fact that he was willing to leave his first wife, a woman whom he had already started a family with, shows that he was willing to use women to his advantage in his pursuit of power.

Even though Bienvenida was an honorable wife and stood by her husband's side, he would eventually divorce her for his mistress whom he would be married to until his death.²³ Since he openly had mistresses and constantly displayed his likings for the female community, it suggests that he had hardly any feelings, let alone respect, for Bienvenida. In the book "The Dictator Next Door" author Eric Rooda references a close friend of the Trujillo's, stating that when it came to choosing who would accompany him to social events it "was always a big to do because he had umpteen mistresses..."²⁴ He had numerous mistresses and cared little on how this presented his wife. He was more concerned with her elite family. Because he used marriage as a tool to ascend in power, it can be assumed that Trujillo had little respect for women. By refuting the emotions of the women he married, he turned them into objects. Therefore, when he made the decision to murder the Mirabal sisters, he was not seeing three women but just three things that were standing in his way of ultimate power.

Not only do his relationships with his wives show that he had little respect for woman, but his inclination towards the female community suggests that he held a sense of entitlement that accelerated his manhood. In a Stanford article, it is stated that, according to machismo, men have an unrestrained sexual appetite and they see it as their right to satisfy that craving however they chose.²⁵ These descriptions also compare to the way Trujillo reacted and felt about women; he saw them as a tool in getting what he desired. It was well known among the Dominican people that Trujillo had a taste for young women. His appetite for young women was something legendary on the island. In her article about the regime, Dominican Republic historian Nancy Robinson states, "families in the Dominican Republic used to hide their daughters when Trujillo was visiting their areas, for if one of these girls was seen and caught the eye of the dictator, there was no way of refusing

¹⁸ Alvarez, *In the times of the Butterflies*.

¹⁹ Newman, Nick. "Machismo: A Cultural Barrier to Learning." Young Latino Males: An American Dilemma. Accessed 2016. <http://cronkite.zine.asu.edu/latinomales/machismo.html>, 1.

²⁰ Newman, 3.

²¹ Crasweller, 212.

²² Crasweller, 212.

²³ Crasweller, 212.

²⁴ Eric Paul Rooda, *The Dictator Next Door The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2012, 163.

²⁵ "Machismo Sexual Identity." Stanford. Accessed 2016.

http://web.stanford.edu/libproxy.csustan.edu/group/womenscourage/Reporto_Latin/ekobash_HIVmachismo_Latin.html.

the invitations that were later delivered by messenger.”²⁶ This desire for women resulted in numerous extra-marital affairs. This also demonstrates the dictator’s thoughts on women. They were objects to be used for his pleasure and greed. A beautiful woman was only meant to please him. A beautiful woman was not supposed to have a mind of revolutionary ideas, something that Minerva Mirabal broadcast so eagerly. When three beautiful women advocated for the downfall of his power, it was something that Trujillo was not accustomed to. The macho man was supposed to be irresistible to the ill minded woman. Therefore, when one of the sisters rejected his advances, it would be a bruise to his ego.

On October 12, 1949, Trujillo held a party at his mansion in San Cristobal.²⁷ It was in commemoration of Columbus’ discovery of the Americas. The Mirabal’s invitation was personally delivered to them by the mayor of their hometown. Therefore, they felt that they had a duty to attend, even though they did not want to. Enrique Mirabal, Patria, Pedro, Minerva, Dede and Jaimito went to the social gathering. Trujillo used this event to execute his plan of seducing Minerva. He had previously seen her in a school play and from then on set his eyes on bedding her. However, she rejected him, something few women had ever done. Fearful that they would get reprimanded for Minerva’s disobedience the family sought to escape.²⁸ The outdoor party was interrupted by a storm, and that is when the Mirabal’s took the opportunity to leave the party unnoticed. Trujillo took this as a lack of respect, because all citizens were supposed to worship him and it was ill-mannered to leave his presence. This would ultimately start a war between the Mirabal family and the dictator, where he would arrest them and they would work more diligently at a revolution. Whatever the case may be, Minerva’s rejection hurt his manhood, something that was based on his ability to easily seduce women.

By rejecting his advances, Minerva struck the dictator’s ego. It was rare that women refused his advances. There was a fear that if they did reject him, then either they or their family would be punished. Because Trujillo had a firm ideology on the placement of women and his strong machismo characteristics, one can assume that being turned down by Minerva struck a nerve with him. These women were blatantly opposing him, speaking out against his authority. A macho man was not one that was disrespected by women. Being a man that was filled with machismo, to bruise his masculinity by rejecting him would be like disrespecting his power. Therefore, Trujillo found it necessary to place them as his number one concern.

A culture with a strong sense of machismo amongst its male population has rigid gender roles. Because women are traditionally associated with having attributes that are

nurturing and moral, they have been subjugated to duties of rearing the children and conducting household chores.²⁹ Whereas, through the conception of machismo, men are strong and assertive. Thus, the male is the “man of the house”. Although there are women in Latin American history that break free from the shackles that are produced by gender roles, it is, however, a rarity and often frowned upon. Therefore, when women were the faces of resistance it did not sit well with the dictator.

The Mirabal sisters acted in such a way that contradicted traditional gender roles. Minerva and Maria Teresa were educated and showed little trouble with speaking their minds. In 1960, they both were arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for “threatening the security of the state.”³⁰ These were not women who sat in their house and silently cared for their home. They were actively involved and as a result defied gender roles. Not only this, but they were educated. Minerva and Maria Teresa both had degrees in higher education.³¹ Their education offered them a liberal perspective of life. By being active in the revolution, they defied the role of subdue housewife and presented a more modern woman. Since Trujillo possessed characteristics of machismo, one can assume that he did not approve of these women brazenly attacked him head on. Because the Mirabal sisters represented a shift in gender norms and opened the doors for the future women to resist patriarchy, it bruised Trujillo’s machismo, thus making the sisters his number one concern.

Conclusion

In no other murder ordered by Trujillo were there women that were specifically targeted alone. Also, the sisters’ husbands were more involved in the resistance than they were, yet Trujillo spared their lives. Therefore, the Mirabal sisters’ murder did not take place merely to get rid of those defying the government, but it was motivated by the challenging behaviors the women displayed. They contradicted traditional gender roles, hindering the beliefs that were firm in machismo. These were women who rejected the common belief that women were to be submissive and only care for the house. Minerva bruised Trujillo’s ego by rejecting his advanced. In turn, the sisters again rejected the ideals of machismo because a woman was intended to ease a macho man’s sexual need. Moreover, it did not prove hard for Trujillo to murder three defenseless women because he saw women as objects, caring little for their emotions. This shows in the relationships he held with his wives and how he used his wives for social status, showing little concern for the emotions of the women he married. His overall treatment of women, regarding his

²⁶ Robinson, 2.

²⁷ Nunez, “The Dominican Republic”.

²⁸ Robinson, 2.

²⁹ “Machismo Sexual Identity.”

³⁰ Nunez, “The Dominican Republic.”

³¹ Hanrahan, par 3.

sexual appetite, also dictated that he saw women as mere objects. He used most of the young Dominican women for sexual satisfaction. They were for his own needs. By following the machismo conception, Trujillo's motivation to ordering the assassination of the Mirabal sisters revolved more around the fact that they were women rather than the fact that they were deviants of the government.

It is the beauty of the butterfly that attracts a person to touch its wings, something that ultimately harms the insect. It was the bravery that the Mirabal sisters had mixed with

their beauty that hastened their deaths. Their resistance towards a government that was repressive to its citizens was something to be admired. Although they are not well-known figures in history by many people, the date of their death lives on as the International Day Against Violence of Women, and is commemorated worldwide. They displayed courage and made a valiant effort at bettering the lives of their fellow Dominicans. By rejecting traditional gender roles and resisting the oppressing authority, the Mirabals proved to be role models women everywhere.

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