INTIMATE VIOLATIONS:
Women and the Ajusticiamiento of Dictator Rafael Trujillo, 1944–1961

The foundation of social order, the primary essence and basic nucleus of every political organization, rests in the family, without whose stable and healthy development, the prosperity of the nation is impossible.1

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina

On the afternoon of August 10, 1959, several dozen Dominican and Cuban women gathered in the streets of Havana.2 Dressed in black as though headed to a funeral, they mourned the political situation in the neighboring Dominican Republic. Specifically, they targeted the dictator Rafael Trujillo, calling him the “Jackal of the Caribbean.” As they paraded through the streets carrying placards and visiting newspaper offices, they were focusing attention on their specific struggles as women and mothers. Their posters read, “Dominican Women Support the Revolutionary Government”; “We Ask for the Expulsion of Trujillo from the OAS”; and “We Represent the Mourning of the Assassinations Committed by Trujillo.” They told the Cuban newspaper

The author wishes to thank the many people who read this article and offered suggestions: Thomas Adams, Guadalupe Garcia, Elizabeth McMahon, Drew Chastain, Jason Bernsten, Elizabeth Hammer, Wendy Gaudin, Leslie Richardson, and Meg Osterbur; the members of the Seminar for Historical Change and Social Theory at Tulane University, especially Justin Wolfe for being such an amazing mentor; my colleagues at Xavier University of Louisiana; the editors and anonymous reviewers of The Americas; and Neici Zeller for helping me to poner un grano de arena for gender history in the Dominican Republic. And, of course, the strong and incredible women of the resistance.


2. Justino José del Orbe, Del exilio politico dominicano antitrujillista en Cuba (Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1983); pp. 145–152. Del Orbe chronicles the event through a series of clippings and photographs taken from several Cuban newspapers. An Información report noted that participants included Carmen Negret, Petronila Gómez, Altgracia del Orbe (the author’s wife), Lupe Luciano, Olimpia Vera, Carmen de Lara, María del Rey, Migdalia Díaz, Yolanda Pulido, Ada Daniel, Elsa Zurita, Elena Quintero, Mercedes Quintero, and Saski Prus. Hoy added Matilde Daniel and Marta Duque to the list of women.
Información that their gestures symbolized “the mourning of our beloved Dominican people, every day more oppressed, humiliated, and enslaved by the crimes committed by the tyrannous regime of Rafael Trujillo.” At once internationally savvy and domestically focused, these women were central to the resistance movement that developed over the three-decade dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Drawing on the regime’s own maternalist discourse of the nation-as-family, these female resister-activists consistently pointed out the failures of “the Jackal” to protect women, children, and the Dominican home. Indeed, their militancy was essential to the termination of the regime.

The story of the fall of the 31-year regime has been told almost exclusively through the eyes of its male protagonists. As the most visible members of the resistance that led to Trujillo’s ajusticiamiento (execution), Dominican men have taken near-exclusive discursive possession of the last years of the infamous dictatorship, with one major exception—the martyred Mirabal sisters. However, women were far from absent from the larger narrative of political transition that led up to the Trujillo assassination on May 30, 1961. Dominican female activists demonstrated that the promises made by the leader—to protect the traditional family and national morality—were not only dubious, but that through the direct violations of the regime their homes and loved ones were being evermore trampled upon. In an altered reflection of the regime’s own gendered framework, these women demonstrated their skill in political engagement and established an ideological formulation grounded in their specifically maternal contributions to civic life in

3. Examples range from U.S. journalistic accounts to Dominican histories and participant memoirs. For the former, see Bernard Diederich, Trujillo: The Death of the Dictator (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000); and John Bartlow Martin, Overtaken by Events: The Dominican Crisis from the Fall of Trujillo to the Civil War (New York: Doubleday, 1966). For Dominican historical accounts of these years, see Roberto Cassá, Los orígenes del Movimiento 14 de Junio. La izquierda dominicana I (Santo Domingo: Editora Universitaria, 1999); Emilio Cordero Michel, “Las expediciones de Junio de 1959,” Estudios Sociales 25:88 (April-June 1992), pp. 35–63; and Bernardo Vega, Los Estados Unidos y Trujillo. Los ñiñes finales: 1960–1961 (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1999). For memoirs, see Juan J. Cruz Segura, Bajo la barbarie. La Juventud Demócrata clandestina (1947–1959): testimonio de un protagonista (Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1997); and del Orbe, Del exilio político, although the last-cited does include some evidence of female activism on the part of his wife, Altagracia.

4. Ajusticiamiento is directly translated as execution or death penalty, although it also connotes a sense of “bringing to justice” and is used by Dominicans to refer to the assassination of Trujillo.

5. Several important exceptions include Carolina Mainardi Vda. Cuello’s memoir Vivencias (Santo Domingo: Editora Manati, 2000); and Grey Coiscou Guzmán’s collection of oral testimonies titled Testimonios. La simiente convulsa. Tomo I (Santo Domingo: Editora Búho, 2002) and Testimonios. La garvilla luminosa. Tomo II (Santo Domingo, Editora Búho, 2002). Alfonso Perozo and Delta Soto have also published memoirs that touch on their roles in the resistance movement: Perozo, Los Perozo: su extermino por la dictadura de Trujillo (Santo Domingo: Editora Centenario, 2002); and Soto, Vivencias de una revolucionaria (Santo Domingo: Editora Universitaria, 2004). In addition, several authors have published works that discuss the lives of the important female resistance activists Minerva Mirabal and Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla.
the Dominican Republic, contributions that persisted well beyond the demise of the infamous leader.

For many Dominicans, the assassination of Minerva, María Teresa, and Patria Mirabal in 1960 stands as the beginning of the end for the Trujillo dictatorship, yet the extant scholarship on the regime fails to fully interrogate this fact. This article argues that the murder of the three women activists was the breaking point of the 30-year regime precisely because it challenged deeply embedded beliefs of what the regime, even at very minimum, could do for the Dominican people. Not simply because it was enacted on supposedly “weak” or “defenseless” women and because it was a tremendously shocking action even for Trujillo, the assassination of the Mirabals exposed the regime’s failure to protect the sanctity of the home, embodied symbolically by women and women as mothers. As a result, it was an assault on Dominican national morality.

Moreover, while it is readily acknowledged that the assassination marked a significant turning point in Dominican history, the idea that women other than the Mirabal sisters participated in the resistance movement is only beginning to enter into the Dominican narrative. As Myrna Herrera Mora points out in her recent study, many women were actively and valiantly involved in the revolutionary movements of the 1940s and 1950s. This article expands the narrative beyond the three martyred Mirabal sisters to highlight how women’s activism, operating through local, national, and international channels and engaging the gendered discourse of conservative politics, is central to the toppling of authoritarian leaders. The historiography of the resistance generally ignores the contributions of women, and the martyrdom of the Mirabal sisters less than a year before the regime’s dissolution further obscures the contributions of Dominican women to the end of the dictatorship. Yet in reality, as Trujillo in effect “created” broken homes and orphans, women more readily entered the movement as engaged resisters, and Dominican society mobilized around these very intimate violations committed by the regime. Though the fall of the Trujillo

6. Myrna Herrera Mora, Mujeres dominicanas, 1930–1961: anti-trujillistas y exiliadas en Puerto Rico (San Juan: Isla Negra, 2008). As noted above, there are a number of smaller-scale studies that address Minerva Mirabal and her sisters, as well as Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla; however, scholars tend to treat the women as exceptions rather than as part of a larger trend.

7. Lauren Derby refers to the regime’s iconography of women in her recent manuscript. On the one hand were the beautiful young women that Trujillo exploited to demonstrate his sexual prowess, and on the other were the less visible yet highly accomplished political figures like Isabel Mayer or Minerva Bernardo. See The Dictator’s Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); pp. 109–134. April Mayes refers to the latter as “Hispanic womanhood,” a formulation employed by both regime supporters and dissenters in pursuit of their political ends. See “Why Dominican Feminism Moved to the Right: Class, Colour and Women’s Activism in the Dominican Republic, 1880s to 1940s,” Gender and History 20:8 (August 2008), pp. 349–371.
regime was a complex process indebted to multiple forces, one of the most significant and little-noted factors lies in the resistance movement’s ability to highlight the regime’s failure to maintain its promised link between “traditional” family values and national unity—and with the women who so vociferously made that failure part of the public debate.

By narrating the involvement of women at several distinct stages of the resistance, this article demonstrates how the maintenance of certain traditional, gendered ideals framed the terms of the debate about the dictatorship and its speculative and actual end. Rather than employ the typical male-dominated periodization of the resistance, this article engages the narrative of the movement in a different way: by focusing on three roughly chronological stages in women activists’ mobilization of gender to protest the Trujillo dictatorship. First addressing the role of the Trujillo regime in creating a maternalist discourse, the article then details the history of women in the resistance movement as it developed on the island between 1942 and 1950, a period in which women sought to debunk the regime’s own argument that it alone was best suited to defend the traditional home and family. As the regime’s pressures on the island mounted and the resistance transitioned into exile, women emphasized increasingly the need to bear witness as women against the abuses of the regime; thus the article focuses next on female activism in exile between the mid-1940s and 1960. Drawing on a legacy of feminine political engagement at both the national and international level, these female resistance activists knew that claims against the dictator needed to be made before both domestic and inter-American audiences and to focus on the home and family.

Finally, as tensions on the island increased and international attention to the Dominican situation grew during the mid-1950s, some of the most intense resistance again developed at home. Many women who had not been forced into exile continued or renewed their commitment to revolutionary opposition work, while demonstrating a parallel dedication to defending the dignity of the mother and the family. These demands to protect women, wives, girlfriends, and children proved essential to the final push in the anti-Trujillo campaign. In sum, the article argues for the importance of widening the historical narrative to explain both the regime’s demise and the rise of post-Trujillo feminist politics, two forces that accepted women into the political fold yet held tightly to traditional formulations of female participation.

**Origins of Maternalist Resistance in the Trujillato**

The use of maternalism to scaffold conservative regimes is far from new, and as Victoria González and Margaret Power point out in their respective research on
Nicaragua and Chile, Latin American authoritarian regimes actively recruited women to solidify a number of crucial “mother-centric” national projects in the early to middle twentieth century. The engagement of women in the public arena of politics through programs aimed at assisting children and families was a tactic of the Trujillato and other Latin American regimes and often led to suffrage and various concrete goals established by feminist movements. Unsurprisingly, from its earliest years, the Trujillo machinery dedicated significant effort to promoting and expanding the stable home and family through these programs, and they enlisted women to do much of the heavy labor.

Coming to power through a military coup in 1930, Trujillo quickly recognized the strength of organized elite women. He sought their allegiance by formally

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acknowledging their fledgling feminist group Acción Feminista Dominicana and then by granting women full suffrage in 1942. Shortly thereafter, the regime began employing legions of women in the work of social assistance, meant to further solidify the clientelistic nature of the regime. Dispersing newly minted female members of the Women’s Branch of the Dominican Party to volunteer in schools, hospitals, and similar public venues, Trujillo sought to reinforce the idea, both at home and abroad, that the regime was in the business of protecting the traditional family and honoring women’s primarily maternal role. The party even gave out awards to women who had 11 or more children. As “Father of the New Nation,” Trujillo established himself as the protective father of a re-envisioned Dominican nation, and drew on female support to scaffold the nurturing and reproductive elements of the state.

Scholars of right-wing women debate the benefits of maternalist policies for feminism and even for the state, and they astutely point out that each conservative regime has its own intricately formulated gendered ideals. In the case of the Dominican Republic, women worked to protect traditional values, but their political efforts were, in many ways, unprecedented. As a result, the regime and its feministas trujillistas opened, perhaps inadvertently, doors to women’s engagement with the state. Notwithstanding, while the regime touted its egalitarian practices of gender inclusion and other demonstrations of fair and democratic leadership, it manipulated elections, obstructed civil liberties, and generally behaved as a totalitarian state.

Not all women chose to support what the regime put forth as its “democratic” principles and traditional values. Resisting the conflation of dictatorial leadership and apparent democratic practice, many women became involved in the anti-Trujillo movement. While their politicization owed much to the conservative maneuverings of their female counterparts within the regime, their conclu-

12. For a comprehensive evaluation of the regime’s clientalistic nature, see Turits, Foundations of Despotism.
14. See particularly the essays in Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World, Paola Bachetta and Margaret Power, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002).
15. Two studies that focus nearly exclusively on the terror imposed by the regime are Galindez, The Era of Trujillo; and Robert D. Crassweller, Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator (New York: Macmillan, 1966).
sions about democracy and the ability of the state to protect family life landed them in an entirely separate camp. Moreover, they drew on a solid foundation of earlier female resistance, as historians of the U.S. occupation of the island (1916–1924) document. Many women found their Trujillista compatriots’ avid support of a violent dictatorial regime increasingly untenable. Through underground activism fomented at the local and university levels, they joined a campaign that would position women as key actors in the anti-dictatorial movement. They turned to the growing underground resistance as a way to channel their displeasure and found ways to employ the regime’s own defense of the stable family and democracy to make their claims.

As has been well documented, particularly in the cases of Argentina and El Salvador, women have used their roles as mothers and grandmothers to protest government-sponsored kidnappings, disappearances, and murders. Moreover, as Maxine Molyneux points out, there is a considerable literature addressing the roles of women in ending Latin American military dictatorships in the 1970s, particularly the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Much of this activism drew on an established idea of women as the moralizing force of the nation. Diana Taylor argues that the Mothers made “conscious use of the socially sanctioned role of motherhood for political ends,” with those political ends being both “a bid for political recognition” and the confrontation of the military regime. Bringing the “private” into the public sphere was central to these movements, and earlier examples from the region demonstrate other instances of women participating in the dismantling of authoritarian leadership. Elisabeth Friedman argues that, in the case of Venezuelan opposition to dictator Pérez-Jiménez in the late 1950s, women successfully infiltrated the movement by serving as

16. While the generational shift of the resistance movement is significant and has been touched upon by Roberto Cassá, it is beyond the scope of this article. Still, it is worth noting that Alfonsina Perozo, who lived through the period, commented in her memoirs that by the last decade of the regime, “[l]os sectores de la sociedad dominicana, especialmente la juventud, no podían soportar más la opresión del regimen (all sectors of Dominican society, particularly the youth, could no longer endure the oppression of the regime).” Future studies are needed to address the gender component of this shift, as well as the motivations of these new actors in choosing to protest a violent dictatorship. See Perozo, Los Perozo, p. 146; and Cassá, Los orígenes, pp. 41–46. For similar references to the role of generation in mobilization, see Joe Foweraker, Theorizing Social Movements (Boulder: Pluto Press, 1995), p. 53; and De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, p. 13.


“nonpolitical” actors and engaging their connections to the private sphere. She notes that violence committed against women by the Venezuelan dictatorship, as in the Dominican Republic, served as a final straw in the collapse of the regime. Clearly, across time and space, women have been active in resistance movements not simply as guerilleras, but also through less obvious and perhaps more ideologically damaging practices.

“Putting women back into the story” and explaining how the violation of traditional gender norms served as breaking points for oppressive regimes are important goals, yet the scholarship on gender and authoritarian regimes has expanded into new areas. As the Dominican case illustrates, female resistance activists undertook highly politicized actions and in formulating an argument against the dictatorship, directly engaged the regime’s own maternalist discourse. This study draws on social-movement theories that demonstrate certain groups’ abilities to engage the hegemonic ideals of the state. As Susan Stokes argues in her study of urban protest in Peru, “the weak” may see through a dominant ideology, but “still find it expedient to appeal ‘explicitly and verbally’ to its principles, “because it is in their strategic interest to do so.” Joe Foweraker cites Chile and Argentina, where military regimes, violating their own Christian moral values, indirectly mobilized women to confront the state. In Chile, for example, despite a pattern of conservative female voting, a majority of women voted against the continuation of the dictatorship. Moreover, such social mobilization has often led to the institutionalizing of both conservative and liberal groups and their particular rights discourses, as was the case with women in the Dominican Republic. The post-dictatorship would yield a high level of female involvement in the public arena of politics, without a concurrent transformation in the traditional gender structures of society.

REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN AND THE ANTI-TRUJILLO MOVEMENT, 1944–1950

An examination of women’s activism in the earliest years of the resistance movement demonstrates that their revolutionary engagement found acceptance among many because it did not upend the traditional gender roles of mother,

22. Stokes goes on to argue that “[t]he Peruvian state’s insistence on the self-reliance of poor communities over the years may ironically have helped lay the groundwork for a more assertive and demanding popular culture.” Susan Stokes, Cultures in Conflict: Social Movements and the State in Peru (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); pp. 8, 127.
23. Foweraker, Theorizing Social Movements, pp. 74, 110.
wife, and daughter; rather, early female resisters argued that the only way to preserve these formulations was through the termination of the rapacious regime of Rafael Trujillo. Given the growing presence of women at the universities of the region in the 1940s, several key female activists began clandestinely encouraging others to protest the increasingly violent tactics of the regime.24 The group was predominantly middle- to upper-class, educated, and from a few key urban areas across the country. They utilized the democratic opening afforded by World War II to mobilize, and came to serve as the inspiration for a larger group of women who would become the vanguard of the protest movement as it moved into the 1950s and 1960s.25 The efforts of these women were foundational to the movement as it grew, and they conveyed the avenues to political participation available to women through the consistent defense of the stable home and family.

Grey Coiscou Guzmán, a young child in the 1940s, documented her mother Rita Violeta Guzmán Gonnell’s memories from the winter of 1944, and her words bring out the idea that women had come to revolutionary stances out of their anguish over destroyed families.26 She noted that “the resistance [movement] against the tyranny became more intense with the increase in losses of human lives. In many homes, as much in the interior of the country as in the capital, mourning shrouded the bodies of mothers, wives, and children of those opposed to the regime.”27

Coiscou Guzmán’s study, in providing the testimony of a self-proclaimed “loyal witness,” contributes to the efforts to reconstruct a movement that, at the time, was meant to go unrecorded or at least undetected. Though most of the voices are male, the tales of a few women do come through, proving if nothing else that the Mirabal sisters were not the only female figures in the struggle to end the dictatorship. However, what the quote from Guzmán Gonnell so pointedly illustrates is that women within the movement engaged in discussions of familial destruction as the primary justification for resistance to the regime.

Although Coiscou Guzmán talks little about her own involvement in the resistance, the work of a woman named Josefina Padilla illustrates the role of women in pushing the regime’s rhetoric in service of revolutionary change. Padilla, a

27. Ibid., p. 4.
young woman from Santiago, enrolled at the University of Santo Domingo in 1943, which afforded her the opportunity to make contact with other young adults in opposition to the dictatorship. The year was propitious, as 1943 was also the year the Partido Demócrata Revolucionario Dominicano (PDRD; later the Partido Socialista Popular, or PSP) formed in Santo Domingo (then Ciudad Trujillo) and assumed its closed Marxist-Leninist ranks. As a result, Padilla found herself amid many young adults who were questioning the existing state structure and authority and refusing to abide by the current single-party system.

The year following her enrollment at the university, Josefina Padilla joined the recently formed and clandestine Juventud Revolucionaria, initially the youth wing of the PDRD and the driving force behind the youth resistance movement. She remembers that it was a fellow student in medicine, Bolívar Kunhardt, who introduced her to the group, which she described as a “movement of youth trying to raise consciousness about the reality of the dictatorship” and attempting to inculcate their fellow students with the idea that there were other elements—“liberty, democracy, human rights”—essential to genuine national leadership. She called it “an educational process,” in reference its search for both alternatives to dictatorship and ways to fight it. The group organized in secret into three-person cells, until the regime offered a brief window for legal opposition in August 1946. The group’s first documented collective activity was the distribution of pamphlets at the Congreso Internacional de Juventudes during Trujillo’s grand celebration of the nation’s centennial in 1944. The group continued to distribute information, although participation in such actions was still a large risk.

The small window created by the regime for political opposition in 1946 was a result of World War II. Global pressure for democratic governance reached even the smallest countries in Latin America, particularly those under the watchful eye of U.S. politicians. Trujillo, according to Padilla, “wanted to appear democratic,” and the quickest way to win that recognition was to publicly proclaim openness to opposing parties. The Juventud Revolucionaria wanted to call the

28. Cassá, Los orígenes, p. 78.
29. The Partido Dominicano, run by Virgilio Álvarez Pina, was the nation’s only legal party.
31. This period coincides with female suffrage and in many ways demonstrates the regime’s larger international show of democracy and transparency.
regime’s bluff, to demonstrate publicly that its discourse of democracy and stability—paraded around by Trujillo’s female supporters particularly—was devoid of substance. When Juventud Revolucionaria was given legal status in 1946, Padilla was the sole woman on its central committee.

Upon this legal reorganization in October, members of the group, newly renamed Juventud Democrática declared themselves to be “neither communist nor anticommunist” and professed commitment to the struggle for democratic principles. Padilla argued that her 11 co-leaders “in no way marginalized her [from the organization]” and noted that there were a number of active women in other parts of the country including Santiago and La Vega. 

Though hidden in the narrative much more deeply than were their male counterparts, women participated in the organization and growth of the Juventud Democrática in both its clandestine and legalized stages and centered their activities in familial circles and hometown networks. Moreover, while mention of their specific actions is limited, female participation did not go unnoticed by male activists.

33. Included, among others, were Gilda Pérez, Brunilda Soñé (who was head of her group in La Vega), Sobeya Mercedes Almonte, Edna Moore, Leila Pantaleón, and Dinorah and Ligia Echevarria.

34. Homes and local communities were essential to the movement in both phases and they provided a platform for female participation. For example, Ligia Echevarria Hernández and her sister Dinorah became involved in the movement through the activities of their brother Vinicio. According to memorialist Juan J. Cruz Segura, the home of the Echevarrias served as a sort of “center of the diffusion of revolutionary ideas.” See Cruz Segura, *Bajo la barbarie*, p. 29. Similar examples include Josefin Padilla’s sister Silvia, as well as Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla and her sister Carmen Julia who also lived in a home of opposition activities. In addition, women who hailed from the same hometown often found that ties of friendship drew them into the movement. Violeta Martínez, Ruth Fernández, and Lourdes Pichardo, all from the small but affluent town of Moca, formed a cell of the Juventud Democrática with Federico Pichardo. This connection of women is noted in an interview with Violeta Martínez in Mu-Kien Adriana Sang’s *Yo soy Minerva! Confecciones más allá de la vida y la muerte* (Santo Domingo: Amigo del Hogar, 2003), p. 53. Gilda Pérez y Pérez became part of the organizing committee in Santiago through several male friends. See Fundación de los Héroes de Constanza, Maimón y Estero Hondo, *Memorias de la lucha contra la tiranía* (Santo Domingo: Fundación de los Héroes de Constanza, Maimón y Estero Hondo, 1982), p. 38. Another large contingent of active women can be traced through connections they made at the Colegio Inmaculada Concepción in La Vega. Brunilda Soñé Pérez, Tomásina Cabral, Dulce Tejada, and Emma Rodríguez all shared connections through either the region generally or their school. *Memorias de la lucha contra la tiranía*, p. 48.

35. Activist Rafael Rodríguez Méndez heaps praise on the work of Josefina Padilla and Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla. In discussing an early Juventud Democrática meeting, another activist, Virgilio Díaz Grullón, mentioned Martínez Bonilla’s constant work, adding that it “was not possible to imagine what we would have done without her” or without her permanent example of commitment, values, and self-denial. Activist Juan Bautista Ducoudray Mansfield, attests that “while the JD was legal, there was one person who played an important role, from 1946 to 1947, and that person was Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla.” See Coiscou Guzmán, *Testimonios. La guayla luminosa*, pp. 106–107. In another article, Díaz Grullón called Martínez Bonilla “el alma presente” of the Juventud Democrática and argues that she was in the “center of it all,” offering her enthusiasm, constant work, and her “fé en el futuro democrático de nuestro pueblo (faith in the democratic future of our people).” The article appeared in a magazine dedicated entirely to Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla. Centro de Solaridad Para el Desarrollo de La Mujer, Inc. *Ambar 7: Revista de Mujeres 3:6-7* (November 1991-April 1992), p. 83.
Josefina Padilla and another young woman, Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla, assisted the movement through their editing and writing for several resistance newsletters, including *Juventud Democrática*, published bi-monthly between November 1946 and May 1947, and *El Popular*, also published between 1946 and 1947. Along with Padilla, Martínez Bonilla was one of the most active female participants in the early youth protest movement. Writing in the first edition of *Juventud Democrática*, Martínez Bonilla argued that it was the aspiration of every individual to work toward a representative government, and away from the current condition in which the "voice of the people—the voice of truth—constituted a moral threat to the force that oppressed it." She valorized the effort and hope implicit among Dominican youth to combat oppression and injustice. Padilla, in the second edition of the same publication, addressed Dominican women directly. She expressed her confidence that women would join the struggle for democracy, knowing that they too played a pivotal role in representative and just governance. Both Padilla and Martínez Bonilla spoke regularly at various meetings, exhorting women to join the fight to redeem the nation and regain its liberties, rights and sense of justice. The female activists connected Dominican women's unfulfilled needs and desires with the failures of the regime, while also expressing their personal dissatisfaction with the government for ignoring themselves and other women—the true *ciudadanas libres*.

Despite its self-proclamations of democratic governance and adherence to the reigning global opposition to fascism, the Trujillo regime quickly realized that its foray into political openness was leading to major disaster. Almost as abruptly as it had declared the legality of opposing parties, it changed course, punishing many of those political activists who had joined the movement. The regime immediately shuttered both public demonstrations, including pamphleteering and protest marches, and private organizing. Many individuals faced imprison-
ment, interrogation, and even torture. Others took the lonely route to exile. When the Trujillo regime ended its experiment in early summer 1947, Josefina Padilla chose a form of exile; after first seeking asylum in the Mexican embassy, she brokered an agreement with the Dominican government that forced her into nearly a year of house arrest and daily reporting to the Mexican embassy.

Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla and her family were also among the many who paid dearly for their involvement in the resistance. A series of letters, spanning several years of struggle for Martínez Bonilla and her family, attests not only to her tenacious opposition, constructed around a moral defense of her family’s dignity, but also to the particularly gendered framing of regime opposition. Beginning in 1946, the young woman wrote to the Dominican government protesting the regime’s unjust persecution of her family. The dispute, which would end in 1950 with the family’s exile to Puerto Rico, began with the expulsion of her brother Andrés from the Colegio La Salle for belonging to Juventud Democrática. Martínez Bonilla’s critiques were patently provocative from the beginning, despite her awareness of the repercussions that the regime visited upon dissenters. She demonstrated her awareness of the regime’s failure to live up to its promises to protect the Dominican family and maintain the nation’s moral rectitude. Although indirectly, Martínez Bonilla was clearly referencing the Trujillato’s motto, an acronym for Trujillo’s initials that appeared on nearly all its correspondence: “Rectitud, Libertad, Trabajo y Moralidad” (Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina). The national situation, she argued, prevented an honest man from dedicating himself solely to his studies. A decent person such as her brother could “not remain indifferent in the face of such abject villainy.” Unafraid of indicting the regime, she contended that his expulsion had exposed once again “the painful and tragic situation of this poor Dominican nation, forgotten by all, even those who claim to be the ministers of God and say they preach equality and love among men in His name.” Finally, in the same initial missive fired at the director of her brother’s school, Martínez Bonilla defended Juventud Democrática, calling it an organization “whose principles are to create better men for a better country, in support of our Constitution and within the most strict Christian moral codes.”

As the family’s situation deteriorated and Martínez Bonilla received no response to her initial letter, she chose to write directly to Trujillo. In her February 1947

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41. Exile groups published reports of the actions of the Dominican government widely. See the Frances R. Grant Collection (hereafter FRGC), Boxes 34, 37, 38, 43, and 61, Rutgers University.

42. All of the letters, minus the final one to the Mexican Embassy, can be found in a compilation of primary documents by Angela Hernández. Carmen Natalia Martínez, “Coraje y dignidad,” in Hernández, Pensantes, pp. 111–118; The final letter, signed by the entire family, is in Herrera, Mujeres dominicanas, pp. 218–221.
communication, she reiterated her concerns about Andrés and listed other injustices done to her father, another brother, and her sister. According to Martínez Bonilla, the national lottery had fired her brother José Antonio after two years of steady employment, and the Dominican telephone company had dismissed her father from his position. Her sister Carmen had been fired from her job at the Colegio Santa Teresita and her brother from a private company after 10 years of service, and the entire family had been evicted from their home. Her conclusion was that the family, unable to freely exercise “the basic right to work honestly and to live in a home—something to which all people aspire,” had no choice but to abandon the country. She politely but firmly requested passports for the entire family, citing Article 10 of the Dominican constitution, which proclaimed free transit for all citizens. Moreover, in choosing to write to the president himself, she implicitly cited the upper echelons of government as the originators of her family’s multiple problems and their ultimate inability to live and work “honestly” in their own nation.

The regime’s reply supported Martínez Bonilla’s assumption that Trujillo was papering over the reality that his administration protected only certain homes and families. The response was terse, explaining that the firings, because they had been undertaken by private businesses and the education system, fell under the purview of the Secretaries of Labor and Education, respectively. The eviction issue was the concern of the Ministry of Housing, and any requests for passports were to be directed to the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Finally, the regime denied all allegations of involvement in the issues facing the family and implied that the accusations against specific employees mentioned in Martínez Bonilla’s letter could be attributed only to wrongdoing on the part of her father at the Dominican telephone company. In her rebuttal, Martínez Bonilla stated what many knew but were afraid to voice: that is, while the stated officials should be responsible, it was ultimately the job of the president “to attend to the loyal execution of the laws.” As a parting shot, Martínez Bonilla reminded her reader that while the Ministry of Foreign Relations should be the department making decisions about her family’s passports, she well knew that it was “the President of the Republic himself who decides which persons will be permitted to leave Dominican territory.”

On March 10, 1947, Martínez Bonilla wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Relations to again request passports for her entire family. She repeated her previous reference to Article 10 of the constitution, which guaranteed Dominicans the right to travel as honest and respectful citizens. Apparently, regime officials

43. During this time all passports were held by the Dominican government and individuals and families had to request them for travel.
ignored the letter at the time. Correspondence from 1950 to the Mexican ambassador signed by the entire family indicated that the regime had not only denied their earlier requests, but escalated their persecution of the entire family, whom the Trujilllato had branded as “enemigos del Gobierno.” Finally, three years after Martínez Bonilla’s initial request, the regime grudgingly and seemingly under international diplomatic pressure, granted the family permission to leave. The Martínez Bonilla family headed to Puerto Rico where they joined a large group of exiles and remained for the next 10 years. These letters testify to the realities of the regime as it affected many women and their families, as well as the will among some women to stand up to the machinery of dictatorial rule. Never submissive, Martínez Bonilla refused to use the servile language expected in letters to the president. She understood the rights granted to Dominican citizens through the constitution and demanded nothing more than their full compliance for her family. Her experiences make it clear not only that individual lives and livelihoods were being threatened, but that the regime’s behavior tore at the fabric of the “moral” and “Christian” Dominican family.

Female dissidents and regime officials alike struggled with the discourse of gender, home, democracy, and morality. As Martínez Bonilla railed at the Trujillo regime, she expressed concerns about the sanctity of the Dominican home and family—in no way did she seek directly to subvert gender norms through her activism. Josefina Padilla indicated support of a similar status quo when she rejected the idea that feminism was in any way part of her activism at a young age. Rather, these women relied on the discourse of democracy, morality, basic human decency, and family in what each argued was an important—if futile—attempt to make the regime accountable to the Dominican home.

By the late 1940s, in response to the resistance movement, the regime began to push the boundaries of its own paternal protections; at the same time, it struggled to maintain its position as moral guardian. Officials were aware of the danger posed by the involvement of women in the resistance. Virgilio Álvarez Pina, president of the Partido Dominicano, the only state-sanctioned party, reminded Dominicans how Trujillo himself had transformed women into citizens. He warned women, particularly by writing in the newspaper La Nación, that the resistance groups were nothing more than a bunch of seditious communists and that individuals should guard against becoming victims of their “pernicious and dangerous” message.

44. Herrera, Mujeres dominicanas, pp. 218–221.
Josefina Padilla and Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla played instrumental roles in the development of a resistance movement during the early years of the Trujillo era, and their lives illustrate how women came to ally themselves with such dangerous political activism. Avenues created during the Trujillo regime, often as a result of its own efforts, brought greater numbers of women into higher education and encouraged a more active role for them in the public sphere.46 In addition, more women came to see possibilities for themselves within the political arena as resistance activists because they felt violated by the regime's claims of maternalism. Most importantly, Padilla and Martínez Bonilla demonstrate that while women took a stand against the regime, issues of gender were galvanizing points in the resistance movement for all participants. Nonetheless, along with many others in the late 1940s, they realized that the battle to restore the nation to a moral democracy would take much more time and retreated into exile, only to seek other avenues to resistance a short time later.

**WOMEN IN THE EXILE MOVEMENT: BEARING WITNESS TO AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE**

Arriving in Puerto Rico in 1950, Martínez Bonilla joined a growing group of women exiles who were active in efforts against Trujillo. By the mid-1940s, groups in Puerto Rico, New York, Venezuela, and Cuba were organizing to help bring an end to the dictatorship. Although a varied group, these women demonstrate a deepening connection to the use of gender and transnational networks in the debate over dictatorship. Drawing on the solidarity of other Latin American women through writing, radio speeches, public demonstrations, and marches, the Dominican exile population invoked women as the spiritual center of both the resistance and the hoped-for democratic future. The efforts of female exiles, along with those of their male compatriots and international supporters, scaffolded the most central critique posed by the resistance. In emphasizing Dominican women's “quiet and heroic sacrifice,” activists attacked directly Trujillo's inability to maintain the morality and dignity of the nation.

Exile groups began to consolidate nuclei of resistance across the Dominican diaspora as early as the 1940s, and they employed both periodicals and radio to highlight their particularly gendered national crisis. *Quisqueya Libre*, a Havana-based magazine of the Unión Democrática Antinazista Dominicana (later the Frente Unido de Liberación Dominicano) anchored by the regime's earliest dissidents, published a call to women in its first months of publication. In September 1944,

46. Hernández, *Emergencia del silencio*; Manley, “*Poner un grano de arena*”; and Zeller, “*The Appearance of All*.”
its editors argued that Dominican women were particularly well placed to actively support the resistance by focusing on the importance of the Dominican home and calling attention to the regime’s failures in “food, housing, health and public education.”47 The same issue included a reprint of an article by a Venezuelan female supporter titled “The Quiet and Heroic Sacrifice of the Dominican Woman.”48 In their introductory note, the editors argued that the author was “doing justice to the Dominican woman, who, in her silence, carried one of the most heroic battles against the treacherous barbarism” of the Trujillato. Carmen Clemente Travieso, identified as “the illustrious Venezuelan writer,” argued that Dominican women and mothers, while living a “horrible tragedy,” continued to maintain the dignity of the home despite their situation, all the while following the “spirit of struggle and sacrifice that animates all Dominican women.”

Similarly, the magazine reproduced the radio address of a Cuban female supporter who lamented the suffering of Dominican women. The first in a series of “voces femeninas” that would be broadcast weekly by Cuba’s Mil Diez radio, Graciela Heureaux de César’s speech called attention to the “cry of the mother . . . of the girlfriend, or the woman desperately facing the absence of her beloved.” Heureaux de César, announcing herself as the daughter of a Dominican, emphasized the urgency of women’s roles in the resistance and in the “reclaiming of public liberties,” clearly indicting the regime and its inability to protect even the most basic freedoms. Like her Venezuelan counterpart, Heureaux de César assured her listeners of the solidarity of Cuban women, a pool from which Dominican women could presumably draw strength in their time of crisis.

While Quisqueya Libre did not boast its own female contributors, its editors made sure to demonstrate the significance of women’s involvement in the resistance, both within the Dominican population and across the female population of the Americas. Reporting on a 1946 conference of women in the United States, the editors thanked the attendees on behalf of “the true Dominican woman who suffers the horrors of Trujillo.”49 While the women of the Dominican Republic purportedly suffered most the abuses of Trujillo, they could count on the support of an international audience of women, to whom they would continue to look through the 1950s for legitimization of their struggles. Dominican female activists, both directly and indirectly, requested that the women of the Americas pay attention to their particularly dire form of suffering.

47. Quisqueya Libre 1:7 (September 1944), p. 4.
48. Ibid., p. 7.
The work of Altagracia del Orbe demonstrates the tactics used by women in exile to reveal the true nature of the Trujillo regime to the world and to call on the assistance of the women of the hemisphere. Del Orbe, wife of the active resistance member Justino del Orbe, was not engaged in the opposition movement against Trujillo until she traveled to Cuba in 1952 to meet her husband, who had joined the Dominican labor movement in the 1940s and, after angering the regime, spent more than two years in prison. He had then fled to exile in Cuba. Upon joining her husband with her four children there, she “immediately” became involved in the opposition movement. As she remembers, “I got caught up in the struggle; I was a militant, and had a committee of Defense of the Revolution in my house.” According to her oral history, del Orbe was a pioneer in her anti-Trujillo struggles—her experiences as the wife and mother in a family classified as dissident had moved her to action. Despite an upbringing that had taught her that women were not political, del Orbe had been curious about her husband’s subversive activities even before they left the Dominican Republic. As she remembers, upon hearing their whisperings, “It interested me, I liked it, but I didn’t dare say I wanted to join the party (the Partido Socialista Popular).” Once settled in Cuba, del Orbe became very active in the organizing efforts of the group. She was frequently present among distinguished male leaders, usually as the only female attendee at weekly meetings, and she organized other women in the movement and encouraged them to defend the dignity of the nation’s mothers. The involvement of women like del Orbe illustrates the continuity of women’s involvement in the resistance and their deepening commitment to demonstrating the regime’s violation of its patriarchal protections.

One of the most visible roles of exile women was bearing witness through organized activities, and they did so before an international community, as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. Altagracia del Orbe addressed the abuses of the regime when she spoke out for female Dominican exiles in Cuba in an article titled “We Fight for the End of the Trujillo Regime.” Speaking for “Dominican women,” the author informed her readers that their common wish in commemoration of International Women’s Day could be nothing other than...
"to see our country free from the ferocious tyranny that has oppressed and bled it for more than 30 years." The female exiles called on the solidarity of Latin American nations in a common struggle against dictatorship and for democratic freedoms. Moreover, they highlighted the total lack of rights and freedoms available to the women who, unlike themselves, still labored under the dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. As mothers, they pointed out, these realities were even harder to bear. "As a mother," del Orbe wrote, "I wish for the triumph of peace from the bottom of my heart, and as a mother I am conscious that only peace will bring humanity the tranquility and well-being it desires." Expressing anxiety for children still in their native land, desire for the peace and well-being of their nation, and worry over the fate of other mothers like themselves, the female exiles in Cuba effectively put the Latin American community on notice that they would not stand by and ignore the situation in the Dominican Republic.

In Puerto Rico, public demonstrations by exile groups often included women, and women were similarly active in resistance groups in other countries where disaffected Dominicans lived. Several women joined a group of male exiles in 1950 to protest the Pan-American Union's decision to hold a World Health Organization conference in Ciudad Trujillo. Signatories of the open letter to the press included Martínez Bonilla and her sister, as well as a former Trujillo functionary living in exile, Carmita Landestoy. Upon her arrival in Puerto Rico, Martínez Bonilla also started writing for the publication Boletín, which was the voice of the Comité Puertorriqueño Pro Democracia Dominicana. Her first piece appeared on the front page of the June/July 1950 issue and was ominously titled "La democracia está en peligro inminente [Democracy is in Imminent Danger]." While she noted that it was not yet time to discuss why Trujillo chose to inflict suffering on Dominican women, it was time to realize that unless the forces of democracy stood up and found a way to overthrow the dictatorship, there might never be a guarantee of democracy. She continued to write in service of the opposition through the end of the regime, calling on her knowledge...
of history and contemporary conditions in the Dominican Republic to highlight the ways in which the Trujillato was destroying the nation and its citizens.

Increased involvement among women is evidenced by several successful attempts to create women’s branches of existing organizations, a move that supports the idea that female participants felt they had a distinct and essential perspective. While creating such branches had not been a practice of earlier resistance activists, organizers drew on the structure of the Partido Dominicano, which had a distinctive women’s branch. Early in 1959 Carolina Mainardi formed a Comité Femenino of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) in Puerto Rico, with another female activist. The two women circulated their letter of invitation throughout San Juan, encouraging Dominican and Puerto Rican women to join their struggle against the “dean of dictators of America” and follow the example of a similarly organized group of New York City exiles. The correspondence demonstrates the unique role women had constructed for themselves within the opposition. The organization, they stated, was comprised solely of “women who love liberty” and who were willing “to face the most immense sacrifices in order to liberate our sons, husbands, boyfriends, and colleagues” from the clutches of the Trujillato. They called on Puerto Rican women to join them in making America a “continent of liberty, justice, and equality.” Not only were female exiles demanding attention to a situation that violated the vaunted role of motherhood and the values of the traditional home, but they were also arguing that women were particularly obligated to sacrifice for the attainment of more just conditions.

In Cuba, Altagracia del Orbe headed a group of women who formed a female branch of their local resistance group, the Unión Patriótica Dominicana (UPD), and by September 1959 the Sección Femenina was actively seeking greater cooperation from fellow UPD members exiled in Puerto Rico. It is likely that this group’s membership grew significantly as a result of the participation of the husbands and children of female exiles in the June 1959 anti-Trujillo expedition of Constanza, Maimón y Estero Hondo. A letter from Dominga Montesinos dated January 3, 1960, requested membership status in the UPD based on her “condition as mother of a member of the Dominican Liberation Army.”

57. Reprinted in Herrera Mora, Mujeres dominicanas, p. 248. The other activist was Mercedes Borel.
58. Del Orbe, Del exilio político, p. 47. For more information on the invasions at Constanza, Maimón y Estero Hondo see Del Orbe, Del exilio político, as well as the information that appears on the website of the Fundación de los Héroes de Constanza, Maimón y Estero Hondo at http://museodelaresistencia.org/museo/federaciones/cmh.html (accessed July 13, 2010) and the Museo de la Resistencia main site at www.museodelaresistencia.org (accessed April 29, 2012). The expedition began on June 14, 1959, and lasted under a week. Word of the movement reached Trujillo in time for him to mobilize a counterattack, and the expeditionaries never received the support they thought they might in the countryside. Nearly all who had
August 1959 protest by the Sección Femenina in Havana attests to their strength as a collective. Numerous newspapers covered their demonstration with pictures and short articles, and their public presence dressed in black demanded international attention to the egregious crimes committed against mothers by the “Jackal of the Caribbean.” In addition to demanding change in Santo Domingo and garnering support from their Cuban compatriots, they expressed solidarity with fellow exiles in New York, who undertook a hunger strike in protest of the regime’s crimes. Thus their presence as political mourners drew attention not only to the dictatorship but also to its direct attack on women and families.

In Cuba in 1959, the wives of the June expeditionaries and members of the Sección Femenina of the UPD wrote an open letter to Fidel Castro that was printed in the daily newspaper Hoy. The female writers of the letter hinted that Castro had decided to turn his back on the June expedition and that blame for its failure was in large part his, yet they then insistently denied “such slanderous accusations.” They affirmed their faith in Castro as “a great democrat, friend of the Dominican people, and enemy of tyranny wherever it might be found.” Despite the somewhat obsequious opening, the writers got straight to the point in the second half of their letter. Their immediate goal was obtaining weapons. They appealed to Castro’s known support for social revolution and liberation, expressing confidence that as a “true revolutionary” he could not but throw his support behind their continued struggle against the dictatorship. The women of the UPD also used the letter to call on the support of their Latin American sisters as yet another resource in their cause, as well as to gain the attention of North American diplomats.

Less well-known than Castro but a prominent North American political actor nonetheless, Frances R. Grant also received correspondence from Dominican women. In one particularly long, poetic letter, the unidentified female author headed out from Cuba (one boat had to turn back) were killed, or arrested and then killed. The resistance movement that grew in Santo Domingo subsequent to the failed attempt took the name of the July 14th movement in honor of the effort.

60. Hoy, September 1959 (Havana), cited in Del Orbe, Del exilio político, pp. 93-94.
61. Justino del Orbe mentions briefly the Congreso Latinoamericano de Mujeres that was held from October 9-12, 1959, and includes a letter signed by attendees. Although he gives little background on the event, the appeal to “hermanas de América Latina” written by event attendees and reproduced in his book was signed by several active female Dominican exiles, including Altagracia del Orbe and Graciela Heureaux. Justino del Orbe, Del exilio político, pp. 94-96, 153-154. The appeal to brothers and sisters in Latin American was not a technique used exclusively by women. Del Orbe notes the March 1960 Semana de Solidaridad in which activists from various Latin American countries gathered to protest the oppressive conditions existing in their native lands. Del Orbe, Del exilio político, pp. 98-101, 133.
nearly begged Grant, who was then president of the Pan-American Women’s Association and active in the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom, to intervene on behalf of the beleaguered Dominican Republic.62 “I need a channel, a North American channel,” she wrote, adding that she wished only “to prevent bloodshed in Santo D[omingo]” and that “Trujillo must fall.” Through as many channels as they could find, female activists sought attention to both the crimes of Trujillo, but also to their suffering as women.

As the stakes grew higher, female exiles continued working to protect their specific rights as women and mothers. In New York City in early 1960, over 200 Dominican exiles went directly to the office of Dominican consul Luis Mercado to protest against the dictator.63 Officials allowed only 75 women to picket, and when a five-woman delegation entered the building, Mercado refused to see them. The women had brought with them a list of all individuals incarcerated by the regime and requested that the consul deliver it to the Dominican Republic, and they asked specifically for information on their incarcerated children and husbands. The New York Times reported that in the end the list was left “with some minor employee at the consul’s office.”64

To Martínez Bonilla’s constant resistance publications and to the frequent speeches of theater director and actress Maricusa Ornes, another Trujillo dissident added her voice in protest. Carmita Landestoy, exiled in 1945 after nearly a decade in service to Trujillo’s Women’s Party and a signer of the letter protesting the 1950 World Health Organization conference in Ciudad Trujillo, published a scathing indictment of the regime titled ¡Yo tambien acuso!65 In it, she detailed the many abuses of the regime, particularly in reference to its purported claims to have given women full and equal rights as citizens. Calling it a “strange paradox,” she argued that once the regime had officially granted women their civil liberties, they ironically “no longer had the right to either express or write anything approaching the truth, nor to broach any fundamental issues.”66 Having been a vocal proponent of Trujillo’s maternalist policies, her claim that the regime denied all means of women’s expression argued strongly for the significant disjuncture between official policy and reality for the Dominican public.

In the documents illustrating female engagement with the antitrujillista movement in exile, an appeal to Latin American women as empathetic mothers and

62. FRGC, Box 43, Folder 27. She identifies herself as the wife of Movimiento de Liberación Dominicano leader Alfonso Canto.
64. Ibid.
66. Ibid., p. 130.
wives is the trope most frequently found. As a call to female exiles to unite in their struggles against dictatorship generally, joined with an exhortation to women in the region to identify with their anguish as mothers, wives and citizens, their efforts combined two powerful discursive techniques—both used by the regime itself—to demand support in overthrowing the Trujillo regime. As a collective, they demanded that attention be paid to the true ideals of democracy, which they felt were withering rapidly under the many military governments in Latin America. Women in the opposition sought Latin American solidarity in their struggle for “the complete triumph of peace” and invited “mothers, wives, sisters, [and] girlfriends” to unite in the cause. Furthermore, as demonstrated by their August 1959 public protest in Cuba, women of the opposition movement sought the attention of not just everyday Latin Americans, but also of the diplomatic corps and other well-placed officials throughout the hemisphere. As their male colleagues noted, they exemplified the “traditional spirit of sacrifice of the Dominican woman,” and they actively conveyed the “pain of the Dominican tragedy” to others. They urged the American nations to “enact a robust isolation of and embargo against the Jackal of the Caribbean, the international symbol of tyranny” in hopes of bringing an end to the regime that stained not only the nation, but its families.

Beyond picketing the Dominican embassy in their country of exile and publicly demonstrating their continued displeasure at the world’s lack of attention to the abuses of Trujillo, some women stepped directly into revolutionary action, forewarning the shift that would occur as the movement intensified back on the island. However, the major contribution of women during this period of exile was their ability to engage the regime’s own politics of gender across national boundaries. In demonstrating the Trujillato’s inability to protect Dominican homes, families, and the integrity of women and mothers, these female activists not only provided the movement with significant momentum, but also solidi-

68. Ibid., pp. 112, 132.
69. Herrera Mora, Mujeres dominicanas, p. 244.
70. Del Orbe, Del exilio político, p. 148.
71. One woman served as a spy for the opposition movement, while another prepared to join the revolutionary forces. Others worked clandestinely to shuttle information, goods, and even weapons, making dangerous trips to transport funds to exiled family members. Irma Hernández Santana, an exile in New York and member of the Movimiento de Liberación Dominicana, was sent by fellow activist-exile Alfonso Canto to conduct research back in the Dominican Republic. As historian Roberto Cassá relates, her assignment was to make a “reconnaissance of the conditions.” Clearly, the more visible and active male exiles would have been quickly jailed for such actions while women were, up to that time, better protected from imprisonment and torture. At a time when the various exile groups were attempting to coordinate their activities with each other and with the movement underway in their native land, such diligences could often be completed only by women. Cassá, Los orígenes, p. 130; Herrera Mora, Mujeres dominicanas, p. 107.
fied the discourse that would become vital in dismantling the regime. In essence, while many women became more radicalized in their political stance, their argument against the regime still hinged on a maternalist discourse of national stability and morality.

**RENEWED OPPOSITION AT HOME: WOMEN AND THE MOVIMIENTO 14 DE JUNIO**

In the Dominican Republic, and particularly Santo Domingo, resistance activists remobilized in the early to mid-1950s. The post-World War II period presented difficulties for the movement, given the regime’s totalitarian crackdowns (coming soon after its self-proclaimed “openings”). The core of the revitalization lay in the University of Santo Domingo, where given the rising level of female enrollment, women became key players in the renewed spread of anti-Trujillo ideology.72 One woman who became most intimately connected with this movement was Minerva Mirabal. By the time she entered the university to study law in 1952, a fledgling resistance movement operating in the same kind of cellular structure followed by the earlier Juventud Democrática was coming back to life. The reinvigoration of the movement highlights a transition to even stronger revolutionary stances among women, and it also illustrates that young female activists had begun to denounce the regime’s violations of its own professed gender norms with increasing frequency.

The efforts of Minerva Mirabal and her sisters María, Teresa, and Patria were not unlike those of other women active in resistance, but they stand out, obscuring the work of many other women who were similarly engaged. In reality, the political awakening of Minerva Mirabal in her secondary school and college years mirrors the experiences of many other women of her generation. Although legally tolerated opposition had ended by the time Mirabal entered the university, her awareness of the political conditions of her country had begun earlier, during her school years in La Vega at the Colegio Inmaculada Concepción. Included in that cadre of female students were other women who would become active in the opposition movement.73

72. Some women, however, were hamstrung by their previous involvement in the resistance. Josefina Padilla, for example, was allowed to return to the university after her year of house arrest only because of a family friend’s intervention and was forced to sign an agreement promising her total lack of involvement in any political activities. She termed herself “marcada” by the regime but argued that if the regime had made any other demands placed on her—for example, to serve as a spy on the regime’s behalf—she would not have complied. Personal correspondence with Josefina Padilla, October 20, 2004.

73. They included, among others, Brunilda Soñé, Violeta Martínez Bosch, and Emma Rodríguez. William Galván argues that it was particularly the friendship between Mirabal, Martínez, and Rodríguez in 1944 that galvanized the women’s political engagement. *Minerva Mirabal. Historia de una heroína* (Santo Domingo: Editora de la Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, 1982), p. 107.
Although the political maneuverings of the resistance following the brief "legal" period of Juventud Democrática are cloudy at best, Mirabal was arrested in October 1949 along with several other women, presumably for opposition activities. Their arrests garnered significant international press. Precisely because they were women, the regime both underestimated their involvement and was wary of the negative effects of meting out harsh punishments for female dissidents. Officials questioned the women but then released them. Still, the regime continued its repression of the entire Mirabal family in hopes of halting the activities of its most political daughter, attempting to provide a cautionary example for other women who might consider similar engagement. In the second year of her legal studies, the regime demanded Mirabal write and perform a speech praising Trujillo as a condition of her continued enrollment at the state institution.

After her 1955 marriage to activist Manolo Tavárez Justo, Mirabal and her sisters became even more intimately tied to the small opposition movement operating throughout the country. Together Manolo and Minerva gathered support among individuals in Tavárez's hometown province of Monte Cristi until regime pressure and her second pregnancy forced Mirabal's return to her family home in Salcedo. She continued her work in that region, securing contacts with the newly formed Acción Clero Cultural, a Catholic organization formed under the guise of regime support but actually a resistance group. By 1959, several different focuses of resistance had begun to coalesce into a national movement against Trujillo, and the groups of women who gathered around the activities of Juventud Democrática and subsequently through the university played a large part in this unification.

In January 1959, at a small meeting convened by Minerva and María Teresa, their husbands, and several others, the group began formal organizing of a
nationwide movement. María Teresa’s husband, Leandro Guzmán, later reported that it was at this meeting that Mirabal expressed her conception of the Dominican Republic’s connection to other revolutionary movements in Latin America. As Guzmán remembered it, Mirabal argued that their country was equally prepared to overthrow the repressive chains of dictatorial rule:

There could not have been a stronger sentiment in Cuba against Batista than there was here against Trujillo. I do not know why there they could create a revolution and overthrow tyrants, while here, with the same conditions, we cannot. . . . It is clear that if we organize against Trujillo, we can have success here too.77

In other areas, a similar optimism pervaded the work of women who had become involved in the anti-Trujillo movement, yet their efforts remained profoundly gendered. Miriam Morales, a native of Puerto Plata, began in the early months of 1959 to organize women into a collective that would eventually integrate into the group of Mirabal, Tavárez, and Guzmán. Her group collected money and medicine and constructed rucksacks that would be used by the planned guerrilla invasion from Cuba.78 Much like women in previous revolutionary struggles, their efforts coalesced around the auxiliary needs and their “feminine” skills of organizing, preparing food, and sewing.

In June 1959, one event drastically altered the course of anti-Trujillo activities in the Dominican Republic. A small group of insurgents, organized in Cuba and supported by the newly installed Castro government, launched an assault on the Dominican Republic in the three towns of Constanza, Maimón, and Estero Hondo. Informed of the event prior to its occurrence, the regime quickly dispatched a counterattack and easily overwhelmed the group, which was unable to call upon planned support from the local peasantry. As Richard Turits argues, the continued “loyalty to the state among much of the peasantry,” particularly in the areas chosen for invasion, helps explain why the action failed so miserably in comparison to similar actions in Cuba and Nicaragua.79 Regime officials captured the men of the insurgency and executed the majority. However, despite its lack of military success, the invasion caused a significant increase in support for the anti-Trujillo movement, particularly following on the regime’s brutal treatment of those involved.80 As fellow activist Tomasina Cabral argued, “the

77. Galván, Minerva, p. 246. Other biographies of Mirabal have noted Guzmán’s recollection of that initial meeting, although it is likely her sentiment had been developing for some time.
80. Ibid. Turits argues that “the insurgents’ quixotic gesture was nonetheless effective. It inspired the urban resistance and fueled the cycle of intensifying state terror and growing opposition that would create
detonator for the massive escalation of the resistance struggle to the national level was the assassination of so many good Dominicans and foreigners, now sons of glory, whose holocaust lit the sacred spark of rebellion latent in our hearts.”81

By the end of 1959 the incipient national movement had both greater inspiration for its activism and a formal organizational structure. The influence of the January 1, 1959, triumph of the Cuban revolution, noted attentively by many of the group’s participants, motivated the core committee, which by January 1960 had devised a basic set of principles and a name: Movimiento Clandestino 14 de Junio, in honor of the failed invasion. Two of the opposition’s most active women participated in its very first official meeting.82 Minerva Mirabal and another female activist collaborated with the small group that drafted the original declaration of principles. While neither woman was designated as an officer of the leadership group, historian Roberto Cassá argues that the group considered Mirabal for a position “in recognition of her skills and role as a mentor.” He contends that members excluded the two women from these positions of responsibility due to the high level of danger. Nonetheless, while Mirabal was not elected to the position of president of the group, participants later asserted that she had soundly rejected the idea that women should not participate in the movement.83 According to the testimony of several activists, it was Mirabal, and not her husband, who exercised true leadership for the group.84

Shortly after the group’s official organization, regime officials caught wind of the resistance movement and mobilized quickly to put an end to its activities. Hundreds of resisters were jailed and savagely tortured by the regime, ostensibly to prevent further organizing and to force them to reveal the names of every

81. Fundación de los Héroes, Memorias, p. 195.
83. Cassá, Los orígenes, p. 241. Cassá offers these conclusions based on the testimony of several of the original members. However, he admits to being unable to interview the surviving female participant in the meeting, Dulce Tejada.
84. Ibid., p. 127.
participant involved.\textsuperscript{85} This time, women were not exempt from the horrendous treatment meted out to organizers. On January 22, 1960, shortly after her husband’s arrest, Minerva Mirabal was jailed for the third time, along with several other female activists.\textsuperscript{86} In a collection of testimonies from participants, two of these women recorded the brutal treatment they received from regime officials. In the January arrests, several of the more prominent female members were brought into the regime’s famous prisons, La Cuarenta and La Victoria, for interrogation alongside their male colleagues. Regime officials brought activist Asela Morel to La Cuarenta and paraded her in front of her fellow male activists, naked, handcuffed, and displaying massive bruises from their savage beatings.\textsuperscript{87} Several other women, including Minerva Mirabal, who had been arrested days earlier, were already in the single jail cell when she arrived. Tomasina Cabral, arrested on January 20, witnessed the beatings of her fellow detainees, and officials paraded her in front of their entire array of torture devices, including the infamous electric chair.\textsuperscript{88} For her, the worst sight of all was the congregation of regime officials in preparation for continual rounds of torture. After “a wave of indecent insults and threats,” her captors tortured her with an electric prod, with what she described as “evident pleasure.”\textsuperscript{89}

While Cabral offers the only direct testimony of physical torture, other participants indicated that regime officials treated all the female prisoners savagely. At one point, officials placed all five in a cell together with only a miniscule window, no circulating air, and a mere three cans for food, “potable” water, and waste. Guards removed the women from their cell in the middle of the night for interrogations, transported them randomly from prison to prison, separated and placed them in solitary cells, allowed them no contact with family, and would not provide information about their arrests. Cabral described the food they had as a “cornmeal with something like pig ears or snouts, nauseating.”\textsuperscript{90} They witnessed the torture of their companions who, in most cases, were their

\textsuperscript{85} The massive wave of arrests began January 17, 1960. Former secret police member Clodoveo Ortiz González offered his version of the arrests in a report he submitted to U.S. Ambassador John Bartlow Martin. In it, he stated that some 350 individuals were imprisoned, including five women. Other reports have indicated higher numbers, as well as more females arrested. Vega, Los Estados Unidos y Trujillo, pp. 42–44. As before, the exile community publicized these numbers widely.

\textsuperscript{86} They included Tomasina Cabral, Fe Violeta Ortega, Dulce Tejada, Miriam Morales, Asela Morel, and Minerva’s sister María Teresa.

\textsuperscript{87} Fundación de los Héroes, Memorias, p. 188.

\textsuperscript{88} Fundación de los Héroes, Memorias, p. 197.

\textsuperscript{89} Cabral’s description of the torture was likely softened in her own retelling. While he does not identify her by name, fellow inmate Rafael Valera Benítez offers a significantly more chilling narrative of the actions taken against “una compañera del clandestinaje,” which includes details of the entire macabre scene. Valera Benítez, Complot develado, pp. 36–40.

\textsuperscript{90} Fundación de los Héroes, Memorias, p. 189.
own husbands, brothers, and friends. After what could only be considered the merest semblance of a trial, the women received penalties averaging 30 years in jail along with heavy fines. However, the combination of international pressures and continued internal struggle weighed heavily on the regime and in early February they released the women, and many of the men, to house arrest.

The brutal change in the regime’s treatment of women dissidents had shocked the Dominican public, and an international audience as well. By making women targets of their draconian practices, the regime publicly and unequivocally violated its own declared gender norms. The “sacred spark” described by Cabral may have been lit by the 1959 deaths of the revolutionaries, but it was aggressively fanned to a flame by the treatment of these young women. The massive arrests and imprisonments carried out by the Trujillo regime drew significant national and international attention to the dictator’s crumbling political drama. During this final year and a half of the regime, Trujillo’s grip over the country, and even perhaps his sanity, began to slip precipitously. Responding to the arrests and imprisonments, the Church, despite its strong support over the preceding 30 years, issued a pastoral letter condemning the actions of the government and demanding fair treatment for all Dominican citizens. The letter was read at every mass in the country on January 31, 1960, immediately following the arrests. It served as a major blow to Trujillo’s power base—the Church had always supported his policies, regardless of his blatant violations of human rights. The

91. U.S. Embassy reports include descriptions of the torture of Tomasina Cabral and Asela Morel that were forwarded to the OAS as part of their investigation of human rights abuses. See Bernardo Vega, Los Estados Unidos y Trujillo, p. 114.

92. According to Cassá, several groups gathered at the trials began spontaneously singing the national anthem, and Cabral affirms this in her own testimony. Cassá goes on to argue that “[l]os juicios tuvieron repercusion nacional, pues algunos de los procesados denunciaron la dictadura y sus sistema legal, como hizo Tomasina Cabral (the trials had national repercussions, as some of the defendants, including Tomasina Cabral, condemned the dictator and the legal system).” Cassá, Los orígenes, p. 274. Although Cabral does not narrate her words before the court, she certainly affirms the fact that the valiant performance of the audience offered incomparable solidarity. As she recalls, “[p]or primera vez en nuestras vidas fuimos testigos de algo nunca visto en muchos años. El público que presencio el juicio entono el Himno Nacional y prácticamente empujaron a los guardias que con fusiles y en número muy crecido nos custodiaban. La presión fue tan fuerte, que suspendieron la entrega de alimentos por familiares negociada por el Fiscal con los guardias (for the first time in our lives, we were witness to something that had not been seen in many years. The public who witnessed the trials sang the National Anthem and practically pushed the armed guards, of whom there were many. The pressure was so intense that they stopped the provision of food from our families that had previously been negotiated between the district attorney and the guards).” Fundación de los Héroes, Memorias, p. 198.

93. Vega, Los Estados Unidos y Trujillo, pp. 55–58; Cassá, Los orígenes, pp. 260–270. The letter is reproduced in its entirety in Rafael Valera Benítez, Complot develado, pp. 156–160.

94. Richard Turits argues for the importance of the pastoral letter at the local level, although undoubtedly it was extremely important in urban areas as well. He writes that among peasants, the pastoral letter “presented an open repudiation of official discourse by an alternative source of authority, thus exposing the limitations of the regime’s hegemony.” Turits, Foundations of Despotism, p. 256.
United States also began to actively pursue an alliance with the opposition, although this effort was focused mostly on the resistance in exile. Finally, the Organization of American States (OAS) became increasingly concerned about the violations of human rights in Trujillo’s brutal persecution of his opposition. In response to the regime’s actions and the increasing concern over dictatorship in the Caribbean, the OAS, the United States, and the opposition began communications regarding an appropriate response as early as February 1, 1960.

Particularly among the families affected by the disappearances and imprisonments, most of whom were identified by many accounts with the upper classes, responses were surprisingly bold, public, and gendered, and women assumed even larger roles in these activities. According to missives from U.S. Ambassador Joseph Farland, a group of “women dressed in mourning” had been regularly using Church confessional to pass along information about clandestine groups, as well as to convey their concern for loved ones. Trujillo’s legal agent in charge of reporting on subversive publications and activities, Dulce María Sánchez de Rubio, expressed aggravation at the many groups (including those headed by women) that depicted the regime as authoritarian. According to her reports, the magazine Libertad published Juana Ramona Castillo’s letter to the oppositionist group Movimiento Popular Dominicano (MPD), in which Castillo requested aid in locating her son who had been detained for nearly a year without communication. Continued public protest by youth groups and the MPD, particularly in Santiago, proved a constant aggravation to regime officials. Moreover, the publication Libertad wrote around the same time that “female organizations” as well as student and worker groups, had been unable to organize since 1930 because of the repression of the regime, and that women in particular were growing anxious for change. “Women and housewives,” they argued, “have not had the opportunity to defend their interests nor to see improvements on the part of the state relative to maternity, education, or childcare.” While women were not frequently among the upper echelons of leadership, their involvement and the safeguarding of proper gender norms were key to mobilizing political activism at the local and community levels.

95. Valera Benítez, Complot develado, p. 43. The investigation was requested by Venezuela.
99. For more on the Movimiento Popular Dominicano, their return from exile in June 1960, and their publication Libertad, see Cassá, Los orígenes, pp. 293–316.
100. Ibid.
In the last decade of the Trujillo regime, women from multiple socioeconomic levels enrolled in the resistance movement. Yet, more to the point, participants of both genders found the dictatorship’s violations of maternalism and family its greatest point of weakness. The resistance used Trujillo’s own rhetoric—protecting maternalism, education, mothers’ rights, and families—as a vehicle for pointing out the regime’s downfalls. Before 1959, many had been able to overlook the regime’s farcical displays of “democracy,” but they found the regime’s attacks on women and entire families in its final years untenable. Many asked themselves whether the dictatorship, unable to live by its own gendered rhetoric, could do anything to protect the Dominican people. As the regime’s own inconsistencies were pointed out more forcefully, many individuals joined the movement against the dictatorship, either explicitly or implicitly, giving it the authority and weight it would need to eventually topple the regime.

In November 1960, the excesses of the Trujillo regime destroyed the politics of clientalism that had maintained it for 30 long years. After the Church response to the massive arrests of 1959, Trujillo reportedly stated that he had only two problems: the Church and the Mirabal sisters. When the regime moved to solve the latter problem by creating a sham automobile accident as the three women returned from visiting their jailed husbands on November 25, 1960, many believed Trujillo had sealed his own fate. By violating the norms of gender that he himself had so widely institutionalized, Trujillo set in motion the events that led to his demise. At the same time, his incensed response to the Church’s objections brought on an extreme violation of his own terms of maternalism. Reacting in April 1961 to the adamantly oppositional stance of a church in La Vega, Trujillo reportedly sent prostitutes to create a spectacle in the cathedral and desecrate the sanctity of the institution. According to newspaper reports, the women, “of doubtful reputation,” entered the church and “stopped the mass with their dancing of merengue and yelling ‘Long Live Trujillo.’” Reportedly, the prostitutes carried placards that read “In the Church and Everywhere, Long Live Trujillo” and “Down with Regime Traitors.” If punishing female dissidents violated the internal guidelines laid down by the regime to protect women, sending “prostitutes” to a mass and raping and murdering three sisters and mothers went above and beyond what the Dominican public could accept.

101. Galván reports that he made this statement during a visit to Villa Tapia, a town close to the women’s hometown of Salcedo. Galván, Minerva Mirabal, p. 317. Bernard Diedrich makes a similar assertion. Diedrich, Trujillo, p. 69. Court records from the subsequent trial of the Mirabal assassins indicate that the statement was made at the home of José Quezada on November 2, 1960. See Valera Benítez, Complot develado, p. 126.


CONCLUSION

While the death of the Mirabal sisters was a brutal and intensely emotional event for the Dominican public, the massacre of women completed the destruction of the gendered politics the Trujillato had created. The idea that women could be assassinated for their unrepentant role in public politics shattered ideas about “propriety.” While the specific reasons behind the murder of the three sisters lie in the realm of Dominican mythology, the result was incontrovertible. According to the New York Times, the New York-based Dominican Liberation Movement called the murders “the most abominable assassination in the 31-year history of the Trujillo dictatorship.” While the Trujillo-controlled newspaper El Caribe reported the deaths as an inexplicable accident, countless Dominicans consider the act the final straw in a series of horrific acts. Exile groups in New York picketed the Dominican consulate demanding action by both the United States and the OAS.

In addition, the massive arrests and assault on the Church provoked a response among mothers and family members who might previously have been apolitical. The testimony of Gloria Cabral de Macarrulla sheds light on the responses of “ordinary” women to the crumbling control of the Trujillo regime. Her nephew, Lisandro Macarrulla, was present in La Cuarenta during the period of arrests and torture. Cabral de Macarrulla visited every Sunday, bringing news from the family and kind words. Her memories serve as testament to both the conditions borne by the prisoners, but also to her own response to the regime’s inhumane treatment of the country’s youth. She had begun to collect crucifixes to bring to the prisoners, realizing that the objects brought comfort to her otherwise miserable family members and friends. According to her count, she collected nearly 200. Despite the fact that the objects were eventually destroyed by prison guards, her efforts serve as testimony to both the growing radicalism of Dominican women and their continued dedication to maternal activities in their efforts to find an alternative to dictatorship.

The murder of the Mirabal sisters and the increasing violence during the final years of the regime, particularly against women, provoked a visceral reaction among the Dominican populace. For many, the regime’s total abandonment of its maternalistic protections—its charade of promoting the idea of nation as family and the blatant flaunting of its own standards for the proper treatment of women—demonstrated to the public that the regime was collapsing under

106. Valera Benitez, Complot develado, pp. 139-143; Fundación de los Héroes, Memorias.
the weight of its own perfidy. Acceptance by the public of a façade of democracy had been a consistent element in maintaining the regime; however, many understood their return for such acceptance to be the paternalistic protection of homes and families. As women and men pointed out repeatedly, particularly in the final years of the regime, Trujillo’s persecutions and violations of women betrayed that compact.

Such violations of human life were not unprecedented, yet it was the steadily increasing assaults on maternalism and family that truly created the crisis. Rafael Valera Benítez, member of the resistance, expressed a sentiment that echoed through the efforts of those who became involved in the movement. As he put it, the assassinations “had their roots in [the regime’s] absolute devaluation of the life of women, and, worse still, children.”107 While the regime had indeed reached a point at which its value of human life was nearly nonexistent, it was specifically the violation of gender norms, as pointed out by both men and women, that truly mobilized the Dominican public.

On May 30, 1961, a group of six men assassinated Rafael Trujillo Molina as he headed west along the oceanside highway, en route to his famous Casa de Caoba retreat in San Cristóbal. While the final end may have come at the hands of male protagonists, the process that led to that juncture was undeniably gendered. As Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla argued later, the end of the regime had come as a result of “an army of women, without any weapon other than the powerful weapon of the heart, the heart tempered by sorrow and sacrifice.”108 Women had become involved in significant numbers, demonstrating not just their political capabilities but also their skill in reappropriating the regime’s own discourse in service of the opposition. As other scholarship has demonstrated, Trujillo worked meticulously to create a political role for women that allowed them to actively support his policies—in fact, women were a major element in the success of such tactics. However, as the resistance movement grew and women became visible players in the drama that was unfolding against him, they brought evidence that the Dominican public was rejecting Trujillo’s image of himself as the larger-than-life, generous protector of national morality, the “Father of the New Nation.” Dominican women argued and acted in ways that brought an integral and distinct element to the functioning of democracy and

107. Valera Benítez, Complot desvelado, p. 9. Journalist Bernard Diederich expresses a similar conclusion. He argues that the “cowardly killing of three beautiful women in such a manner had greater effect on Dominicans than most of Trujillo’s other crimes. It did something to their machismo. They could never forgive Trujillo this crime. 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 Mirabals’ murder tempered the resolution of the conspirators plotting his end.” Diederich, Trujillo, pp. 71–72.
108. FRGC, Box 43, Folder 21.
domestic stability. Employing local, national, and even international channels, they worked consistently to bring attention to what would become glaringly obvious to the population at large with the murder of the Mirabal sisters: that vague promises of domestic and international stability would no longer stand on the legs of the regime’s gendered rhetoric.

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