

# Haitian massacre



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The Real and Imagined Borders of Hispaniola Michele Wucker Sending letters directly between the Dominican Republic and Haiti has only recently become possible. For most of the last sixty years, their postal services routed the mail ninety miles north to Miami as if the two countries had decided that they no longer shared the island of Hispaniola.

This is absurd at best; a flight between their capital cities, Santo Domingo and Port-au-Prince, takes only half an hour. Deep in the Cordillera Central mountain range, the border is virtually irrelevant to peasants who cross it easily on market days and switch rapidly between Dominican Spanish and Haitian Kreyol. In the north, the river that separates the two countries is so shallow that in it women wash clothes and children play. Tragedy, not geography, forms the real border. Its name, as any Dominican or Haitian can tell you, is the same as that of the deceptively calm northern river: The Massacre.

During just a few weeks in October 1937, Dominican soldiers killed 30, 000 Haitians along the border because the victims' skin was dark, even though Dominicans were just a few shades lighter. The events still divide the Dominican Republic and Haiti so deeply that there may as well be an ocean not only around them but between them. Dominicans typically do not describe the massacre as the result of popular hatred against Haitians, but instead imply that Dominicans dislike Haitians because of the massacre.

This sounds odd but is not far from the truth, which is that for six decades nationalist Dominican governments distorted history and promoted dissent to defend the madman dictator Rafael Trujillo. Trujillo was openly inspired by Hitler's racial theories and ordered the massacre as a way of "whitening" his country. To quiet critics, Trujillo deployed an intense "Dominicanization" propaganda campaign portraying his racist mania as a paternal act to save his people from Haiti.

Today the two nations are at a historical juncture, the end of an era dominated by two powerful Dominican leaders who were shaped by the massacre -- Joaquin Balaguer, its greatest defender, and Jose Francisco Pena Gomez, an orphan left behind. Their successors now have a chance to transform the memory of the massacre from one used to justify the past into one with the power to keep such a thing from happening again. To do so, they must replace the myth of the protective strongman with the stories of his victims.

A former sugar cane plantation guard, Rafael Trujillo began his ascent to power in the National Guard, where he was trained by American Marines occupying the Dominican Republic. He quickly rose through the ranks, becoming head of the armed forces when the American troops left in 1924, a time of relative prosperity. It was not long before he toppled an aging caretaker president, and in 1930 he began a thirty-one-year dictatorship during which he renamed mountains and cities after himself and embellished his own name with the honorific Great Benefactor of the Nation and Father of the New Dominion.

He wore pancake make-up to lighten the traces of color his Haitian grandmother's blood had left in his skin. Yet Dominican society still snubbed him for his working-class family origins, and for his youthful exploits as a petty thief. Turmoil in Europe resonated both with the Dominican Republic's growing economic difficulties and with Trujillo's own obsessions with race and status. By 1937 the Dominican Republic was practically broke, its sugar exports fetching only a penny a pound, one twentieth of the price during the boom a decade earlier.

In late September of that year, weeks before the massacre, the Dominican president publicly accepted a gift of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, whose racial theories he clearly embraced. A visiting Nazi delegation was welcomed by glowing newspaper editorials: " Long live our illustrious leaders, the Honorable President, Doctor Trujillo, and the Fuhrer of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler. " Hitler's ideas gave Trujillo a racist and nationalist plan to distract Dominicans from their empty stomachs. Reminding Dominicans that they could not afford to feed foreigners too, Trujillo cracked down on migration from Haiti.

But powerful American sugar cane plantation owners, who brought in Haitians to cut cane because, unlike Dominicans, they worked for practically nothing, forced him to make huge exceptions. He resorted to deporting Haitians and tightening border patrols, but the Haitians kept coming. On October 2, 1937, while Trujillo was drunk at a party in his honor not far from the Massacre River, he gave orders for the " solution" to the Haitian problem. In the Book of Judges, forty thousand Ephraimites were killed at the River

Jordan because their inability to pronounce "Shibboleth" identified them as foreigners.

On the Dominican border, Trujillo's men asked anyone with dark skin to identify the sprigs of parsley they held up. Haitians, whose Kreyol uses a wide, flat "R", could not pronounce the trilled "R" in the Spanish word for parsley, "perejil." Dominicans still refer to the massacre as El Corte, the cutting, alluding to the machetes the Dominican soldiers used so they could say the carnage was the work of peasants defending themselves; only the government could afford to kill with bullets.

El Corte also suggested to the Haitians' work of harvesting sugar cane (ironically, soldiers did not touch the Haitians who stayed on the Americans' sugar plantations). Trujillo's deed became a footnote to a much larger crime against humanity, and he exploited events in Europe as a way to clear his own name. At the time of El Corte, the world had its eyes on Hitler and on refugees desperate for a country to take them in. In an effort to find a home for them, U. S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt met with world leaders at Evian-les-Bains, France in July 1938.

Of the many attendees, the only president to respond was Trujillo, who offered a vast expanse of farm land and 100,000 visas. This offer not only repaired his relations with the rest of the world, but also fit into his "whitening" plan. While it saved lives, the plan failed as a social engineering project. Most of the 5,000 or so refugees who acquired visas soon left for other countries. And it turned out that only about half of the 700 people who

eventually settled in the new community of Sosua were unmarried; very few of the rest married Dominicans.

Meanwhile, Trujillo's men were revising history to justify what he had done. His protege, Joaquin Balaguer, wrote that the massacre was " the crystallization in the heart of our country of a sentiment of protest and defense against four centuries of Haitian depredations. " Grateful for this elegant defense, Trujillo made him, in 1960, the last of three puppet presidents. Driven into exile after Trujillo's assassination in 1961, Balaguer returned triumphantly, with U. S. support, to the nation's highest office in 1966.

During seven presidential terms, Balaguer repeated one pledge above all others: to defend the country from the Haitian hordes. History gives a far more complex version of Dominican-Haitian relations. The Massacre River got its name from a colonial-era Spanish slaughter of French pirate buccaneers. As a result of different socialization strategies on the part of these European rivals, Dominicans are mostly mulattos (of mixed African and European race) while Haitians have much darker skin.

Spanish Santo Domingo encouraged its criollo descendants of European settlers and African slaves to intermarry. This was good for cattle ranching, which required close collaboration of workers and masters. It also fortified the Spanish-speaking population, which was dwindling as adventurers abandoned Santo Domingo to search for gold in South America. By contrast, in French Saint-Domingue, brutal masters perpetrated unspeakable cruelties

on the African slaves of coffee and sugar plantations. In 1804, rebellious slaves expelled the French and created Haiti, the world's first Black republic.

The Haitians then backed Dominican independence from Spain, though they soon occupied Spanish Santo Domingo to make sure neither Spain nor France would find an easy foothold. Slavery was abolished across the island. But Dominicans, chafing from twenty-two years of inept Haitian rule, won back freedom in 1844. Spain soon re-annexed Santo Domingo for a few unhappy years until the colony again resorted to Haitian help to cast off European rule. Official Dominican history, however, downplays its neighbor's contribution: Independence Day celebrates freedom not from Spain, but from Haiti.

The border remained nebulous well into this century. Intermingling of Dominicans and Haitians had gone on for so long that in many cases it was (and still is) impossible to identify someone as fully one or the other. A clear line between the countries was not drawn until 1930, when the two governments signed a treaty at the urging of American troops, who were preparing to end a nineteen-year occupation of Haiti. At the time of the massacre, most of the residents of the border were bilingual, so could indeed pronounce perejil.

Some scholars even suggest that Dominicans exaggerated the parsley story as a way to reassure themselves that only Haitians were killed, that the line was clearly drawn between those who were meant to live and die. The life of Jose Francisco Pena Gomez, the black Dominican leader who died in May 1998, debunks Balaguer's portrait of Dominicans and Haitians as utter

enemies. Pena was adopted as an infant by a Dominican family when his Dominico-Haitian father and Dominican mother were forced to flee to Haiti during the massacre. Pena's skin was a color so dark that Dominicans described him as "black as a telephone. Despite Trujillo's and Balaguer's insistence that the country's destiny belonged in the hands of those of European ancestry, Pena became the internationally respected leader and three-time presidential candidate of the Dominican Revolutionary Party. His running mate was Fernando Alvarez Bogaert, the white Dominican son of the landowners who had given him safe haven. Was this really a case of two peoples who could never reconcile? During campaigns, Balaguer's team spewed nationalist and racist smears against the popular Pena, alleging that he practiced Haitian Vodou and would open the country to the black hordes from the west.

This tactic was not enough to keep Pena from winning in 1994; the government accomplished that only by stealing the election from him. Two years later Balaguer's government expelled several thousand Haitians as a way of intimidating dark-skinned voters who were thought likely to vote for Pena in a special election called to repair the fraud. Balaguer, who himself was barred from running because he had stolen the last election, insinuated that Pena was not an "authentic Dominican. Balaguer's propagandists tried to convince Dominicans that Pena's skin color proved that he was erratic, quick to anger, and unfit to be president. In reality, Pena time and again chose to seek peace instead of advancing his presidential ambitions, which remained unrequited. He lost in 1996 to Leonel Fernandez, a man who won with the help of Balaguer's endorsement. A few days after Pena's death from



cancer last year, amid national mourning and soul-searching over the racism that had dogged his life, congressional elections took place. Pena's party swept to a landslide victory in tribute.

President Leonel Fernandez, a mulatto who spent his adolescence in Manhattan, ironically has more in common with Pena than with Balaguer. Fernandez, too, comes from a part of the population that was long shunned by the Dominican government: the more than one million Dominicans who live abroad, the "absent Dominicans." One out of eight Dominicans now lives in the United States, where they are unearthing the African roots that Trujillo's massacre sought to obliterate. These Dominicans left their own country for jobs so they could send money back to their families; they are needed yet despised.

In this way, they are not unlike the half-million Haitians who live in the Dominican Republic, where they are systematically undermined, paid miserably, and arbitrarily deported. A Haitian cane cutter tapping a forearm crisscrossed with scars, a construction worker scratching his kinky hair, a merchant woman rubbing her dark cheek to show the color of the skin, they all say the same thing when asked about their life: *Nou pa moun*, we're not people. Fernandez has pushed for better relations, but the past continues to undermine efforts to bring the countries together.

Time and again, reprisal follows rapprochement. Two years ago, Fernandez met in Miami with Haitian President Rene Preval to build goodwill, but a month later his government expelled 20,000 Haitians it ludicrously accused of forming a "massive network of beggars." In 1998, Pena's death prompted

tributes to him and eloquent homages against racism. But within weeks politicians began to discuss ways to deny citizenship to Haitians born in the Dominican Republic, sabotaging expectations for a treaty that would guarantee humane treatment of Haitian migrants.

This past June, President Fernandez traveled to Port-au-Prince for two days; it had been more than sixty years since a Dominican president slept in Haiti. The last time that happened, as the Haitian press did not fail to recall, Trujillo had traveled to Port-au-Prince in the spring of 1936, just a year before the massacre. Then, Haitian leaders re-named Grande Rue as " Avenue Trujillo. " During Fernandez's trip, the two countries agreed to cooperate with the United States to fight drug trafficking.

But Dominican officials kept themselves busy blaming much of the drug problem on Haiti. Afraid that Haiti's image would taint them, Dominican tourism industry leaders refused to entertain the possibility of joint tourism efforts. Still, as small an achievement as it may seem, there are now letters going back and forth from one side of the island to the other. More concretely, the two presidents do meet regularly. For the first time ever, both leaders have been elected democratically.

History is no longer only in the hands of dictators who distort it to justify evil. Finally, the forgotten are being heard, given a voice by Dominican and Haitian novelists, many of them from Hispaniola's huge diaspora. The *Farming of Bones*, a new novel by the acclaimed Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, articulates this new cry for healing in the words of a young Haitian man frustrated by a Dominican youth: " He won't say what I want him

to say, that we're the same, me and him, flesh like flesh, blood like blood. Shortly after his lament, he is killed by a mob during the massacre. Right now, reviving the memory of the massacre may be exactly what is needed so its story can be re-told: not in the words of strongmen but in the words of the ones who for so long have been silent. This article, sent to Windows on Haiti by its distinguished author, originally appeared in the November 1998 issue of Tikkun magazine. Michele Wucker is the author of *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians and the Struggle for Hispaniola* (Hill ; Wang: 1999).