



How the Agency Killed Trujillo

By Norman Gall

The New Republic - April 13, 1963, republished June 28, 1975

The assassination of the Dominican Republic's Rafael L. Trujillo was carried out with assistance from the US Central Intelligence Agency. Arms for the May 30, 1961. slaying of the 69-year-old dictator on a lonely stretch of highway near his capital were smuggled by the CIA into the country at the request of the assassins, according to highly qualified sources I interviewed in Santo Domingo shortly after the collapse of the Trujillo rule.

The arms had to come from the outside, I was told, because of the close scrutiny imposed by Trujillo on the removal of guns from military bases. These controls kept the conspirators from obtaining their own weapons without awakening suspicion, despite the involvement in the plot of the Secretary of State for the Armed Forces, Gen. Jose Rene Roman Fernandez, and other leading military officers.

The CIA began shipping arms to the Dominican Republic in late 1960, following a series of talks between US Consul Henry Dearborn, Chief Political Officer John Barfield of the US Consulate, and Luis Amiama Tio, who had extensive banana and cattle holdings and had been mayor of Santo Domingo. Also involved in the plot was Antonio Imbert who had been Governor of Puerto Plata province. Both Amiama and Imbert are tough guys and ambitious. Both were made four-star generals by the provisional council that took over after Trujillo's death. However, when leading army officers balked at their elevation to the highest military rank, Amiama and Imbert said the honor bestowed upon them was too great and modestly demoted themselves to brigadier generals.

1960 was a bad year for the Dominican Republic. The economy was in the dumps. The country was in disgrace internationally as a result of Trujillo's backing of a plot against the life of Venezuelan President Romulo Betancourt. In June, a car full of explosives blew up alongside Betancourt's automobile during a Caracas Armed Forces Day procession, wounding the President and killing two others. A Venezuelan naval officer later admitted that the elaborate bomb was prepared in the Dominican Republic, presumably as an act of retaliation against Venezuela for having asked the OAS in February 1960, to censure Trujillo for "flagrant violations of human rights."

In August that same year, the Organization of American States did censure the Dominican Republic, and the US and several Latin American nations thereupon suspended diplomatic relations with the Trujillo regime, though Washington kept a consulate in Ciudad Trujillo to protect its commercial interests.

This was one of the stormiest periods of Trujillo's 31-year rule. On June 14, 1959, the Dominican Republic's southern coast had been invaded by Cuba-based Dominican exiles. They were wiped out, but then Trujillo uncovered a plot to kill him, only 24 hours before it was to be carried out on January 21, 1960. Mass purges, arrests and some killings followed. Tensions within the regime mounted rapidly, as did its Byzantine-style ruler's greed. Assuming the presidency of the Dominican Central Bank, the dictator forced exporters, as part of an "austerity" program, to deposit with the bank half of their dollar earnings, which soon found their way into Trujillo accounts abroad.

During this time, Trujillo was completing an intensive drive, begun in the mid-1950s with the purchase of the Haina complex of sugar mills and lands in the southern part of the Republic, to expand sugar production and appropriate more and more of it to himself. He went so far as to deprive thousands of peasant families of their squatters' settlements, forcing them to sell their cattle and work as sugar peons. It had been hoped, of course, that the Dominican Republic would get a generous share of the US sugar quota previously allotted to Cuba. An intensive Washington lobbying campaign was carried on to this end, largely through the Dominican Consul-General in Washington, Marco A. Pena. In the late summer of 1960, Congress did raise the Dominican allotment from 27,000 to 250,000 tons, but President Eisenhower slapped a punitive excise tax on it in September, after the OAS ministerial conference voted economic sanctions against the Trujillo regime and a break of diplomatic relations.

As Trujillo's political and financial problems deepened, talks continued between Dearborn, Barfield and leaders of the anti-Trujillo conspiracy. Toward the end of 1960, contact was established between Amiana and a CIA agent who, according to Arturo R. Espailat, former head of Trujillo's Military Intelligence Service, was named Plato Cox. Espailat made this statement in a press conference in Ottawa in 1962; his word alone cannot, of course, be accepted as conclusive proof. But whatever the name of the agent, the smuggling of firearms into the Republic for the assassination began.

The key link between the assassins and the CIA in the arms shipments was a long-time American civilian resident of Ciudad Trujillo, Lorenzo Perry, otherwise known as "Wimpy," who operated a supermarket in a fashionable neighborhood where Trujillo also lived. "Wimpy" was put under brief arrest after the killing but was later allowed to leave the country.

The weapons were imported in small parts, to be assembled later by the plotters, among the routine grocery shipments for the supermarket arriving regularly in the capital's port. The gun-parts entered the Republic in specially marked food cans, which were later turned over to the conspirators.

Plans for the intended assassination were worked out during the same period in which the abortive assault on Cuba was being prepared. However, when the CIA-organized April 17, 1961 invasion at the Bay of Pigs failed and world attention was focused on Washington's complicity in that operation, a postponement of the attempt on Trujillo's life was ordered because of the embarrassment another such failure might cause the United States. But the order to hold up came too late. According to what I was told in the Dominican Republic, the needed weapons were already in the hands of the conspirators, who refused appeals by Dearborn and Barfield to delay the assassination. They insisted on moving at the first opportunity. This came on May 30, when Trujillo and his chauffeur drove out into the country in an unescorted 1959 Chevrolet for a rendezvous at a San Cristobal estate, *La Fundacion*, with Trujillo's 20-year-old mistress, Mona Sanchez.

It was Trujillo's custom to call on his 94-year-old mother, Julia Molina, before going on to *La Fundacion*. His departure for San Cristobal from his mother's home was signaled to the killers by Sen. Modesto Diaz, a neighbor of Julia Molina and brother of Brig. Gen. Juan Tomas Diaz, one of the principal gunmen in the plot. It is said that General Diaz was bitter toward Trujillo because of his forced, premature retirement from the army in 1960 on the dictator's orders.

The plan was to finish off Trujillo, seize control, form a provisional government to be recognized by the US, and hold the elections which Trujillo had promised for May 1962. The assassins intended to be candidates.

The scheme, however, was frustrated soon after the murder when the assassins could not locate Gen. Roman Fernandez, who had been ordered to the San Isidro Air Force Base that afternoon by Trujillo and told to stay there until some administrative irregularities were

corrected. Since he was thus kept 10 miles outside Ciudad Trujillo until next morning, Roman was not able to carry out the assignment he had been given. General Roman was to have summoned the entire Trujillo clan to La Fortaleza de Ozama in the capital, informed them of Trujillo's death and had them killed on the spot.

Around 10:30 pm on May 30, two carloads of gunmen fired 27 shots into the dictator's body and pummelled it mercilessly on the main highway between the capital and the Agricultural Fair Grounds, where Trujillo annually received tributes for his prize cattle. Having dumped the riddled corpse into the trunk of one of the attack cars, the assassins went to the house of Roman, only to learn there he was not in the capital. They then scattered. In succeeding days all the known assassins, including Roman, were rounded up and slain either at once or shortly before the mass departure of the Trujillo family in November 1961. The two surviving exceptions were Imbert and Amiana.

It can be reported on excellent authority that close associates of the slain dictator knew of the US role within a few days following the killing. Almost immediately upon his May 31 return from Paris to assume command of the Dominican armed forces, Lt. Gen. Rafael (Ramfis) Trujillo Jr. was fully briefed.

However, Ramfis and other retainers, of the dead dictator were warned not to launch reprisals against Americans involved in the plot. Ramfis' hand was probably stayed also by the presence of numerous foreign newsmen in Ciudad Trujillo within 48 hours after the assassination, and the reported readiness of US naval and marine forces, waiting in off-shore waters, to intervene in the Dominican Republic should there be any loss of American life or property. Likewise, an OAS fact-finding commission arrived in early June, and that may have helped prevent a bloodbath. Ramfis' six months in power did, however, allow him to liquidate what moveable family wealth he could. US diplomats were telling him that if he behaved himself he could leave the country a rich man, which he did. He "donated" the family sugar mills and lands to the nation.

Dearborn, Barfield and Berry had meanwhile been rushed out of the Dominican Republic by US officials. Subsequently, Dearborn went to Colombia as Consul, and Barfield first to Italy and then to Washington where he was a staff assistant to Edwin Martin, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Since the ouster of the Trujillos, Perry ("Wimpy") has returned to operate his handsomely appointed supermarket in Santo Domingo, greeting customers with calm and courtesy, as if Trujillo had never lived.

[Home](#) | [Biography](#) | [Publications](#) | [Publication List](#) | [Contact](#)
ngall@braudel.org.br