

How the García Girls Lost their Accents Study Guide

Compiled by Alejandra Gonzales

The Trujillo Dictatorship



President Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina

The Trujillo dictatorship controlled the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina personally served as President from 1930-1938 and then again from 1942-1952. When not officially holding office he maintained absolute power over the government as a military leader with the title Generalissimo. For almost half of his thirty-year dictatorship puppet presidents performed the ceremonial duties of the presidency while Trujillo ruled the country with an iron fist. The Trujillo era ended in 1961, when he was assassinated.

After the U.S. withdrew military support from the country in the 1920s, Trujillo began his ascent to power as the U.S. appointed leader of the National Guard. He received support from the United States because of his strong anti-communist beliefs. The National Guard had been trained by the US for the prior twenty years and when the election of 1930 installed Trujillo as president the US was happy to support him despite full evidence of gross election fraud. He didn't challenge their interests in the sugar industry and in later years provided a counter balance to Castro's communist government in neighboring Cuba.

Once in power he used the National Guard to terrorize citizens and any opposition forces. He established the SIM (Military Intelligence Service), a secret police force whose function ranged from routine surveillance work to the imprisonment and torture of political dissenters. He was notorious for his cruelty, often torturing and killing the friends and family of suspected opposition fighters. He modeled his reign of terror after Francisco Franco, the fascist leader of Spain.

Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic by using the military as a tool that operated within Dominican life. The constant military presence on the streets of the major cities combined with their involvement in public works projects allowed soldiers to participate in the every day life of most Dominicans. The military presence also served as an intimidation tactic, guaranteeing the obedience of the common citizen. Psychological terror was implemented by the state as a mechanism of control. Trujillo's goals of prosperity and progress were only feasible with tight control over all sectors of the country. By creating monopolies in all the major industries and closely monitoring and controlling the economy, Trujillo successfully brought the Dominican Republic out of poverty during a time when many Latin American countries were suffering economically. However, the prosperity and progress came at a steep price. Dominicans were deprived of many personal freedoms and lived

in fear under the Trujillo regime. In the Militarization of the Dominican Republic, Valentina Peguero describes the climate of fear that dominated the island:

People were to stop thinking and just obey in order to survive. Dato Pagán Perdomo, a university professor and radical opponent of the regime, described the people's fears. The psychological terror, he explained, penetrated people's minds and bodies to the extent that those who during the night dared to think of the dictator's downfall were sick the following day with fever and a nervous breakdown. Pagán's words illustrate the state of mind of the people and reflect the fear of Dominican society during the dictatorship. The process was gradual, but its effect was profound. (Peguero, 57)

Along with the psychological intimidation conducted by his regime, Trujillo sought domination on a personal basis. All of the women of the island were at his disposal whether married or virginal. He came to be feared as a man and not just as a military dictator. Trujillo stands out among 20th century dictators for the cult personality he created during his regime. Not only did he declare it the "Era of Trujillo" upon reaching high office in 1930, but also renamed the capital Ciudad Trujillo. He erected hundreds statues of himself and renamed roads, buildings, and bridges Trujillo. In the later years of his dictatorship churches were required to post signs that said "Trujillo on earth, God in Heaven," putting himself even before God.

However, Dominicans did not universally hate Trujillo. Generally speaking, the quality of life improved for the average Dominican under Trujillo. Poverty persisted, but the economy strengthened, the foreign debt disappeared, the currency remained stable, and the middle class expanded. Public works projects enhanced the



The Presidential Palace built in 1942

road system and improved port facilities; airports and public buildings were constructed, the public education system grew, and illiteracy declined. These advances might well have been achieved in even greater measure under a responsive democratic government, but to Dominicans, who had no experience with such a government, the results under Trujillo were impressive. He united a nation whose government had long been ineffective due to corruption and vicious infighting through the establishment of unquestionable authority. He also subverted the class system by marginalizing the country's white elite. He was from a rural area of the country and in the process of coming to power he had

been excluded from high society. He revoked all state control from the ruling elite, a move that won him popularity with the rural poor. Although he never tested his personal popularity in a free election, some observers feel that Trujillo could have won a majority of the popular vote up until the final years of his dictatorship.

Despite his popularity, his capacity for violence was well known. Trujillo terrorized Dominicans with the SIM secret police and was constantly seeking out dissenters. He kept the opposition underground by routinely torturing and killing suspected rebels. He also maintained concentration camps on remote islands off of Hispaniola where dissenters were sent to die of starvation. Within the SIM he had facilities for torture and

secret incarceration and even had a shark pit built to intimidate prisoners and to dispose of bodies. He established a vast network of domestic spies and maintained a close eye on the country. His popularity and his intimidation practices made it common practice for ordinary citizens to supply information on opposition forces and organizing dissenters. Those fighting for a free Dominican Republic not only had Trujillo's forces to contend with, but no citizen could be trusted.

In 1937 he was responsible for the Parsley Massacre. The Parsley Massacre was based on a *shibboleth*, a linguistic mark of a particular culture or group. Trujillo was eager to begin a war with Haiti in order to control the whole island of Hispaniola. In order to provoke a response from Haiti, he terrorized the Haitian population squatting on the Dominican border. To distinguish Dominicans from Haitians, victims were required to pronounce the word "perejil," parsley in Spanish. The French/Creole speaking Haitians couldn't pronounce the Spanish "jota" and were subsequently killed. The estimates lie between 20 and 30 thousand Haitians killed during the 36-hour massacre.



When he was assassinated in 1961, Trujillo was one of the wealthiest men in the world. He had successfully managed the national industries and apportioned for himself a substantial percentage of the profits. His dictatorship that lasted from 1931 to 1961 has been remembered as one of the darkest periods in Dominican history.

Consider the situation in the DR under Trujillo's dictatorship. Would you trade your personal freedoms for your countries developmental progress and economic stability?

Research and explain how U.S. imperialist policy set the stage for the ascent of a fascist dictator in the Dominican Republic.

Why was Trujillo so popular with the rural poor?

The Post-Trujillo Era

The assassination of Trujillo left the Dominican Republic in an uproar and Vice-president Dr. Joaquin Balaguer assumed the presidency. Over a year later the Dominican Republic held the first ever fair election and Juan Bosch of the Dominican Revolutionary Party (DRP) became president of the Dominican Republic. Unfortunately, the strong reforms Bosch implemented as the first elected post-Trujillo era president were seen as too socialist. United States was very nervous about the spread of communism through Latin America after the revolution in Cuba and intervened 3 years later. Without the backing of the military or U.S. support Bosch was unable to implement many reforms. President Juan Bosch was removed from office in 1966 in a military coup and was replaced by Balaguer who ruled for the next 12 years. Balaguer was criticized for repressing civil liberties; however, he received commendations for his ambitious infrastructure program. Two terms of PRD presidents succeeded him and provided the Dominican people with basic human rights. Balaguer returned to



the presidency in 1986 and served until 1996 when Leonel Fernández won a second run-off election for the PLD, the Dominican Liberation Party, the political party founded by Bosch in 1973.

How the García Girls Lost their Accents begins in 1993. Papi, an old opposition fighter, is not satisfied with the progress made in Dominican politics since his immigration to the United States. He says “Trujillo, Bosch, Balaguer. They say things will change and it doesn’t. It is no hope for the island. I am given-up.” After Trujillo, the Dominican Republic was unable to create the government the opposition forces had imagined and more and more Dominicans found themselves raising their children in the United States as Dominican Americans, unable to return to

a stable and prosperous homeland.

Why is Papi unsatisfied with all the leaders of the Dominican Republic of the last half of the 20th century?

How has US involvement in the DR limited the possibilities for reform and the formation of a legitimate democracy?

Mirabal Sisters

The Mirabal Sisters are Dominican national heroes and were recently fictionalized in Julia Alvarez’s novel In the Time of the Butterflies. The four women were deeply involved in the opposition movement. Patria Mercedes Mirabal, María Argentina Minerva Mirabal, María Teresa Mirabal, and Bélgica Adela “Dedé” Mirabal-Reyes formed the opposition group the Movement of the Fourteenth of June. As opposition leaders they became widely known by their codename *Las Mariposas* or The Butterflies. The sisters were born into an upper class family and spent their childhood among the elite of the Dominican Republic. They were well educated and prior to their involvement in anti-dictatorship activities Minerva attended law school. However, after refusing the advances of Trujillo himself she was unable to receive her practitioner’s license and became involved in the movement opposing the dictator. Her sisters followed her example and were soon actively participating in opposition activities.



During their careers the sisters were repeatedly captured and tortured, but it wasn’t until November 25th, 1960 that Trujillo had them eliminated. Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa were overtaken by the SIM after a visit to the prison where their husbands were being held for political crimes. The three sisters were murdered in a cane field and their car was pushed off the edge of a cliff. Trujillo thought he had addressed a persistent annoyance by murdering three opposition leaders, but the Butterfly Sisters had found their way into the hearts of the Dominican people. There was a strong public outcry and six months later the dictatorship came to an end. It is suspected that the upper classes of the Dominican Republic arranged the assassination of Trujillo, although there are many competing theories. The surviving sister, Déde, still lives in the house the sisters grew up in and keeps their memory alive through the “Museo Hermanas Mirabal.” They have become national heroes and important figures in Dominican political and cultural history.

Consider the sacrifices made by the Mirabal Sisters in their opposition of the Trujillo dictatorship. Would you be willing to dedicate your life to a cause? If so, what cause?

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In October of 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis paralyzed the United States. The Cold War, the conflict between American and Russian nuclear hegemony that lasted from 1945-1991, reached a climactic moment when the US discovered Russian-placed nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba, 70 miles off of the coast of Florida. From October 14, when the missiles were first observed during a reconnaissance mission over Cuba, and October 28th, when President JFK, with the mediation of the United Nations, reached an agreement with the Soviets to dismantle the missiles, the United States felt itself on the edge of a nuclear conflict. Along with implanting fear of nuclear attack in the American conscience, the incident provoked anti-Hispanic sentiment in the United States. The prejudice levied against Hispanic immigrants who were “stealing” jobs and “over-extending” school systems and social services intensified and was directed more specifically towards Caribbean immigrants.



How can the fear created by an event like the Cuban Missile Crisis be misguided and create racial tensions within a community?

Dominican Immigration to the United States

Dominican immigration to the United States began in the 1880's, but did not occur in substantial numbers until the 1960s. In order for Trujillo to maintain a stable workforce and allow for the progress of the Dominican economy he severely limited immigration during his time in power. The emigrants from this period were typically escaping the country for security reasons after becoming involved in the opposition movement. However, no mass migrations occurred during this time. Trujillo encouraged population growth and the population nearly doubled from its pre-Trujillo size. The fall of Trujillo and the subsequent economic collapse caused a huge wave of Dominican emigration. The economy could no longer provide jobs for all Dominican citizens and people began to look for work elsewhere in order to support large families. Large numbers of the rural poor migrated from the country to urban areas. Many simply relocated to large cities within the Dominican Republic while others left the country, leaving for Cuba or the United States. Dominican immigrants settling in the United States created huge Dominican enclaves in various U.S. cities. The majority of Dominicans that fled to the United States congregated in communities on the East Coast. New York City received, by far, the largest number of immigrants while New York State, New Jersey, Florida, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts also began to develop Dominican communities.

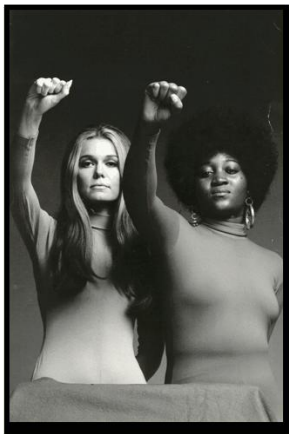
Explore why Dominican Americans, even those born and raised in the United States, identify so strongly with their native country?

How does living in a homogenous Dominican community, for example in New York, preserve your native cultural identity?

Feminism as a Cultural Conflict

One of the main sources of tension in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* is each sister's search for a personal identity among contrasting cultures and a changing world. The girls come of age in the seventies, a

turbulent time for the women's liberation movement. The sixties and seventies were an active period for women's rights and were dominated by second wave feminism. First wave feminism occurred around the turn of the century and focused on issues of suffrage and political equality. Second wave feminism revolved around the idea that, despite voting power, the society is entirely patriarchal by nature and is founded on a deeply ingrained sexist power structure. The second wave saw the rejection of the role of the housewife; dependence on a husband and the isolation of the home denied a woman her own identity. Under those conditions, women were forced to recognize themselves as less than a man for they lacked a career to provide for economic independence and the time and freedom to pursue their own interests for they were responsible for child rearing. Second wave feminism refused to accept these constraints and fought for women's rights in the workplace and for the creation of a feminine identity outside of the home.



Sexual liberation also became a major issue in the feminist movement. The double standard of the each gender's allowable expression of sexuality came under question. The traditional necessity of a woman preserving her virginity for marriage also lost strength. Female sexuality continued to be a very taboo subject, but was being addressed in order to fight for equal cultural rights between men and women.

The García girls were raised in a very traditional Dominican family. The Dominican Republic, like many Latin American countries, maintains strong Catholic beliefs that are integrated into the cultural structure of the island. The patriarchal society is based on respect for the male head of the family in exchange for lifelong support (or until marriage when a woman then becomes the husband's responsibility) for the females. Mami has filled the role of a good Catholic wife for her entire life while her daughters come of age in an America that is refusing to accept the patriarchal family structure advocated in the Dominican Republic. The blooming feminist movement in the United States has yet to make a leap to the island where the older more traditional views still hold sway. The macho attitude Sofia encounters and embraces is still desirable on the island, while her liberated sisters see the danger in such a relationship. The girls are forced to make decisions about gender roles and cultural identity as well as their own personal identities.

Explain the choices the four girls make throughout the play in regards to their feminine identity and adoption of cultural gender roles?

Julia Alvarez

Julia Alvarez, the author of the original novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, is a Dominican American woman, a successful writer and a writer-in-residence at Middlebury College. The experience of the García girls, moving to the United States at a young age and encountering the conflict of cultural identity and assimilation, mirrors her own experiences. She tells her own story:

I was born in New York City during my parents' first and failed stay in the United States. When I was three months old, my parents, both native Dominicans, decided to return to their homeland, preferring the dictatorship of Trujillo to the U.S.A. of the early 50s. Once again, my

father got involved in the underground and soon my family was in deep trouble. We left hurriedly in 1960, three months before the founders of that underground, the Mirabal sisters, were brutally murdered by the dictatorship.

It is interesting to note that Dominican immigrants preferred the brutality of the Trujillo dictatorship over the alienation and marginalization that they encountered in the United States. After moving to the United States, Julia continued to spend her summers with her extended family in the Dominican Republic. The extended trips were intended to cement her identity as a *Dominicana* and to grow up as a proper young lady. The constant transition from one country to another, however, informed her cultural identity and reinforced the bi-cultural nature of her upbringing. Julia Alvarez conclusively self-identifies as a Dominican American.

Julia Alvarez is a member of a generation that had to fight for a Latino woman's place in the U.S. writing industry. She writes,

"I was a driven soul. I knew that I wanted to be a writer. But it was the late sixties, early seventies. Afro-American writers were just beginning to gain admission into the canon. Latino literature or writers were unheard of."

Despite being a prolific writer for her entire life, her first novel was published after her 40th birthday. For the majority of her career she worked as a teacher and later as a professor at Middlebury College. In 1991, however, she published her first novel, How the García Girls Lost their Accents. The overwhelming success of the novel allowed her to pursue writing as a career.

Today she lives on a farm in the rural area of Vermont with her partner, Bill Eichner. She is a writer-in-residence at Middlebury and has now published 9 novels and several collections of poetry.

Karen Zacarias

Karen Zacarias is a renowned Washington, D.C. playwright and author of the theatre adaptation of How the García Girls Lost Their Accents. She is also the founder of the Young Playwright's Theater, a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering literacy, dialogue and conflict resolution through playwriting in inner-city schools. The organization originated as the condition for her education. As a teenager she was accepted into a prestigious program at Boston University to study theatre, but was unable to accept due to financial constraints. A fellow member of her playwriting group heard of her dilemma and, impressed with the young writer's immense talent, offered to pay for her education if, upon graduation, Karen would return and do something for the community. She held up her end of the bargain and the Young Playwright's Theatre was born. The organization has grown to a half-million-dollar organization and teaches the art of playwriting to 800 local students a year.

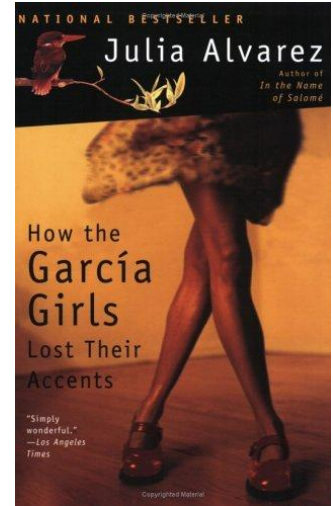


Illustration by Belkis Ramirez

Today, Karen is a mother of three and a full time playwright. She is the winner of numerous awards for her writing including the 1998 D.C. Mayor's Award for Outstanding Emerging Artist, a finalist at the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights' Conference and the Jane Chambers National Women's Playwright Competition. Her works include: The Sins of Sor Juana, Magical Piñata, Legacy of Light, Ferdinand the Bull, and How the García Girls Lost their Accents.

Merengue music

Merengue is a popular musical style and dance in the Dominican Republic. The music originated in the 1920's with Níco Lora, a Dominican of Spanish descent. The music was popularized by Trujillo and made the leap to the United States with Dominican immigrants. In fact, it was through merengue that Trujillo first reached out to the masses. He understood the importance of rural aesthetic forms as symbols of national identity. He conducted voter outreach by touring with popular merengue artists through rural areas. The *merengeros* sang of his virtues and derided his opponents granting him access to large crowds of the rural poor and interacting with them on a visceral level. Merengue became the national music and dance style for the Dominican Republic



during his time as president. When in power he continued to use merengue as a form of pro-Trujillo propaganda and his brother was put in charge of the largest radio station in Dominican Republic. Petán Trujillo enjoyed live music and was able to place limits on the recording industry on the island, a frustration that forced the emigration of many merengue groups to Puerto Rico and New York. By restricting the islands recorded output Petán Trujillo effectively spread the genre to an international audience. In the post-Trujillo period, due to trends such as rapid urbanization and migration, merengue became faster and more technically demanding. The changes and rapid growth of the period catalyzed accelerated development in music. Merengue became a more developed art form, incorporating new instruments and requiring greater skill from its artists.

In the 1960's, interest in merengue effectively crossed the ocean through the formation of large Dominican communities around the United States. Immigrant populations, feeling the forces of assimilation and the disintegration of a strong cultural identity used merengue to cement themselves as Dominicans. As a nostalgic and ethnic reminder of who they are and where they come from, merengue continued to grow despite Americanization of subsequent generations. By using merengue as a cultural link successive generations of Dominicans maintain strong ties to the island with constant reminders of their homeland.

How does dance allow the preservation of cultural identity?

Oscar de la Renta

Oscar de la Renta was the first Latin American designer adopted as a member of the international fashion industry. He is one of the most famous Dominicans in the world. He first gained attention for his gypsy- and Russian-inspired collections in the late 1960s and early '70s, which suggested the cosmopolitan sophistication that would characterize his creative output over the following decades. Consistent elements of his

vision include a vibrant colour palette, delicate silk prints, the use of ruffles, and soft silhouettes. He is perhaps best known for his evening wear and suits for women, which over the years became wardrobe staples for his faithful clientele of socialites and for former First Ladies Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Nancy Reagan, and Hillary Clinton.

Oscar de la Renta dances with a young actress wearing one of his creations.



Resources

http://www.jlhs.nhusd.k12.ca.us/classes/social_science/Latin_America/Dominican_Republic.html The Militarization of Culture in the Dominican Republic, from the Captains General to General Trujillo by Valentina Peguero

<http://books.google.com/books>

http://www.workmall.com/wfb2001/dominican_republic/dominican_republic_history_the_era_of_trujillo.html

Modern Tyrants by Daniel Chirot

<http://books.google.com/books>

Pdf Cuban and Other Hispanic Immigration (pg. 11)

<http://www.salsa-merengue.co.uk/revealit/histmer/part4.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLBhKMJNrmk>

http://www.hispaniola.com/dominican_republic/info/history.php

<http://www.juliaalvarez.com/about/>

How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents

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