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## **The Tancredo Martínez Assassination Attempt: Frances Grant and Communist Discourses<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

The Trujillato (1930-1961) spanned almost four decades, in part, due to a series of tools and mechanisms centered around Trujillo's influences and networks outside of the Dominican Republic. Trujillo's international network of spies made it possible for the Trujillato to identify and keep tabs on anyone who threatened Trujillo's reign. Thus, Trujillo's tentacles extended beyond the Dominican Republic and into nations and territories such as Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico and the United States. In order to combat Trujillo's network, Dominican exiles embraced non-Dominican allies to combat Trujillo's tentacles.

This essay is part of a larger project that aims to bring attention to the complex networks established predominantly by Dominican exiles as a means to combat Trujillo's forces on a geopolitical level. More specifically, this essay examines the assassination attempt made on the life of Tancredo Martínez,

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a lawyer and former diplomat who fell out of favor with the Trujillato for bringing to light some of the abuses that took place during Trujillo's government. Although the assassination attempt on Martínez is merely one of many assassinations carried out by Trujillo's forces and can be lumped with all others, studying this particular case will lead historians and social scientists to ask further questions.

Although there have been times when one can be misled to believe that one event (such as the murders of the Mirabal sisters or Trujillo falling out of favor with the Roman Catholic Church) led to the *ajusticiamiento* of Trujillo, the Tancredo Martínez case is one of the many events that led to Trujillo's downfall. In fact, surveying newspaper articles from the time demonstrates that the failed assassination attempt served as a major black eye for Trujillo's image. Not only does the Tancredo Martínez case provide with a mirror of the Dominican exile community, but the aftermath of the event also offers a glimpse at many areas including discourses of anti-Communism, relations between Dominicans and non-Dominicans, and even the public relations campaign to spread word of that fateful day.

The little attention paid to the Martínez case may be the result of the absence of coherent scholarship on the Dominican exile community. This absence can also be attributed to scholars of Dominican history looking from within the Dominican Republic outward as opposed to examining the exile community from their perspective, being physically outside the Dominican Republic.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the caveat is that still, not enough work has been done regarding the Dominican exile community in the United States. Fortunately, the Tancredo Martínez case provides us with a microcosm of the Dominican exile community and their lives.

The purpose of this essay is three-fold. First, this essay focuses on relationships formed by members of the Dominican exile

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2 Aaron Coy Moulton can be named among other scholars who have recently produced solid scholarship on the topic.

community with United States citizens. Second, this essay highlights the intervention of an understudied and forgotten United States ally: Frances R. Grant and the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom (IADF). Analyzing the little-known and understudied archival collection of Frances Grant<sup>3</sup> reveals many of the trials and tribulations faced by Dominicans not only in the Dominican Republic, but throughout the world. Hence, it is imperative to highlight Grant's collection, which by default brings to the center the activism of this strong-willed Dominican ally. Grant emerged as an important figure within exile communities in the United States because she used her privilege as a White United States citizen to help exiles, such as by translating documents, holding press conferences, and preventing the deportation of exiles, to name just a few examples. Last, but not least, the Tancredo Martínez case provides us with a glimpse into communistic discourses that emerged during the second half of the Trujillato, an understudied area in Dominican history.

## The Tancredo Martínez Case

During the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina Dominican Republic experienced a brain drain as many intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, diplomats, authors, and highly-skilled professionals left the Caribbean nation. Although many people resisted co-optation by the regime, several individuals who left the nation in exile did so after years of being complicit in doing the bidding of the Trujillato. One such person was Tancredo Eloy Martínez García, who served and represented the Dominican government as a diplomat throughout Latin America. During his time as a diplomat in Peru, however, Martínez renounced his position, soon after self-exiling to Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Martínez exposed human rights violations com-

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3 The Frances R. Grant archives are housed at the Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

4 Mexico served as a safe haven for many exiles; however, it also became a hotbed for murder and assassination attempts, including the brutal assassina-

mitted by the Dominican State, thus Earning the ire of the dictatorship.

Most documentation pertinent to Martínez in the Grant archive relates to the calamitous events that transpired on 23 September 1957 in Mexico City. On this date, a man later identified as Ricardo Bonichea León entered the office where Martínez worked, handing the lawyer a letter. Believing Martínez to be distracted while glancing over the correspondence, Bonichea León pulled-out a firearm, shooting Martínez in the face. The bullet entered Martínez's cheek, exiting through his spine.

A member of Vanguardia Revolucionaria Dominicana (VRD), Martínez joined a group of disenchanted Dominican exiles and refugees to combat the dictatorship from abroad. Headquartered in Puerto Rico, VRD established branches in New York and Mexico with some key members being J.A. Bonilla Atilas and J.R. Roque Martínez, who through their work as journalists, spread word of the dictatorship. Members of the VRD took an anti-Communist stance, yet the group bore the name Vanguardia Revolucionaria, a name later associated with the Marxist Peruvian political party Vanguardia Revolucionaria founded in 1965.<sup>5</sup>

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tions of Cuban activist Julio Antonio Mella McPartland in 1929 and Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky in 1940.

5 Between the death of Trujillo on 30 May 1961 and the 1962 December elections, 26 political parties came into existence; of these, only eight participated in the elections, with VRD being one. Similar to several groups who combated the Trujillato from abroad such as the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD). The VRD disappeared from public view after the 1965 Revolution, unlike the PRD, which survived the post-Trujillo era, remaining in the public eye well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Between the death of Trujillo on 30 May 1961 and the 1962 December elections, 26 political parties came into existence; of these, only eight participated in the elections, with VRD being one. Similar to several groups who combated the Trujillato from abroad such as the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD). The VRD disappeared from public view after the 1965 Revolution, unlike the PRD, which survived the post-Trujillo era, remaining in the public eye well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. See "Pero no llega," *Hoy*, 11 August, 2014 <https://hoy.com.do/pero-no-llega/>, footnote with the names of the 26 parties.

## Seeking United States Citizen Allies

The alliances formed among Dominican exiles and non-Dominicans is an important factor when studying the Trujillo regime. Exiles knew they could not combat the Trujillato from abroad with fellow Dominicans alone, hence their willingness to create united fronts with Dominicans and non-Dominicans, even those who held diverging ideologies, strategies, and tactics. Many exiles sought partnerships with allies in other nations, especially United States citizens such as Frances Grant, founder of the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom (IADF),<sup>6</sup> and elected officials Congressman Charles Orlando Porter and Senator Wayne Lyman Morse.<sup>7</sup> An illustration of these alliances would be an *informe* sent directly to Representative Porter, which included a photograph of Martínez on a gurney on the day he was shot in the face.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important yet overlooked figures in the history of exiles in the United States is Frances Grant, founder of the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom (IADF).<sup>9</sup> Grant was a humanitarian who often found herself embroiled in the middle of legal matters pertaining to exiles. Frequently, she performed tasks that may appear trivial and were administrative in nature, such as translating documents

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6 The Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom produced its own reports; the organization is noted in several publications.

7 Grant played a key role in the lives of exiles, refugees and struggles back in the homeland. Representing Oregon's 4<sup>th</sup> district, Porter served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives holding office from January 1957 through January 1961. Morse represented the Republican Party (1944-1952), Independent Party (1952-1955), and Democratic Party (1955-1974) at several junctures during his twenty-four-year political career. Porter and Morse both joined *exiliados* in their anti-Trujillo campaign as each elected official had a vested interest.

8 "Informe al representante Porter," 1957. Bulletin. From Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, *Inventory to the Papers of Frances R. Grant*.

9 Unlike the Inter-American Association for Democracy, Grant has not been given the credit she rightfully deserves as her work remains relatively understudied. The most complete work on Grants' pan American activities is a dissertation by David Mark Carletta, "Frances R. Grant's Pan American Activities, 1929-1949," PhD diss., (Michigan State University, 2009).

and completing paperwork to halt a migrant's deportation, yet these tasks made significant impact on the lives of exiles. In addition to service-oriented work, Grant organized press conferences, providing exiles a platform where they could share their personal experiences. Grant's activism made her a linchpin, allowing her to connect exiles with one another as well as with U.S. citizens and organizations.

The Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom organized a press conference on 11 March 1958, as noted in a message J.R. Roque Martínez sent to Grant.<sup>10</sup> As per the press release, the purpose of the press conference was for Tancredo Martínez to share his personal experience at the hands of the dictatorship with a wider audience. He shared the story of his attempted murder undertaken by the Trujillato. The press release—most likely translated by Grant—contains several chilling lines including: “I must insist that Trujillo has a network of spies who are constantly at work and moving through Central America and even in this country” and “It is this International Murder Inc. who has been responsible for the attempted attack of President Figueres of Costa Rica; for that of Castillo Armas of Guatemala; and for my own attempted assassination.”<sup>11</sup>

## Discourses of Communism and anti-Communism

Exiles' alliances did not follow a uniform ideology. With a greater goal in mind, some exiles aligned themselves with Communism, a pressing issue especially at the onset of the Cold War in 1947. For example, some members of the *Movimiento 14 de Junio* who participated in the expedition of Constanza, Maimón, and Estero Hondo trained in Miami and

10 Roque Martínez, J.R. *J.R. Roques Martínez to Frances Grant*, March 27, 1956. Letter. From Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, *Inventory to the Papers of Frances R. Grant*.

11 “For Release After \_ P.M.,” March 11, 1957. Press release. From Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, *Inventory to the Papers of Frances R. Grant*.

Cuba alongside Fidel Castro's forces.<sup>12</sup> An ardent student of U.S. politics, Trujillo leveraged his public disdain for Communism to remain in favor with the United States. Trujillo appeared to care little for Communists during the first fifteen years of his dictatorship as several Communists organized publicly. In reality, Trujillo began to exploit fears of the Red Scare as a means to remain in good graces with his number one advocate—the United States of America.

Several documents involving Martínez reveal an interesting debate centered around Communism among Trujillo's forces and those combating the Trujillato. After the failed assassination attempt against Martínez, the Dominican government released a public statement on 12 March 1958,<sup>13</sup> absolving Dominican officials of the assassination attempt on Tancredo Martínez while simultaneously claiming that Martínez's Communist activities resulted in him being shot in the face.<sup>14</sup> Branding Martínez as an enemy of the Dominican State due to his alleged ties to Communism, the press release links Martínez to German film actress Hilde Krüger de La Torre,<sup>15</sup> suspected of serving as a spy on behalf of the *Abwehr*, the German intelligence in Mexico. Among the several claims made in the document are that Martínez and Krüger were romantically involved during their time in Mexico and that Krüger served the Gestapo<sup>16</sup> as an agent. In a move of desperation, by linking Martínez to Krüger de La Torre, Trujillo's forces sloppily conflated two opposing ideologies: fascist Nazism and totalitarian Communism/Stalinism. The Trujillato's

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12 A misconception among many scholars is that individuals who trained in Cuba during this time supported Castro and Communism. In reality many trainees later opposed Castro's newly-installed government and/or opposed Communism. Many exiles vehemently denied being Communists.

13 Although the year is not stated in the document, it may be safe to assume it was published in 1958, months after the events that transpired on 23 September 1957.

14 "Ciudad Trujillo," March 12, 1957. Press release. From Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, *Inventory to the Papers of Frances R. Grant*.

15 Name is also listed as Hilda Kruyer de La Torre.

16 The Nazi secret police.

manipulation of information was one of its key strengths that allowed it to operate for 31 years. Trujillo's networks did their best to cling to whatever lies or "fake news" they could exploit, as noted with the unsubstantiated Martínez-Krüger link, a clear ploy to discredit exiles.

The most disturbing aspect of the communication, however, is the claim made by the head of the Servicio de Inteligencia Dominicana (Dominican Intelligence)<sup>17</sup> branding Martínez and his alleged shooter, Cuban gunman Ricardo Bonichea León, Communist buddies who had a falling out. Bonichea León is branded "IZQUIERDISTA FICHADO Y REVOLUCIONARIO CUBANO PERTENECIENTE DEL GRUPO 26 DE JULIO POR LO QUE ES ENEMIGO DECLARADO DEL GOBIERNO DOMINICANO." The statement also declares "TANCREDO MARTINEZ DESDE MUCHO TIEMPO ANDA EN ACTIVIDADES COMUNISTAS Y REVOLUCIONARIAS CON PELIGROSOS ELEMENTOS CUBANOS Y DE OTRAS NACIONALIDADES, SIENDO LOGICO SUPONER QUE EL ATENTADO DE QUE FUE VICTIMA SE HAYA ORIGINADO EN ALGUN INCIDENTE CON SUS COLEGAS COMUNISTAS." Regardless of its success as propaganda, the aim of this press release is threefold: 1. to absolve the Dominican Government of international involvement against Martínez or anyone who opposes Trujillo, 2. to discredit Martínez by branding him a Communist and consequently, the assassination attempt on his life is a result of his alleged Communist activities, and 3. to position Trujillo and the Dominican Republic as staunch opposers of Communism.

Martínez and other members of the VRD rebuked claims made by the Dominican government that VRD members were Com-

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17 Although the press release lists this entity as Servicio de Inteligencia Dominicana, it most likely refers to Trujillo's "secret police" established in 1957 under the name Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (SIM). Headed by Johnny Abbes García, the SIM was responsible for the murder and disappearance of many individuals who opposed the dictatorship both on the island and abroad. Abbes García and the SIM are noted in several documents, yet his name does not appear on this one, but we can deduce that he is most likely the person making the statement.



munists. In one document, Martínez outright denies the allegations stating that “PARA EL DICTADOR DOMINICANO TODOS SUS ENEMIGOS SON COMUNISTAS. ESTA HA SIDO UNA ACTITUD ADOPTADA POR EL EXTRANGULADOR DE LAS LIBERTADES DE LA REPUBLICA DOMINICANA PARA HACER CREER AL MUNDO, Y MUY ESPECIALMENTE AL DEPARTAMENTO DE ESTADO DE ESTADOS UNIDOS, QUE SOLO LOS MARXISTAS SE LE OPONEN A SU REGIMEN.”<sup>18</sup> Within the same document, which may be an excerpt from his speech given at a press conference on 11 March 1958 or draft of a letter, Martínez denies ever meeting or even knowing Hilde Krüger de La Torre, stating that the Dominican government’s press release was the first time he learned of Krüger’s existence. VRD member J. R. Roque Martínez sent Frances Grant a communication dated 27 March 1958.<sup>19</sup> Within that message, Roque Martínez reassures Grant that Tancredo Martínez is not a Communist and shares copies of two articles: the infamous press release from the Dominican government and a newspaper clipping from *El Mundo de San Juan de Puerto Rico* informing readers of Tancredo Martínez’s press conference that took place in New York on 11 March 1958.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Although largely ignored by the historical record, the assassination attempt on Tancredo Martínez must be considered an important moment when analyzing the Trujillato. This particular assassination attempt and the events that transpired thereafter not only shed important light on the activities of exiles and refugees during the Trujillato, but also on the vast, interconnected network of freedom fighters and their allies.

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18 “Las afirmaciones que hizo el gobierno del Tirano Trujillo,” 1957. From Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, *Inventory to the Papers of Frances R. Grant*.

19 Roque Martínez, J. R. *J. R. Roque Martínez to Frances Grant*, March 27, 1956. Letter. From Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, *Inventory to the Papers of Frances R. Grant*.

20 The press conference had been organized by Grant.

Rather than taking a top-down approach, this essay examined the relationship between Tancredo Martínez and Frances Grant from the bottom-up, bringing attention to the importance of the allyship among exiles and U.S. citizens. Similarly, this essay merely scratched the surface regarding discourses about Communism that emerged after World War II. Tancredo Martínez's story within the historiography of Trujillo is but a small portion of the larger picture. However, studying the Martínez case can lead historians and social scientists to ideas never previously considered. Using the Martínez case as an area of inquiry to further examine the anti-Trujillo movement in the United States as well as the exile movement's contribution in bringing down the Trujillo regime.