On Sunday, June 14, 1959, members of the Dominican Liberation Movement with the assistance of Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro staged an invasion of the Dominican Republic and attempted to overthrow the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. The revolutionaries were divided into three groups; the first arrived near Constanza in the mountains of Cordillero Central by transport plane, while two others attacked from ships stationed offshore. The mission was short-lived, however. Trujillo’s spies learned of the attack and the dictator’s armed forces thwarted the plot.

In Chapter Eight of In the Time of the Butterflies, Patria travels with Padre de Jesús and a group of women for a spiritual retreat in Constanza, a place she describes as “purple mountains reaching toward angelfeather clouds; a falcon soaring in a calm blue sky, God combing His sunshine fingers through green pastures straight out of the Psalms” (p. 160). On the fourth day of her trip, gunfire and shelling break the sanctity of the place. Patria is changed when she watches a young boy die from gunshot wounds.

Though the invasion by the Dominican Liberation Movement failed, it inspired others to organize their efforts against the dictator. The underground effort founded by the Mirabal sisters and their husbands takes its name from this brave attempt of exiled Dominicans to restore democracy to their country. The Fourteenth of June Movement, sometimes called J14, soon had hundreds of members.

Trujillo had evidence of the underground efforts to overthrow his regime and imprisoned the Mirabal sisters, their husbands, and dozens of other members of the Fourteenth of June Movement. The arrests were condemned by the Catholic Church, which had initially been reluctant to speak out against the dictator. As the resistance gained strength, the dictator declared that he had only two problems: the Catholic Church and the Mirabal sisters. In November 1960, he ordered the murders of Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa.

The date of the Mirabal sisters’ deaths became recognized throughout Latin America as a day to end violence against women. In December 1999, the United Nations General Assembly declared November 25th the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The United Nations website (http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/news/vawd.html) explains:

The sisters … have become a symbol against victimization of women. They have become the symbol of both popular and feminist resistance. They have been commemorated in poems, songs and books. Their execution inspired a fictional account In the Time of the Butterflies on the young lives of the sisters written by Julia Alvarez. It describes their suffering and martyrdom in the last days of the Trujillo dictatorship. The memory of the Mirabal sisters and their struggle for freedom and respect for human rights for all has transformed them into symbols of dignity and inspiration. They are symbols against prejudice and stereotypes, and their lives raised the spirits of all those they encountered and later, after their death, not only those in the Dominican Republic but others around the world.