

## **Dr Francia**

Alex Middleton

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### **Birth name**

José Gaspar de Franza y Velasco

### **Date of birth**

1766

### **Place of birth**

Yaguarón, Paraguay

### **Date of death**

1840

### **Education**

University of Córdoba

### **Date of ascension to power**

1814 (as temporary dictator)

### **Date of loss of power**

1840 (his death)

### **Length of rule (years, months, days)**

26 years

José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia has always divided opinion. For some of his subjects he was a paternal patriot, while for others he was a cruel, bigoted tyrant. His European and North American contemporaries clashed bitterly over whether he was a political Robin Hood, or an earthly Mephistopheles. Historians writing more recently have been similarly split about whether Francia was a devoted father to an emergent Paraguayan nation, or a man corrupted and even driven mad by the long-continued possession of absolute power.

Spanish America threw up an impressive number of dictators in the decades after its seizure of independence in the early nineteenth century. But Dr Francia – as he has generally been known in the Anglophone world – has always been one of the most widely discussed and studied. This is in part because of his longevity. Where most Latin American leaders of the post-revolutionary era rose and fell rapidly, measuring their reigns in months or weeks, Francia ruled for more than a quarter of century, and retained power until his death. But the sustained interest he has generated has also, perhaps even more significantly, arisen as a result of the mystery and even romance in which his regime was enveloped. Deliberately isolated from the outside world for most of the period of Francia's ascendancy, newly independent Paraguay was seen – as the historian Thomas Carlyle put it – through 'a murk of distracted shadows and rumours'. Carlyle's 1843 essay 'Dr. Francia', casting the dictator as an exemplary anti-constitutional strongman, has helped to maintain Francia's celebrity ever since, despite concluding that he was 'at present, to the European mind, little other than a chimera; at best, the statement of a puzzle, to which the solution is still to seek'.

Francia was born in 1766, to a Brazilian planter father and a Paraguayan mother. He was educated at a monastery school in Asunción, the principal city of Paraguay, and later at the College of Monserrat at the University of Córdoba, in what is now Argentina. Initially he taught theology, but he quickly turned to the study of law, and rapidly became one of the most successful (and morally fastidious) lawyers in Asunción. Ascending through a series of provincial political offices during the 1800s, he had become a prominent figure by the time of 1810's May Revolution in Buenos Aires, the capital of the Spanish Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata to which Paraguay belonged. When Paraguay declared its own independence in 1811, Francia was first made Secretary to the new ruling *junta*, before being raised to its ranks. After a series of strategic resignations and power-plays, in 1813 Francia was named as one of two alternating consuls (alongside the leading military man Fulgencio Yegros) under the country's new classicising constitution. In 1814 a national Congress replaced this system with a temporary one-man dictatorship, to which Francia was elevated. In 1816 another Congress confirmed Francia's appointment for life. Some claimed this outcome was a natural result of his popularity and superior merits, while others blamed corrupt influence. Either way, Francia spent the next quarter-century ruling as Supreme and Perpetual Dictator of Paraguay – or as he was more widely called, *El Supremo*.

As far as the rest of the contemporary world was concerned, the most remarkable thing Francia did as Dictator of Paraguay was to shut it out. By 1820 it was reported that almost all of Paraguay's foreign commerce had been curtailed, and that the borders of the country were closed virtually to all-comers, with the odd exception made for political refugees. Francia's goal, apparently, was to make his landlocked country economically self-sufficient, and to insulate it from the wars and civil conflicts which were a chronic feature of political life across much of post-revolutionary Spanish America. But the result was that foreign observers had no reliable supply of information. Highly coloured rumours and manifestly partial accounts constituted most of what was available.

What intelligence did creep out from behind Francia's diplomatic and commercial walls suggested that he was running a regime of an extraordinary kind. The reports which swirled across nineteenth-century Europe revolved around the same basic points. Francia appeared to be pursuing the most singularly absolute dictatorship in the history of dictatorships: centralising all legislative, executive, and judicial power in his own hands alone, and showing no hesitation about using any of it. It was clear that he had a taste for arbitrary imprisonment, detaining not only the authors of the two available first-hand accounts of dictatorial Paraguay (Swiss doctors and Scottish merchants), but also the distinguished French naturalist Aimé Bonpland, who had travelled with Alexander von Humboldt, and who was kept captive in rural Paraguay for most of the 1820s. It was widely alleged that Francia imposed capital sentences and incarcerations with abandon and without remorse, that he cared nothing for the sanctity of property either real or moveable – decreeing on a whim the levelling of buildings which might provide shelter to potential assassins – and that he had instituted a uniquely rigorous system of political surveillance, police, and passports. He himself supposedly inspected, approved, and rejected every single delivery of trade goods submitted to the Paraguayan government. Certain more specific incidents were generally cited to stand for the character of his regime. Francia was said to personally (and parsimoniously) distribute the ammunition used in state executions, which he watched dispassionately from a palace window while eking out his favourite cigars. An episode in which he instructed his sentinel to shoot on sight any passers-by who so much as looked at his official residence was repeated breathlessly across the public presses of Europe.

So one contemporary explanation for Francia's hold on power rested on the radical purity and comprehensiveness of his approach to the business of dictatorship. Yet many foreign observers argued that some kind of moral nexus bound the dictator and his people together. Dr Francia was, by definition, a highly educated man, reputedly the possessor of the best – and by many accounts the only – library in his country. Some travel writers claimed that by night the Dictator conducted astronomical observations in front of admiring mass audiences, and that his apparent understanding of that which commanded the stars was one of the foundations of his political authority. More commonly, it was suggested that Francia benefited from and sought to encourage the habits of absolute obedience fostered among the people of Paraguay by the Jesuit missions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

What was known of Francia's personal life suggested that he was a national leader of unusually ascetic habits. He was said to live, dress, and eat with remarkable simplicity, to spend almost nothing, and – as a result – to be utterly resistant to any form of material corruption. The book on Paraguay published by the detained Swiss doctors, Messrs Rengger and Longchamp, gave a brief account of the Dictator's personal habits, which the European press reproduced more widely than any other single passage about Francia. It described his 6am confidences with his barber, 'a filthy, ragged, and drunken mulatto'; his 'extremely frugal' dinners; and his preference for fastening the doors of his residence himself when he retired to bed. His fear of assassination, the doctors claimed, meant that he always had multiple guns and sabres to hand. They asserted that his disinterestedness was such that he paid little attention to the bonds of family, imprisoning his nephew for some years for having fallen into a scuffle at a ball. They suggested, moreover, that Francia was afflicted with regular (seemingly weather-induced) attacks of hypochondria, which tended to correlate with his willingness to impose death sentences. These observations did much to foster the idea that Francia was at least partially insane, a suggestion which ran through contemporary commentary of all sympathies.

There were elements of truth, at least, in virtually all of these contemporary accounts. The historical Francia drew inspiration of various kinds from the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and especially the Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte. Responding to aspects of that inheritance, he aimed to break the social and political power of the landed Spanish colonial elite, and of the Roman Catholic Church, which was nationalised in almost all particulars under his administration. The Inquisition, tithes, and the local college of theology were all abolished, and a litany of restrictions gradually imposed on the despised clergy. Francia appears, by most modern accounts, to have aimed seriously at the elevation of the interests of the lower classes of Paraguay, especially its native (Guarani) people. As dictator, he pursued a series of innovations in education (made mandatory for boys remarkably early, in 1828), in agriculture (confiscating land from the elites and the Church and leasing it to the propertyless, and introducing new methods of pastoral and arable farming), and in the organisation and composition of the military (troop numbers being kept flexible in response to the changing character of foreign threats). New industries and manufactures were cultivated as part of Francia's policy of economic self-sufficiency, especially shipbuilding and textiles. Paraguayan 'isolation', moreover, was never as absolute as it appeared to contemporaries, and commercial contacts with Argentina and Brazil sustained the nation throughout Francia's time. His quietist foreign policy achieved its aims, in that Paraguay under his rule retained its independence and avoided war, despite a sequence of tricky border disputes. The trade-off was the absolute suppression of all vestiges of political or constitutional liberty.

That there was severity under Francia is not in doubt. What is not so clear is how fundamental it was to the character of his regime. A foiled 1820 plot against the Dictator's life led to executions, imprisonments, and ransoms in the hundreds (including the execution of former co-consul Yegros). In scale at least, however, these punishments appear to have been exceptional, and in many cases common criminals seem to have been treated with relative generosity in Francia's Paraguay. As far as Francia's personal habits are concerned, historians today have little more evidence available to them than contemporaries did. Interpretations continue to rely on the same handful of partial first-hand accounts.

In the end, the clashing takes on Francia outlined at the start of this entry are not difficult to account for. Like all rulers of modern states, he meant different things to different social, political, and religious groups. It is hardly surprising that, internally, he appealed more to native Paraguayans than to the post-colonial Spanish elite; or that, externally, constitutional agnostics like Carlyle were more sympathetic towards him than were convinced liberals. Like many long-serving dictators, his policy also changed over time – not least in relation to commerce, coercion, and the Church – which helps to explain why views have differed. A mercurial temper added a spice of unpredictability to his decisions. But Francia belonged, it might be suggested, to a particularly complex species of autocrats. A taste for arbitrary power in its most naked forms coexisted in him with an austere republican simplicity, and genuine financial disinterestedness. Unsentimental and sometimes brutal deployments of physical force ran alongside an unyielding commitment to the safeguarding and improvement of the economic and social condition of the Paraguayan state. National independence was Francia's overriding goal, but that was no easy ambition in the war-torn and politically chaotic climate of early-nineteenth-century Latin America. The politics of his country and his revolutionary continent were unprecedented and unpredictable. It makes sense that they should have generated an approach to dictatorship that fell across fault lines. Carlyle, as ever, summed it up best: 'The meaning and meanings of the one true man, never so lean and limited, starting-up direct from Nature's heart, in this bewildered Gaucho world... are endless!'

It must be noted, finally, that Francia created a distinctive dictatorial tradition in Paraguay. He left no children and no acknowledged successor, but was shortly succeeded in another two-decade-long dictatorship by another lawyer, Carlos Antonio López. In due course the son, Francisco Solano López, took over. The younger López then led the country into the Paraguayan War of 1864-70, in which, by some estimates, the majority of its population died.