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Diego Rivera, “La Gran Tenochtitlán”

Lost Worlds

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Dumbfounded by the beauty of it, the conquistadors ride down the causeway. Tenochtitlán seems to have been torn from the pages of Amadís, *things never heard of, never seen, nor even dreamed*. ... The Sun rises behind the volcanoes, enters the lake, and breaks the floating mist into shreds. The city – streets, canals, high-towered temples – glitters before them. A multitude comes out to greet the invaders, silent and unhurried, while innumerable canoes open furrows in the cobalt waters.

– Eduardo Galeano¹

Lost in the library one day in my undergraduate years – and desperately seeking an excuse to avoid completing a term paper that was already overdue – I stumbled upon a book of reproductions of Diego Rivera’s murals. I was awestruck by the force of Rivera’s images of the depredations of the Spanish conquistadors in such works as “De la Conquista a 1930” (“From Conquest to 1930”) and “Desembarco de Españoles en Veracruz” (“Disembarkation of the Spanish in Veracruz”).

But one work in particular captured my imagination: the artist's recreation of the great Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, on the eve of its destruction.² Rivera's homage to pre-Conquest Mexico – "La Gran Tenochtitlán" ("The Great City of Tenochtitlán") – is among an enormous series of frescoes that adorns the stairwells and walls of the third floor of the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City.

Most of the action in Rivera's "Tenochtitlán" occurs in the foreground, behind which looms the magnificent city, replete with temples, streets, marketplaces, and plazas, surrounded by towering mountains. Characteristically, Rivera notes the distinctions between rich and poor, rulers and subjects; but the most lasting impression is one of a centuries-old culture of elaborate symbolism and rituals. Rivera's fresco is not only a celebration of a vanquished people who had given much to his own, modern Mexico, but also an indictment of the Conquest – for *we* know, unlike the Indians painted by Rivera, that this way of life would shortly be destroyed, along with the city itself, by Cortés and his successors.³

At the time I encountered this work, I was a young student fascinated with the history of Nazi Germany, an era that raises many troubling and profound questions. My introduction to the Holocaust had led me to look deeper into the long and grim history of genocide – learning, for example, about the mass murder of indigenous peoples in the Americas. But in viewing Rivera's fresco, even in the book's pale reproduction, it dawned on me that history could have taken other paths. I was compelled to discover those civilizations that had been erased from the earth, and often from historical memory, because of genocide.

Our work as historians of genocide tends to dwell upon the crimes of the perpetrators and the suffering of the victims. Much is known today about the suffering of the Armenian people during World War I, the horrors under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the genocide that eradicated three-fourths of Rwanda's Tutsi population. But much less is known of the lives these people led before the tragedies that befell them, and of the cultures that were dispersed or destroyed. Some, like the East Timorese, have managed to persevere and keep alive their cultural identity. Others were less fortunate.

"La Gran Tenochtitlán" would serve as a lingering inspiration for my own research, some years later, into German-Jewish life before the Holocaust, and specifically the underground anti-Nazi resistance that originated in left-wing Jewish youth subcultures. It is tempting to view all of pre-1933 German-Jewish history as a prelude to the Holocaust. In fact, by the time of its unification, Germany was actually seen by European Jews as a haven from the much harsher antisemitism of neighboring lands.

Jews lived in Germany for many centuries, and gave Europe some of its greatest talents, from Moses Mendelssohn and Heinrich Heine to Alfred Einstein, Kurt Weill, and Walter Benjamin – products not purely of Jewish life, but of cultural syntheses. German-Jewish intellectual traditions and youth subcultures would later foment a determined and creative resistance to Nazism – a resistance that took many forms, and was much larger than is commonly believed. While in Germany a Jewish community has reemerged in recent years, it is in many ways cut off from the vibrant pre-1933 traditions of German Jewry, which can never be rebuilt or resurrected. The Jewish people not only suffered an irreparable tragedy in the Holocaust: Europe and the world lost something irreplaceable as well.

It was only recently that I finally had the privilege of viewing Rivera's murals at various sites around Mexico City – the teeming metropolis that rests, layer upon layer, above the ruins of Tenochtitlán. Groups of schoolchildren milled about the frescoes of the Palacio Nacional, reminding me that Rivera's work continues to resonate, and that the pre-Spanish civilization he depicted is seen by Mexicans as part of their heritage. Yet the frescoes remain as poignant reminders that what is lost can never be regained.

Notes

¹ Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 67.

² "Aztec" is a popular term that is not entirely accurate, but I use it for clarity. The Aztecs referred to themselves as Culhua-Mexica, and many scholars today prefer "Mexica."

³ The revolutionary artist and *bon vivant* ran afoul of his comrades in the Communist Party for his portrayal of pre-Conquest Mexico, which expressed too unambiguously his admiration of Indian culture and veered too far from the deadening "socialist realism" then in vogue.

