

Hirohito at Disneyland

A biography of Hirohito by Professor Herbert Bix that I recently read offers an unexpected connection to one of my favorite Doctorow novels, *The Book of Daniel*; I reviewed the book two years ago. When the war in the Pacific ended the standard view of the public was that the Emperor was a passive onlooker in Japan's aggression against Asia and the west. Japan's pre-war constitution, it was argued, rendered him a powerless bystander obliged to give his assent to cabinet decisions. This belief persisted even though he broke a charged political deadlock by forcing the cabinet to accept the American terms of surrender in 1945. Senior military officers, personified by Hideki Tojo--who was actually one of three premiers to hold office from the fall of 1941 until the end of the war--were seen as the personification of evil. He and his malevolent cohorts, executed after the war, apparently forced the policy of expansionism on a reluctant but powerless Emperor. In his novel *Sabbath's Theater*, Philip Roth has Mickey Sabbath assert the common fallacy that Hirohito "could have stopped his nutty admirals before [war] even began if God had given God Emperor just an ordinary commoner's pair of balls."

But a lack of courage was not Hirohito's deficiency. Not according to Bix. By heavily mining Japanese-language archives, he has presented a different picture of the Emperor, one that would have infuriated Sabbath even more than the conventional one. Hirohito was, in fact, an active proponent from the outset of the war, which began in 1931 with the invasion of Manchuria and may have killed as many as 20 million people in Asia. That figure excludes Japan's own casualties, and is itself no more than a guess. The sum of the killed and injured in China, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma and elsewhere is so vast that historians can only hazard the most general figure.

In 1937, to take one example, the Emperor authorized high-level military officers to use tear gas and "certain special chemical warfare units." Tear gas sounds innocuous, but within a year the order was extended to poison gas "in the main battle theaters in China and Mongolia." Further, the maltreatment of prisoners of war is laid to Hirohito. He approved of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the beginning of offensive operations against Western colonial powers in South Asia. When the United States captured Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, its first ground engagement in the Pacific War, "the Emperor put constant psychological pressure on his naval commanders to recapture the island...." Only after two atomic bombs had been dropped and the

Soviets had invaded Mongolia did the Emperor agree to surrender terms—and even then, partly under the threat of a popular revolt in his own country. As Bix declares, "through every state of its unfolding, Hirohito played a highly active role in supporting the actions carried out in his name." Bix continues: "From the very start of the Asia-Pacific war, the Emperor was a major protagonist of the events unfolding around him." Interrogated by American officials after the surrender, Hirohito blamed Tojo for the attack on Pearl Harbor, which was what the occupying authorities wanted to hear. From the moment the USS Missouri swung into Tokyo Bay, MacArthur's goal was to stabilize the country, exploit functioning government agencies, and ensure the democratic transformation of Japan. Protecting the Emperor from formal war crimes prosecution, which many US officials wanted, was essential. So were Hirohito's guided visits to military hospitals, which rehabilitated his image as a kind of "people's Emperor" and were meant to appease Japanese angered by the needless length of the war and its thousands of avoidable casualties. (The Soviets, less obliging, pressed the matter of prosecuting the Emperor as late as 1950, on the grounds that he sanctioned the use of chemical and biological agents during the war. But with the country under American control, they had no leverage.) Preserving stability in Japan was a worthy American goal, but absolving the Emperor and other leading authorities prevented the country from confronting its history of wartime atrocities.

The strategy matched Hirohito's goals entirely. He was protected from execution or imprisonment, unlike the twenty-five defendants in the Tokyo war crimes trials, and maintained his position as emperor, even if his status as a divinity was greatly diminished. One notable (if late) phase of his rehabilitation, which extended from the very first day of the surrender in 1945 until his death in 1989, came thirty years after the war ended. The Emperor made his one and only trip to the United States in the fall of 1975, when he visited President Ford in the capital and toured sites in California, including Disneyland. At the amusement park, he posed with Mickey Mouse, signed a visitor's book and acquired a Mickey Mouse wristwatch. Photographs of this were taken and widely disseminated around the country, perhaps around the world. These images helped persuade the generation of Americans born after the war that the Emperor truly was just a harmless figurehead, now greatly aged, who bore no responsibility for the events of the thirties and forties.

It is precisely this visit to Disneyland that connects the Doctorow novel with the transformation of Hirohito's reputation. As readers of my review of the novel know, the story

reaches a conclusion when the demented Daniel Isaacson, the stand-in for the children of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, is driven out of the Columbia University library by black power advocates intent on "taking over" the university. This happened in the spring of 1968. The moment comes just after Daniel has returned from California, where he had hoped to confront his parents' accuser, Dr. Selig Mindish, a retired dentist, former Communist Party member, and the person responsible (in the novel) for his parents' conviction and ultimate execution. This confrontation takes place at Disneyland, over twenty years after the end of the war; the novel itself was published in 1969.

Two things stood out for me regarding this element of the book. The entire story, of course, is simply a demented autobiography in the form of a doctoral dissertation, an autobiography that Daniel prepares over a period of weeks in the library. A graduate student specializing in diplomatic history, Daniel's ostensible subject is the end of World War II, the use of the atomic bomb, and the onset of the Cold War. He has added to his ruminations on his family history citations from William Appleman Williams, Irving Louis Horowitz and Gar Alperovitz, scholars who published revisionist histories of the Cold War in the 1960s. Doctorow's view of the Rosenberg case, the use of the atomic bomb and the advent of the Cold War are far from clear, because, like most novelists, he hides behind his characters. But the novel itself would seem to be part of this trend, which includes the rise of the New Left and the denunciation of American power. Daniel's trip to Disneyland, other than illustrating his disturbed condition, captures the frivolity that overtook American life in the post-war years and especially its transformation in the 1960s, when a culture of entertainment seemed to take over the world of leisure and recreation. Dr. Mindish has bought a book of tickets at Disneyland that allows him to spend the day driving hard-plastic cars that collide with other such cars in the arena named "Richfield Autopia." It is actually his wife who seems to be piloting the vehicle, because Dr. Mindish is far too decayed mentally to do much of anything. Daniel's plan to confront Mindish and challenge his claim that his parents were involved in a conspiracy to commit espionage comes to nothing.

As I commented in an earlier essay on *Daniel*, the United States was driven into the war to save itself from the aggression of Germany and Japan. Ferocious ground and naval campaigns in Europe and the Pacific cost the country about 300,000 lives and led to the use of atomic weapons at the end of the war. From Doctorow's perspective, this earth-shaking event concludes

in the dismal frivolity of Disneyland. Big American corporations of the day, including Bell Telephone, Monsanto, General Electric, and others, all have elements of the "park" named after them, much as stadiums today bear the names of large companies willing to pay for "naming rights." The name of the rink the Mindishes traverse in their silly entertainment is appropriate, because Richfield was an oil company that was later absorbed by other larger ones. And the makers of the amusement park—the Disney Corporation--have contrived a facility that falls short of amusement. The facility is broken up into segments that are intended to reflect phases in American history. An artificial river is meant to recreate a Mark Twain steamboat ride on the Mississippi. A mule train captures the crossing of the West. Main Street USA is supposed to capture a typical small town in the 1890s. But two things seriously detract from the experience. The first is that the settings are transparently artificial, and the second is the abundance of crowds. Visitors on the steamboat look into the hills with the mule pack trains, and vice versa, and the attempts at "vicarious participation" in one historical experience or another is thwarted by "human multiplicity" and "the mirror of others' eyes." (Daniel's remarks on Disneyland are sometimes acute and at other times paranoid.)

The entire experience is one of fakery and even of something slightly grim. Hirohito's public relations campaign is a manifestation of this. But he chose a facility that has a dark side, if one that is overlooked by the public. And it would have been more to the point in 1975 had the Emperor made time on his way home to take in the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor. It draws thousands of visitors to Hawaii every year, and lies mid-way between Japan and the West Coast.

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