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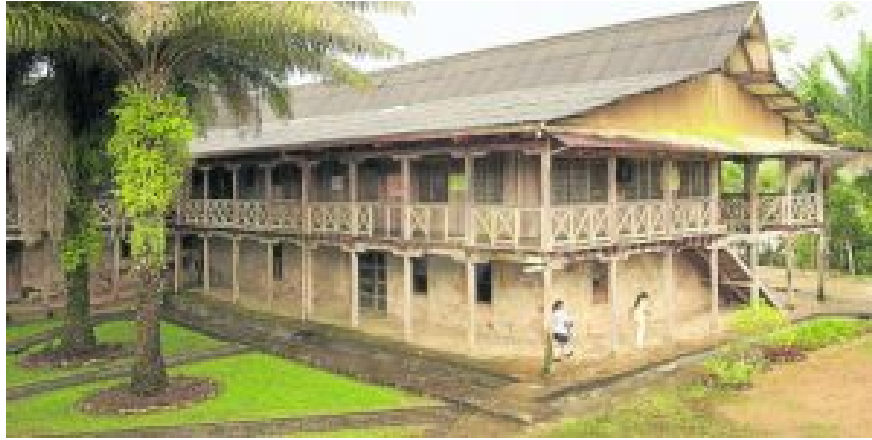
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The Rubber Holocaust and 'The Maelstrom'

"La Vorágine, by José Eustacio Rivera, oscillates between exacerbated romanticism, by then already extinct in the rest of the world, and realism, which shows the human beast with its worst unbridled instincts, became a universal reference for the disasters of violence in a country like Colombia" – Reinaldo Spitaletta.



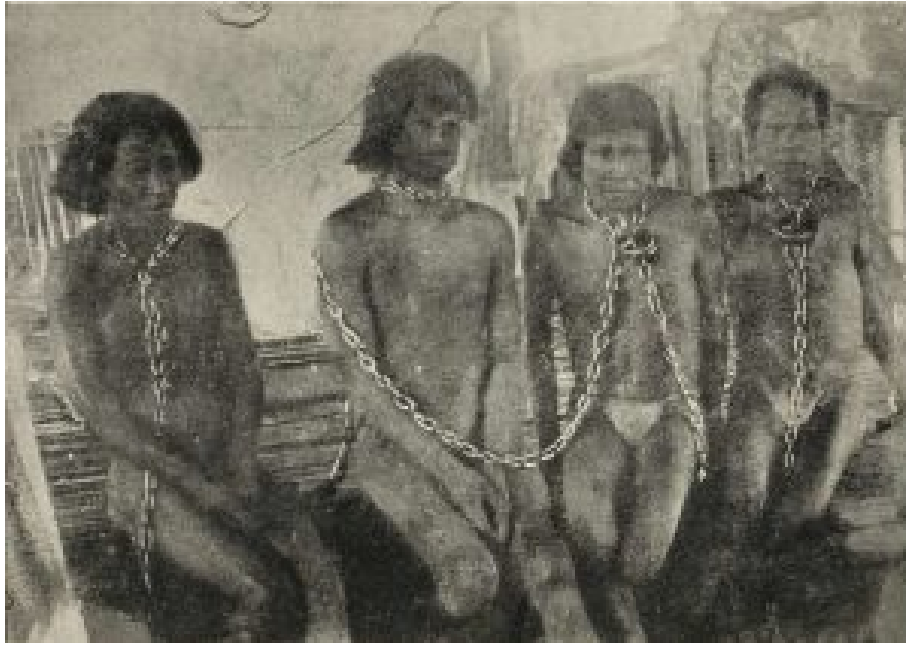
The Amazonian holocaust, the rubber genocide, the more than 100,000 Indians, who in the nineteenth century were called "irrationals", murdered by the [Spider House](#), turned the manigua into a seat of all hell. The first incursions in which natural disasters were killed as if they were being weeded were in the times of the "cinchona fever", and later, with the rise of rubber exploitation, after the advances of vulcanization in capitalist countries such as England, France and the United States, the devastation of indigenous people continued, victims of unusual punishments. persecution and extermination.



The trading empire known as Casa Arana, which exploited rubber in the Amazon, used terror to enslave the indigenous people. Archive Portafolio.co

An enormous network of latex extraction and distribution spread throughout Manaus and Iquitos, was also irrigated in the Colombian jungles and transfigured those territories into a source of wealth for a few and death and desolation for thousands, among whom were members of different Amazonian cultures, such as the Huitotos, for example. In 1901, the Peruvian Julio César Arana formed the Indian colony of La Chorrera with other allies. That natural wealth, exploited by the voracity of Great Britain, would lead to tensions between Colombia and Peru, triggering the war between the two countries in 1932.

The jungle was erected as the "devil's paradise", as it was described by a young American engineer, [Walter Hardenburg](#), who witnessed, in 1907, the torture and thousands of atrocities against the indigenous people, subjected to a regime of slavery. Some of those aberrations were those denounced, years later, by the novelist and poet [José Eustasio Rivera](#), in *La vorágine*, published in 1924. The work, which oscillates between exaggerated romanticism, by then already extinct in the rest of the world, and realism, which shows the "human beast" with its worst unbridled instincts, became a universal reference of the disasters of violence in a country like Colombia.



Thousands of indigenous people were enslaved and killed during the rubber rush. © W Hardenburg

As the fiery novel began to become popular, Rivera became a kind of "star," transcending his trip to the jungle where he was going only for a "lawyer's business" and emerged from it a universal figure, as is his work. Rivera, by narrating the other country, the unknown, the one of the incredible, the marvelous and the enormous, grows in the interest of readers. On February 7, 1926, El Tiempo's Sunday Readings published an interview titled "An Hour with José Eustasio Rivera."

One of the questions asked was about "the movement of the novel in Colombian literature", to which the writer replied that, among us, prose has not had the same atmosphere as verse (after all, since before and since that interview this has been known as a country of poets, but also as a country of murderers). He also said that "the imaginative capacity to create is deficient, almost non-existent. The characters, the essential basis of the novel, are usually blurred and easily forgotten, for almost all of them lack life, strong and real life."

Undoubtedly, Arturo Cova, the one who before falling in love with any woman gambled his heart on chance and was won by Violence, is an unforgettable character, as are the beginning and also the epilogue of *The Maelstrom*. In the interview, he was also asked about the "poetry movement in Colombia" and said that it was superior to any other in the Americas. His tongue was bitten and he mentioned that of the new poets "of those who

write here in Bogotá," he liked [Rafael Maya](#) "in some of his poems," [León de Greiff](#), "who despite his metrical extravagances, highlights his poetic vein," and Rafael Vásquez.

He considered the greatest poet in Colombia to be [Rafael Pombo](#) and expressed his liking for foreign writers and poets such as [Eça de Queiroz](#), [Gabriel D'Annunzio](#) and [Henrik Ibsen](#). "Lately I've been reading a book that has caught my attention: the novel Iphigenia, by the Venezuelan writer [Teresa de la Parra](#)." A key question was what interested him more, politics or literature: "Literature, without a doubt; From politics I have drawn nothing but the knowledge of men, of their miseries, which will furnish me with elements for my future literary work in some form."

He began writing another play, The Black Spot, which was lost in New York, where he died mysteriously on December 1, 1928. There were five days to go before the massacre of the banana plantations took place in Colombia, carried out by the transnational United Fruit Company and the conservative government of Miguel Abadía Méndez. The massacre, it is known, appears in works such as [One Hundred Years of Solitude](#), by García Márquez; [La casa grande](#), by Cepeda Samudio, and [Si no fuera por la zona caramba](#), by Ramón Illán Bacca.

More than a century ago, there was a genocide in the Amazon rainforests. The main executioners were Julio César Arana and the British company Peruvian Amazon. May history and literature continue to do justice.

Reinaldo Spitaletta for La Pluma, March 11, 2024

Edited by [Maria Piedad Ossaba](#)

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