

Current Books

Africa, the struggle continues.

Pham does not draw sufficient attention to a factor I believe to have been crucial in the debacle not only of Liberia but of all post-colonial Africa: the disjunction in the educated classes between abstract, rhetorical universal principles and innermost desires for personal advancement. Thus, old regimes such as the Americo-Liberian are criticized from the standpoint of an ideal by people with limited, or deliberately concealed, self-knowledge—they speak of social justice but dream of Mercedes cars. Nevertheless, Pham's book is the best short guide to the Liberian imbroglio, and serves as a timely warning to those who think weak and disintegrating states can be led by outside intervention to the paths of peace and wisdom.

—THEODORE DALRYMPLE

THE NUremberg INTERVIEWS: An American Psychiatrist's Conversations with the Defendants and Witnesses.

By Leon Goldensohn. Edited by Robert Gellately. Knopf. 474 pp. \$35

As every publisher knows—and as we were reminded during Holocaust denier David Irving's audacious but ill-fated libel suit against his fellow historian Deborah Lipstadt—there can probably be no such thing as a surfeit of information about the Third Reich. Like Richard Overy's *Interrogations* (2001), which synthesized the transcripts of interviews of captured German leaders, Leon Goldensohn's fastidious record of his encounters with fallen potentates and functionaries offers a backstage glimpse of the Nuremberg trials.

A psychiatrist who rose to the rank of major in the U.S. Army, Goldensohn (1911-61) spent seven months of 1946 interviewing Nazi officials held as both defendants and witnesses at the Nuremberg trials, for purposes of monitoring their mental health. Although he never fulfilled his plan to write a book about the assignment, his notes and transcripts were collated after his death and subsequently came to the attention of Florida State University professor Robert Gellately, author of *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (2001).

The result is, essentially, a work in

progress, which inevitably lacks the narrative flow and occasional melodramatic flourish of psychologist G. M. Gilbert's *Nuremberg Diary* (1947). But Goldensohn remains an intriguing witness to history nonetheless. There may be a chilling doggedness to some of his techniques: Asking Rudolf Hoess, the former commandant of Auschwitz, if his wife was "a good cook" elicits no useful information. And like many an interlocutor at Nuremberg, Goldensohn is invariably confronted with long-winded evasions and self-justifications, particularly when he attempts to probe the inner workings of the Final Solution.

But his patience and persistence yield valuable insights, especially from the lowlier figures in the Nazi hierarchy. Indeed, the third of the book devoted to the men called as witnesses is the most intriguing. The loftily self-absorbed SS general Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski attempts to depict himself as an "incorruptible," good Nazi. The fanatical *Einsatzgruppe* leader Otto Ohlendorf is so successful at convincing himself that he was a mere pawn that he resembles, in Goldensohn's words, "a burned-out ghoul."

In a curious way, there is an even more repellent quality to the portrait of Walter Schellenberg, the urbane intelligence official who seems capable of infinite adjustments to the moral calculus. If the VIPs in the other cells often seem less than human, Schellenberg is all too recognizable as the ambitious, quick-witted young man who always knows which way the wind is blowing. Though the monsters were hanged, Schellenberg's spiritual descendants will always be with us.

—CLIVE DAVIS

ATHENS: A History, from Ancient Ideal to Modern City.

By Robin Waterfield. Basic.
362 pp. \$27.50

Classical scholar Robin Waterfield takes on a daunting task. He aims to provide a concise but detailed history of Athens from the Mycenaean settlements of the 13th century B.C.E. to the preparations for the 2004 Olympics. Waterfield's love for the land and its history permeates the book. He provides vivid portraits of the major players—Pericles,

Demosthenes, Lord Elgin, and Lord Byron—as well as less familiar figures, such as the mournful, scholarly archbishop Michael of Chonae, who labored in the 12th century to restore the Parthenon. His forthrightly “moralizing history” contains a good deal that’s inspiring and edifying, but also, unfortunately, much that’s misleading.

Waterfield blames Athenian imperialism for the agonies of the fifth-century B.C.E. Peloponnesian War and gives a chilling, accurate description of Athenian hubris, exemplified in the eradication of Melos and Skione. But he doesn’t grasp the complexity of the causes of the war. In his account, reluctant Spartans were “forced” to “confront Athens and its imperialist ambitions.” In contrast, the Athenian general and historian Thucydides properly emphasized Sparta’s fear of Athens’s growth as well as Sparta’s long-standing, bitter jealousy of Athens. Unlike Thucydides, Waterfield doesn’t mention Athens’s offer to submit to arbitration to avoid war, and he underreports Sparta’s war crimes, such as the massacre of the Plataeans.

The book’s moralizing builds on Waterfield’s notion of an “Olympic spirit of Greek cooperation.” Although he admits that the Olympic truce of Greek antiquity was little more than a guarantee of safe passage for competitors and spectators to and from Olympia, he wants to believe that wars generally subsided. But not only did Greece’s interneccine wars continue, the Olympic

truce itself was broken on a few occasions and Olympia witnessed warfare in its own sacred precincts.

Scholars have long cautioned against investing the Olympics with undeserved moral status. In the case of the notorious 1936 games in Berlin, precisely this kind of weak history and fuzzy thinking caused the world to overlook the crimes of the hosts in the name of a putative Olympic ideal. In truth, the ancient Olympics were relentlessly competitive and ruthlessly individual; teams and teamwork were unknown. The actual Olympic ideal is no more evidence of the ancient Greeks’ multiculturalism than is their term for non-Greek speakers, *barbaroi*—“barbarians.”

Athens raises crucial questions about the past and challenges us to apply history to today’s decisions (“If America could look back on Athens’s story . . . it might learn to curtail its use of arms and to become a defender of true culture, not monotonous globalization”), but it doesn’t offer the material that would allow us to do so judiciously. Waterfield’s “Olympic ideal” is no more valid than his insistence on the moral equivalence of Robert Mugabe, Saddam Hussein, and the United States. The book might at least encourage readers to delve deeper, but the bibliography omits many seminal yet readable works. All in all, *Athens* deserves better than *Athens*.

—MICHAEL POLIAKOFF

ARTS & LETTERS

KAFKA:

A Biography.

By Nicholas Murray. Yale Univ. Press.
440 pp. \$30

On July 12, 1914, Franz Kafka, an employee of the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague, was alone in his room when he was abruptly ambushed by three women: his fiancée, Felice Bauer (whom he would never marry); a colleague of hers, Grete Bloch (with whom he had been carrying on an intimate correspondence); and Erna Bauer, Felice’s sister. Assuming a prosecuto-

rial mode, Felice proceeded to read aloud portions of letters Kafka had written to Grete. It’s not clear from Nicholas Murray’s meticulous biography exactly what her accusations were. What is clear is that this incident, which Kafka later referred to as “the tribunal,” was the direct inspiration for *The Trial*, his haunting novel about Joseph K., charged with an unspecified crime he didn’t commit.

Kafka’s stark visions of estrangement, persecution, and punishment have been read as prophesies of Nazism and Stalinism, yet their origins often lie not in any encounter