Serious Books to Leave One Depressed

by Samuel Hux (May 2022)



Still Life with Books and Candle, Henri Matisse, 1890

I

Thomas E. Ricks' *First Principles* is—no fault of the author—a most depressing book to contemplate, even though it is more than a "good read." Subtitled *What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country,* it is a political history of the first four administrations as well as the intellectual history the subtitle promises: the

learning and ideas of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. It's depressing because the reader, or at least this reader, is saying to himself before he gets very far, "How the hell—or how in god's name—did we get from that glorious then to this goddamned now?" I should explain, although the reader may know already what I mean and why I mean it.

I have no doubt that the United States of America is, even now, the most fortunate national blessing ever bestowed upon this earth—and there is a great deal of competition, including the manifest freedoms invented by The United Kingdom and the cultural monuments of continental Europe. But Jeessuss! Given the quality of the men who have led the U.S. since the first four—with very few exceptions—Americans have been blessed with the most inexplicable and unearned sheer Luck, or God has been most kind to the unworthy. I know it is unfair to think of the generation of the Founders and then shudder in disgust that a *thing* like Jim Jordan sits in Congress (I'm registered Republican by the way) and he is not the worst of either party, the Republican fringe embarrassing, the Democratic anti-Semitic.

As straight history *First Principles* has its surprises unless you are a specialist in early American history. If you paid attention in school you know that the most significant of the early presidents was Washington with Jefferson a close second. And Washington, the sentimental greatest since the first may still be the most significant because this man who could have become an unofficial monarch stepped down after two terms, creating a powerful precedent. Ricks makes the case, without shouting it, that Madison may outweigh Jefferson and Adams since he was essential to the establishment of the Constitution, which might not have passed without his powerful essays in its support. A surprise about Washington is that as *General* Washington—I had never thought about this—he won really few battles. We know the famous ones—after crossing the

Delaware and the finale at Yorktown—but he suffered many more technical defeats as he outlasted the British by wearing them down with unconventional warfare. The straight history is interesting and often riveting, but the intellectual history is more so, and much less thought about.

While Adams, Jefferson, and Madison could be, should be, thought of as philosophers, Washington certainly not. He was the least educated, minimum formal education in fact, while Adams attended Harvard, Jefferson William and Mary, and Madison the College of New Jersey which came to be Princeton. That should not allow one to assume *The Founding Father* a merely so-so intellect: his correspondence during the war and after, its depth of thought and surprising grace of prose, reveal a kind of untutored and almost poetic intellectual in the making. Adams, the least successful of the four, serving but one term, was the purest philosopher, his several works of political theory belonging in any history of the genre. (So say I, who always included Adams in my course on American Philosophy.) Jefferson read, wrote, and thought about "everything"—and never stopped. The late-life correspondence between him and Adams is an intellectual monument. Madison was Jefferson's equal, and maybe slightly more the philosopher, given his contributions to *The Federalist Papers.*

Ricks' most compelling and instructive theme, of course, is indicated by the subtitle. "Everyone" knows classical Greece and Rome were essential to the 18th century, but "anyone" will be surprised and/or impressed by *how much* the classical authors and thinkers meant to the founders. The latter three were constantly quoting the Greeks and Romans and finding lessons in their history, Adams and Madison favoring Roman sources, Jefferson more inclined to the Greek. Washington was hardly Greco-Roman illiterate. But he absorbed most of the classical virtues more or less at second hand. Nonetheless, he was characterized by his contemporaries as "The Noblest Roman of Them All."

A sub-subtitle of Ricks' book could be *The Intellectual as President: The Beginnings.* But it would be hard to make substantial subsequent volumes. James Monroe was no slouch, and John Quincy Adams was as intellectual as Ricks' subjects, but not until one gets to Abraham Lincoln does the story pick up again. Andrew Jackson of course had his virtues, but intellect and culture were not among them. And after Lincoln? U. S. Grant, great general and so-so president, finally revealed his intellectual culture with his magnificent memoirs. Then wait several decades until the prolific Theodore Roosevelt precedes the College Professor as President, Woodrow Wilson, Ph.D. Then. . . ?

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was smart. As were Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and Lyndon Johnson. Before LBJ, Jack Kennedy impressed the hell out of Norman Mailer, who mistook a glamorous Ivy Leaguer for a cultural icon, since he had a smattering of acculturation and apparently knew of one of Mailer's books. Bill Clinton was smart, but not enough to keep his trousers zipped. Please do not tell me Barack Obama was an intellectual: merely a brownish pseudo-JFK and thereby "historical." None of the others were without smarts, but. . . .

It's a good thing that The United States was not being founded recently, *recent* not being very recent. *Founding* itself is a vital concept and historical fact. Actually there are not many nations which were "founded." Unless one considers the 1707 Act of Union which joined England and Scotland a founding, Great Britain was never founded. England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales each slowly *evolved* over many centuries: there is no definitive date like 1775 plus. France also gradually evolved. As did Russia (a change of *regime* to the Soviet Union was not the birth of Russia). Apparent exceptions are of two classes. (1) The union of various nations which slowly evolved and then came together as One Nation, as in Germany, Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, etc. in "imitation" as it were of Great

Britain. (2) A colony *given independence* by an empire, as is the case with India for instance, which is less an active founding than a gift to a national entity which had evolved radically over the years, quite a different thing from the American example of birth through revolution. One might say of the apparent exceptions, very loosely but meaningfully, they were not *made* but rather *happened.* The only significant example of a real founding with a dramatic date other than The United States is Israel. It was not a gift from any empire of which it was not a part. And if one wants to insist that Israel would not exist had not the United Nations voted its establishment, a gift, I insist "No." The U.N. would not have acted as it did had not the Jews of the middle-east *insisted,* "We are making our own new nation no matter what the hell anybody else says!"

One other matter the U.S. and Israel share, once I set Washington aside as an historical figure who truly is *sui generis*: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison. Chaim Weitzmann, David Ben Gurion, Golda Meir. Founders who were serious intellectuals. There are scholars and hard-nosed realists who will argue, I am sure, that it does not require advanced intellect to bring a new nation into being, that the job can be done by people of ordinary mental capacities and middling culture. But give me an example, I would answer. Don't merely compliment ordinary human capacities and feel virtuous and democratic about it. And don't tell me that since *founding* as I have defined it has only two examples that is too few to prove anything. So far I am batting one thousand.

Of course there are names that will always be associated with the beginnings of great nations. Otto von Bismarck and the unification of 39 already evolved German states into *Deutschland.* Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini and the *Risorgimento* of seven already evolved Italian states which became *Italia.* But not the same thing as the unique *founding* by intellectual Founders. The U.S. and Israel: only just that

they should be and remain close allies.

I cannot prove that the establishment by intellect of a Constitution, written in the U.S. or implicit in Israel, provides a philosophical assurance of stability and longevity, but so far I see no reason to doubt it. The "so far" refers to the American case. . . given the undeniable fact of the difference between the mind and culture of the Founders and that of the contemporary "sustainers." And considering the crisis of American politics at this time one cannot help but be unsettled and uncertain. Who would have thought a very few years ago that we would have to wonder if the Constitution is in danger of violation? Who would have thought that the two-party system would come to seem like practice for civil war? And who could have imagined that during a pandemic public health would be politicized to the degree that politicians would not all endorse medical advice to wear masks and welcome vaccines? So that one grows nervous not simply about the intelligence of public men and women but about their sanity. I am going to try to make the following remarks as non-partisan as I possibly can, while knowing that not all will be pleased at my efforts.

I am an unattached traditionalist conservative, Burkean, Toryish. While I find most historians' polls ranking the American presidents seriously cockeyed, I agree with the consensus that Lincoln and Washington rank first and second, and I agree that James Buchanan was the worst. But some very recent rankings which I suspect are nothing more than exercises in partisanship place Donald Trump last—with which I profoundly disagree. While I profoundly disapprove of Trump as a *person,* I have no trouble distinguishing between the man and his *administration.* I never could figure out his relationship to Vladimir Putin and the North Korean fat boy, but as often as not I approved of Trump's positions and policies, especially his reversal of Obama's distrust of Israel and distrust that Iran would honor its promise to abide by its

treaty agreements. Furthermore, had Warren Harding never come to power, Barack Obama would get my vote as the worst president of the 20th and 21st centuries, not least for his Middle Eastern policies and criminal foolishness like the Ben Ghazi affair. Chances are however that he will be rated high principally for his achievement of being an historical figure because arranging to have an African father.

On the other hand, Trump's legacy will be vastly underrated, not simply because of the probable liberal bias of most historians who will make the ratings, but because of the biggest mistake that Trump ever made: his quite self-destructive refusal to accept that Joseph Biden won the popular and electoral-college vote in 2020. If his supporters in congress and governorships had any sense they would have urged him with all their strength to reverse himself instead of shaking in their boots at the possible wrath of that insolent crowd called "the base." When Richard Nixon lost to Jack Kennedy in 1960 he had a good case to make that the Daley regime in Illinois rigged the Illinois returns, but Nixon refused to make it, so as not to cause a constitutional crisis. God knows how many courts have found that Trump had no case to make, yet. . . no need to finish this sentence.

People will not have to have read Thomas Ricks' *First Principles* to appreciate and honor one of George Washington's greatest precedents. This "noblest Roman of them all" could surely have remained at the seat of power as long as he lived but instead stepped down and saw to the peaceful transfer of office. In spite of the several positive achievements of his presidency, Donald Trump's legacy will be—quite simply—that he did not honor the precedent established by Washington and honored by all other presidents since. And that you can take to the bank.

II

I wanted so much to heap praise upon Dara Horn's *People Love Dead Jews*, in spite of the title, but suffered my reservations instead. I was attracted to the book because I knew it contained an essay on Varian Fry, to whom I was introduced by the 2001 film *Varian's War.* In 1940-41 Fry rescued over 2000 Jewish artists and intellectuals from Vichy France and Gestapo hands. I will not try to summarize a remarkable story. See William Hurt as Fry and read Horn's essay.

I had not known before Horn's treatment that Fry's efforts, sponsored by the Emergency Rescue Committee, were disapproved of by the State department for breaking Vichy protocols, Vichy considered by State to be a friend (!), so the department saw to it that Fry's work was aborted early. Nor had I known that the likes of Lion Feuchtwanger, Franz Werfel, and Marc Chagall, whose lives were saved by Fry, showed remarkably and inexplicably little appreciation to their savior. I did not know—but might have guessed—that Varian Fry's life after his career of heroism in Vichy France was one disappointment or failure of achievement after another, not really his fault. I might have guessed, for as I contemplated Fry's noble efforts and subsequent obscurity, Oskar Schindler came to mind. After Schindler's unexpected career as savior of Jews in Poland, his life never amounted to anything. As if Life itself were saying to certain heroes, "What have you done for me lately?"

Just as compelling was a long essay on Jews in China, especially the Russian Jews suffering anti-Semitism at home who agreed, with the promise of freedom from such, to go to Manchuria in 1898 to build (literally) the city of Harbin, which would be a stop on the rail-route from Moscow to Vladivostok. Within less than a decade Harbin was a bustling cultural center with a bright future—which after about 30 years lost its brightness, betrayed by Russia, assaulted by China, and eventually more or less murdered by Japan. If the reader can bear an exhilarating tale that predictably becomes unbearable, this essay is worth the purchase of Horn's book.

Her essay on The *Merchant of Venice* certainly is not: a supposed to be charming but ultimately silly piece in which Horn comes to agree with her 10-year-oid son that there's nothing there, anti-Semitic screed. Often when I read a book of essays I do not begin with the first but with a chapter that looks interesting. If I had read this piece first I would have thrown the book away.

Had I not picked up the book to read the Fry essay I would probably never have, since I found the title *People Love Dead Jews* off-putting. What people are you talking about? People who feel great compassion for Jews of the past no longer living, or Jews who've been murdered? Or people who love for Jews to be dead? A little of both, it turns out. There is much to object to in this book. But be careful! Dara Horn lets you know more times than necessary that besides writing novels she earned a Ph.D. in literature, specializing in both Hebrew and Yiddish letters. Do you dear reader know as much as she does? . . . the tone seems to warn you.

And look. . . anti-Semitism is so persistent and so re-re-re-re-born. . . that one does not know, or *I* do not know, how to finish that sentence. Horn's rage is hard for her to control—and it is impertinent to suggest that she should control it. I can hardly control mine. That my spouse could be hated by anyone for being the Jew that she is drives me to lethal urges. But I suspect that Horn would suspect a Gentile (that's me) who claims to have rage, given the various tones and undertones throughout the book. For. . . .

There seems to be no response a non-Jew (and some Jews) can have to dead Jews that is sufficient. If one attends any of the Holocaust museums is that out of respect and remorse for victims, or to make oneself feel virtuous, or for a kind of perverse entertainment so to speak, or merely studious curiosity, and if one is or assumes oneself to be philo-Semitic is one driven to that stance only by such an extreme outrage as the Holocaust but would not have been a "pure"

friend of Jews otherwise, and why is one interested in the commemorating of dead Jews instead of interested in the lives of the living? Etcetera, and so forth, *aun azoy veyter (*in transcribed Yiddish), and for German Jews *und so weiter.*

The first essay, which begins thus, "People love dead Jews. Living Jews, not so much," is entitled "Everyone's (Second) Favorite Dead Jew." That's Anne Frank. But why *second*? Nowhere in the essay are we told who is first. Is it the *real* Anne Frank as opposed to various sentimentalized and inadequate versions that everyone but Dara Horn seems to prefer? Is it Jesus Christ? If so, is it any surprise and is it inappropriate that Christians should rate their "Son of God" highest? What the hell is she talking about? Why be so cute about it? Dara Horn is just too "smarky" by far—by which I mean a combination of "smart-assed" and "smirky."

That's not a very nice thing to say, is it? Especially about a lady. But I'll forgive myself, being depressed. How so, specifically? That's a dumb question, even if I asked it. The murders at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue and the other contemporary horrors Horn writes about, killings and/or attacks in San Diego, Chicago, New York, New Jersey. That's how so. I'm one of the People who love living Jews; and I would admire Jewishness even were I not in love with a specific Jew, as I did before I ever met her. Horn is at her best when she delineates Pittsburgh-etc. Then she is most straight-forwardly honest, and not so cute, as she vents her rage where it belongs. The Jew-haters will never read her book. They are not her audience. Who are then? That's easy to answer: (1) readers interested in Jewish subjects, of course, and (2) People who Love Dead Jews. . . .

Those particular people, with rare exceptions, will not themselves be Jewish: they will be Gentiles who are not anti-Semitic but whose views of Jews, living and dead, do not pass some Hornesque purity test. Who chose the title, I wonder—Horn herself or some smart-ass editor? Being a *person* among the

People myself I bristle at the title. Did it never occur to her that the title inescapably means "*All* People Love Dead Jews"? Which of course is a foolish lie. But I suppose "*Some* People Love Dead Jews" is not a catchy title, only an accurate one.

I wonder what Horn would think of Longfellow's great poem "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport"?

III

Paul Kriwaczek is on the surface an unlikely author for *Yiddish Civilisation.* Quite obviously I do not say that because he is Jewish, having escaped from Vienna with parents in 1939 to England. But intellectual historians generally are not graduates of the London Hospital Medical College, and med-school graduates generally do not become for a quarter century BBC producers and film-makers, and such types do not then turn to the history of ideas such as *The Search for Zarathustra, Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilisation*, and the book under consideration. So thank the Lord Kriwaczek made this journey.

People ordinarily have a general idea of the shape of the history of European Jewry which I will attempt to outline very roughly:

After the familiar Biblical history of the Old Testament, the Jews spread out beyond the borders of the Holy Land, throughout the Mediterranean (to become the Sephardim speaking Ladino) and throughout the rest of Europe (to become the Ashkenazi eventually speaking Yiddish). After the triumph of Christianity the history of European Jewry is one anti-Jewish outrage after another punctuated by one expulsion after another, from the Dark Ages through the Medieval Period, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, before things got better, except for the interruption of the Holocaust. In spite of

singular Jews like Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Marx, Freud, and Einstein, Judaism itself, after giving birth to Christianity, has had little effect, broadly speaking, on Western civilization.

Well. . . . People ordinarily don't know what Kriwaczek knows. For the italicized paragraph above has things just about backwards. There were anti-Semitic outrages, yes, and the occasional expulsion, such as from Great Britain in 1290, but for the longer time even up to the Enlightenment Judaism was a serious alternative to Christianity. Rather than things getting better the closer to modernity, they got worse; the Holocaust rather than being an interruption was closer to a logical denouement. Whatever the habits of local populations, bishops and kings, especially eastwards in Germany, Bohemia, and Poland-Lithuania, rewarded Jews for their economic relevance. A Polish king decreed, "We should always aim to increase the income from our towns and castles, and through the competition of the Jews the value of our leases has always increased." The reward was special political and cultural conditions such that "Yiddish Civilization" was a reality. A Jewish joke at the time was that the name *Poland*, or *Polen* in Yiddish, derived from the Hebrew "*poh lin*," meaning "here shall you rest." But only, it turned out, until the later years of the Enlightenment. In spite of the Jewish enlightenment of the second half of the 19th century which included the birth of the great Yiddish literature in Poland, life for the Jews in the east had become hell.

Some particulars that Kriwaczek explores:

One should be surprised that Martin Luther was a champion of the Jews. Until, that is, he became a violent Jew-hater, apparently because the Jews did not show sufficient appreciation, not rewarding his defense of them by converting to his form of Christianity. Practically everything one learns about Luther is repulsive. But his brief time as a sympathizer

of Jews runs counter to what "most people" *know* about Jewish history. People have heard for instance of the "court Jew." But know him as a rare exception of a Jew lucky enough to have a job which protected him somewhat. But in fact they were legion: every respectable court, ecclesiastical or political, had its educated Jew who knew how to run things; and if the court Jews' conditions did not represent the general condition of the Jewish population, neither did they represent that of the Christian population at large. Of course it depended on where in Yiddish Civilization one was. An English traveler in the 1590s in Prague observed a population of Calvinists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Jews, "yet to converse in strange amity and peace together." Long before Moses Mendelssohn in the 18th century was universally respected as philosopher, some Jews were intellectually respected—and powerful—such as Josel of Rosheim in Alsace (1478-1554) who, so goes the story, was thought to be a kind of "ruler" of the Jews and succeeded more than once in convincing Christian governors to reverse expulsion decrees.

The biggest surprise by far was the extent of Judaism as an option to Christianity, although the actual numbers of conversions cannot be documented. But it is obvious that the extent lessened as Yiddish Civilization—*as* a civilization—declined. By mid-19th century there would have been very few people associating Judaism with Mendelssohn and such. Even while Yiddish literature was about to enter its glory days, other cultural tendencies would make Judaism less attractive as a religious alternative. Rabbinical Judaism with its many familiarities may have seemed an attractive option—but hardly so the Kabalistic nonsense and the Chassidism sweeping Eastern Europe. The following is my observation, not Kriwaczek's. The Gentile converts to Judaism that I observe even today are always Reform or Conservative, never Lubavitcher.

In the intellectual world now, which is the world I inhabit,

Jews are, roughly speaking, Spinozists, Mendelssohnians, Marxists, Freudians, Einsteinians—if you know what I mean and will accept my characterizations. Kriwaczek, discussing Chassidism, quotes the great historian Shimon Dubnow. "Under the influence of the Chassidim, the Russo-Polish Jew became brighter at heart but dark in intellect."

Thank God—and Kriwaczek more or less does—that what could survive of Yiddish Civilization immigrated to become Irving Howe's "World of Our Fathers."

IV

James Wyllie's *Nazi Wives: The Women at the Top of Hitler's Germany* leaves one depressed because how could the memory or contemplation of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust not. But actually it is not depressing *to read.* Indeed, it is rather a pleasure to learn what miserable lives most Nazis lived.

I know a great deal about Hermann Goering, Joseph Goebbels, Rudolf Hess, Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, and Martin Bormann, and, of course Adolf Hitler. I thought it might be interesting to "meet" their women: they might, perhaps, be more interesting than poor Eva Braun. And they are; but. . . . Well, the big Nazis got what they deserved: a generally repulsive lot. But I cannot say the women got what *they* deserved. Who could deserve those seven males?

Before Eva Braun came along, young Geli Raubel did not deserve her besotted Uncle Adolf, with whom she shared an apartment in Munich before his political ascendency. Wyllie includes a photograph of the foolish girl lying on grass staring lovingly at a surprisingly defenseless-looking Hitler asleep in a lawn chair. I can't decide which is more shocking: Geli's obvious affection, or Hitler seeming vulnerable. Give the poor fool credit: she grew to feel trapped by his possessiveness and escaped into suicide. Wyllie believes that they shared a bed,

which suggests you-know-what. But I find it hard to believe Hitler would know what to do abed when not asleep. There was only one other time when I was shocked to feel something like compassion for one of the subjects in the book.

Given the repulsiveness of Joseph Goebbels, his *chosen* soul an imitation of his gimpy physique nature cursed him with, I was amazed at what Magda Quandt (her first married name) was before she became Magda Goebbels. When she was five her divorced mother married a wealthy Jew named Richard Friedlaender, who adopted Magda who took his name. During her formative years she adored her stepfather. To deepen the ironies, it is possible that her "stepfather" may have been her biological father. In any case during those years a close friend of hers, Jewish, had a brother who was a Zionist, with whom Magda had a probably Platonic relationship: she wore his Star of David and attended Jewish youth club meetings with him. So one cannot help but wonder: what the hell happened to Magda Friedlaender Quandt? The answer is incomprehensible to me: Love and devotion, not for and to her foul husband, with whom she shared six children and a marriage of mutual infidelity, although his more extensive and blatant—but for and to Adolf Hitler. It is obviously possible for such an unlikely one as Magda to become a National Socialist. And so converted to hold the Leader in devotion. But love for such a repulsive figure is beyond my understanding. (Perhaps love between the sexes depends for me upon at least some degree of physical attraction—but I don't apologize for that or feel less "spiritual.")

About none of the other wives do I wonder "how could she?"—but for one other. . . later. The vilest was the most innocent looking aside from Eva Braun: Lina Heydrich was no anti-Semite because hubby was: she was a Jew-hater who actively sought ways to do harm. Gerda Bormann, Ilse Hess, and Margaret Himmler saw eye to eye with their husbands—although only Ilse was fully appreciated by her man. It is almost possible to

sympathize with Margaret, given Himmler's insensitive treatment of her, wanting her to appreciate his mistress Hedwig; it is *almost* possible I say. . . .

I feel no momentary compassion for Goering's second wife, the actress Emmy (neé Sonnemann) but find her the most interesting because most surprising. After Goering's first wife Carin, a Swedish anti-Semite, died, Emmy Goering was a revelation. She made a "career" of sorts by intervening on behalf of Jewish theatrical colleagues and even convincing Goering to throw his considerable weight in support, although not always successfully, but nonetheless. . . .

One feature therefore of Wyllie's book is that focus on the wives often reveals more about the husbands than one had perhaps previously known. Goering, unlike the others, was not anti-Semitic by conviction, but "only" because that's what a proper Nazi professed—which is more a condemnation of him than mitigation. Goering is really hard to handle, for me at any rate. I find that while I condemn his actions I cannot purely hate the man as I do Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Bormann, and Heydrich. The reader will notice Hess's name does not appear in that sentence. (Later.)

Hermann Goering strikes me—and many people as well—as more "human" than the others while no less guilty. (I did not say "humane.") The vanity of Adolf Hitler was astronomical: he considered himself *to be Germany,* his *Reich* to last a thousand years. Goering's vanity was ridiculous but amusing: his fantastic uniforms, as if he himself was a singular service in the *Wehrmacht*, not merely the commandant of the *Luftwaffe.* His Air Force itself impenetrable: "If a British bomb reaches Berlin you can call me *Meyer*." His purchased and stolen art collection was not a matter of aesthetic satisfaction; it was merely gigantic greed. Hitler and Himmler were hardly models of Nazi masculinity; the brutally handsome and slim World War I fighter ace (22 air victories) *was* that ideal before it was conceived, and when he became the *Reichsmarschall* his vanity

was still larger than his obesity, which was accentuated by the dramatic uniforms and the togas, as he surely must have known.

There was something else about Goering which was different. Most of the chief Nazis preferred their women traditionally subservient appendages. Goering, on the other hand, was even *influenced by* his mates. His first wife Carin's psychopathic anti-Semitism probably compelled Goering more than Hitler's did, because he adored her. Even after her death and his remarriage his estate remained "Carinhall." His second wife Emmy's relative philo-Semitism compelled him to support her efforts as safely as he could, usually not too successfully.

The only other big Nazi who considered his wife his at-least-near equal was Rudolf Hess. Wyllie's treatment of Ilse Hess, while of course dismissive of her politics, is fairly admiring. Indeed, her loyalty to the man—to hell with his politics—is the single un-complicated-moving part of the book. And while I'm at it: Wyllie's telling of the Rudolf Hess story is objective narration with as little editorial judgment as possible. . . but quietly raises the possibility that at least this one man did not receive justice at the Nuremberg Trials. About which one has to perform a delicate verbal dance in order to give both the devil and truth their due.

The devil: Hess was the most loyal, and longest loyal, of all Hitler's followers, from the time of their incarceration after the Beer-Hall putsch in 1923 on to the end and beyond. He was Hitler's Number Two until the elevation of Hermann Goering. He had as much to do with the success of Nazidom up to World War II as any follower. Even his misguided flight to Scotland in 1941 was intended to bring a peace with Britain which would be to Hitler's advantage more than Britain's and to the disadvantage of the Russian ally.

The Truth: Nonetheless, the flight was indeed a peace attempt. Hess sat out the war as prisoner in Britain and had no

responsibility for German policies and positions from May 1941 until the German defeat in 1945, four years. Consequently he could not be convicted of War Crimes or Crimes Against Humanity, which probably saved him from hanging. Convicted of Crimes Against Peace and Conspiracy to commit crimes, he was sentenced to Life imprisonment. In retrospect, as it *must* have seemed at the time, odd that his sentence outstripped that of Albert Speer for instance: 20 years for War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity. Of course Speer was one of the defendants who said "Sorry" while Hess remained adamant to the end. But does that justify his continued imprisonment: criminal thought? By the time those who'd served their 20 years were free, the Americans, British, and French periodically suggested it was absurd to keep Spandau open just to keep Hess behind bars, all suggestions overruled by the Russians. It is strange that the three could not prevail—especially given the fact that Admiral Erich Raeder, sentenced to Life, was released for ill health after serving but 10 years of his Life Sentence, and Raeder had been in the dock specifically charged by the Russians. Spandau closed only after Hess committed suicide at 93.

One cannot help but get the impression—at least I cannot help it—that if a defendant was lucky enough not to hang but to serve a sentence at Spandau instead, his thoughts were deemed more punishable than his actions. I see no other way to understand the Rudolf Hess epic—and that is not a pleasant judgment to come to.

Especially because it is a blot on the most significant pursuit of justice in international law in the 20th century, and that the Trials were, as Telford Taylor's massive and magnificent *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials* makes abundantly clear, even as Taylor, who was *there* as a principal in the prosecution, notes the warts and blemishes as well as the triumphs of right. Among the blemishes: Taylor essentially agrees with Rebecca West (*A Train of Powder*). "Hess was. . .

so plainly mad that it seemed shameful that he should be tried. . . . He looked as if his mind had no surface, as if every part of it had been blasted away except the depth where the nightmares live." Taylor doubts Hess's sanity and ability to "defend himself and should not have been tried"; and as for Hess's 21 years of imprisonment after the others had been freed, he concludes with words obviously chosen for impact, Hess's long years "in a huge prison where he was the sole inmate was a crime against humanity."

But set the Rudolf and Ilse Hess story aside, I find it not depressing to read James Wyllie's *Nazi Wives.* As I suggested earlier, although the history of the Nazi years will always be depressing, there is a certain pleasurer in knowing how miserable the lives of the Nazis were, male and female.

V

I am not "obsessed" with Nazidom and the Holocaust, but they are never at any great distance from my mind, and that is not because—or only because—the Second World War was happening when I became sentient as a youth aware of the world beyond my immediate home life; but also because I cannot imagine anything more important in the 20th century. So when I see a book entitled *Hitler's First Hundred Days*, by Peter Fritzsche, I pounce. In 100 days the world changed dramatically, in such a way that life itself has not fully—or anywhere near fully—recovered even 89 years later as I write. I hope that someday I will read it. I am depressed that at this time I cannot, although I have tried.

Peter Fritzsche is a well-regarded and highly rewarded academic, W.D. and Sarah Trowbridge Professor of History at the University of Illinois. Fritzsche's prose. . . . It is not academic prose of the sort often caricatured: intellectual-sounding pretentious incoherence. It's something else. Here is

part of a paragraph from page 24. You try it out.

> *National Socialists themselves worked hard to edit the representation of collective desire in the media. In rallies and marches, they stage-crafted events so that citizens could experience the awakening of the nation. These attempts often fall short of the promised nirvana, since people spent a great deal of time standing around waiting, and the dead time allowed participants to closely observe the disorganization or disinterest or drinking around them. But the Nazis also reframed disappointments so that blemishes did not disrupt ideals.*

Enough of this. . . so I got barely beyond page 24 before I threw the book against a wall. How did I get that far after myriads of expressions like "to edit the representation of desire"? What should one call this style? Expressionistic? Pseudo poetic? How about *self-indulgent posturing disrespect for one's reader?* Such an important subject, and such a lot of trash to obscure it. I'm sure Fritzsche thinks himself a stylist. Although American born, Fritzsche surely knows German. I wonder what his German is like. My wife, a poet, says his English sounds like a poor translation. "Stop!" she said to me. "You're hurting me."

VI

After throwing Fritzsche's book against the wall, still in the mood for the general subject, I turned to a book I had purchased at the same time, Benjamin Carter Hett's *The Nazi Menace: Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and the Road to War*. What a revelation. I know of no modern historian who writes this well since the great C. Vann Woodward, or who has such a convincing range, *almost* approaching that of the great John Lukacs. . . which is close enough to be credited.

I am not very long on school spirit so I surprise myself—a

career City University of New York academic—with my pleasure at noting that Hett is a professor of History at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. It reminds me of the glory days of the Grad Center when it was, in the humanities at least, as distinguished a graduate school as any in the States, with the likes of the critics Irving How and Alfred Kazin and the historian Arthur Schlesinger. OK, so this paragraph is irrelevant. But not what follows.

Hett's historical narrative is remarkably clear as he moves with ease back and forth between Germany, Britain, the United States, and the USSR. Each new chapter begins with a charming italicized introduction which seems no matter how interesting to be somewhat irrelevant. . . until it turns out to be just what is needed to whet the reader's appetite and fix his or her attention. The narrative is too vast for quick or even slow summary. There are three large Parts: "Crisis," "Munich," and "War."

Munich is for me—and probably every reader—the most rewarding. Even while I was confident I knew the story fairly well for a non-specialist since the story has been told so often, I was surprised by the twists and turns of events and the depths of Hett's observations, which I imagine will enlighten the pro as well. For example, *we all* know that Neville Chamberlain was that unfortunate good and decent English *democrat* who was, bless his soul, just not equipped to see into Hitler and so goes down in history as the leader who learned too late what appeasement meant. Not that Chamberlain was not decent, but we learn that he was as well a man of strong dictatorial leanings. We also learn by the way that Winston Churchill was a man who was often dismissive of and impatient with the virtues of democracy before he became its greatest champion of the 20th century. Well, we learn a great many things.

I have long been interested in German resistance, having written one essay on Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg and having

alluded to him a dozen times. So I was intrigued by Hett's discussion of the ineffective resistance of German generals—ineffective yes, but significant nonetheless under the totalitarian circumstances. At the time that Hitler was threatening military invasion of Czechoslovakia and the world was hoping there would be a diplomatic solution, Generals like, for example, Ludwig Beck and Franz Halder were hoping Hitler would indeed declare war and were disappointed that he did not have to. The reason: Beck, to single out one name to stand for several, was convinced that a Czech war would be so unpopular that a military coup could succeed. Given the possibility come probability that the British knew something of the attitude of the German chiefs of staff, one can in retrospect lament the speech or speeches that Neville Chamberlain did *not* make encouraging German resistance.

I have a habit, I will confess, of judging the lost causes of the present in light of those of the past, Santayana never far from my mind. I wish that Joseph Biden, a man without what Churchill called "martial vigor," had made an impassioned speech encouraging NATO to let Ukraine in, instead of insisting that Ukraine, whose need for NATO membership was manifest, "was not yet ready," when the only things he could have really meant was that *he* was not ready to test the manifest purpose of NATO in the first place.

It is not Hett's great book itself, but rather where it leads my thoughts instead, that leaves me depressed.

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