

Book Reviews

Berlin Games: How the Nazis Stole the Olympic Dream by Guy Walters (New York: William Morrow, 2006), 368 pp. Reviewed by Michael Pitblado, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

More than three decades ago, Richard Mandell's *The Nazi Olympics* was described in the pages of the *American Historical Review* as "both narrative thriller and a scholarly disappointment."¹ The same can be said of the latest addition to the considerable literature on the 1936 Summer Games held in Hitler's Germany. *Berlin Games: How the Nazis Stole the Olympic Dream* is the first venture into historical non-fiction for bestselling novelist and journalist Guy Walters. The history of the Third Reich is familiar ground for the British writer, who has set his novels of espionage and resistance in this period.

The scope of *Berlin Games* is grand but familiar. The first half of the book is dedicated to the politics behind the IOC's selection of Berlin as host city, the threatened boycotts in both the United States and Great Britain, the Nazi promise of no discrimination against German Jewish athletes, and the Garmisch-Partenkirchen Winter Games as a dress rehearsal to the "real show" later the same year in the capital of the new Reich.

The strength of the book lies in Walters's riveting prose, which captures the triumphant atmosphere of the opening ceremonies, the extravagance of the many high society banquets, and the tranquility of the newly constructed Olympic village (for men only). Gripping, too, is the author's dramatic description in the second half of the book of the competitions on the playing fields, particularly the well-known exploits of American sprinter and long-jumper Jesse Owens, Jewish German fencing starlet Helene Mayer, and Korean/Japanese marathon winner Son Ki-Jung. Walters also updates the familiar narrative with compelling individual stories, such as that of German wrestler and communist agitator Werner Seelenbinder, as well as with colorful reports of the author's own interviews with former participants. A welcome omission is a lengthy discussion of Leni Riefenstahl's production of her epic film *Olympia*, which has been an overworked staple in the literature on the Berlin Olympics.

Berlin Games is primarily intended for the general reader. Yet the book's promotional material—including the author's personal website and the dust jacket of the UK edition—boasts that Walters has unearthed new archival evidence that reveals an original assessment of the nature of the Nazi Olympics. In this regard, academics will find *Berlin Games* a frustrating read. There is a disconcerting shortage of endnotes and throughout the text Walters includes direct quotes without providing sources. The citations that do appear at the back of the

book are difficult to follow. On more than one occasion, the novelist in Walters cannot resist putting words into the mouths of historical figures (including Hitler) by supplying dialogue – again, without producing a source.

The promise of originality is based on the author's allegations that it was not only the Nazis who were guilty of corrupting the idealism of the Olympic Movement, but also high-ranking Olympic officials. Walters points an accusatory finger at the aging and destitute founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, for accepting a sizeable and secret "donation" to his foundation, earmarked for his personal use, in exchange for the figurehead's symbolic endorsement of the *Berlin Games*. The evidence, namely letters exchanged between Coubertin and Dr. Theodor Lewald, Chairman of the German Olympic Games Organizing Committee, is clearly damning for both men: for the former for accepting the bribe, and for the latter for doing the bidding of his Nazi masters. As dramatic as this evidence is, the findings are not new. German scholars have known about the Nazis' courting of Coubertin for some time. Historians Hans Joachim Teichler and Arnd Krüger have both conducted more exhaustive archival research and written more detailed accounts of this facet of the 1936 Olympic drama.² Nevertheless, the impact of the Nazis' successful wooing of Coubertin on the course of events is questionable. Walters asks hypothetically, "If the athletes had known it, how many would have felt comfortable about going to the Games?" (p. 303). Yet the author's own interviews reveal that the majority of the athletes were either blissfully ignorant of Nazi repressive domestic policies or simply considered themselves apolitical, believing that their only concern was to compete. A minority of athletes did in fact feel uncomfortable, but most of them participated nonetheless.

Walters ascribes responsibility for the boycott movement's failure to the stubborn personality of Avery Brundage, head of the American Olympic Committee. Walters is disapproving of his political naivety, his paranoia of a communist conspiracy behind the boycotters, his anti-Semitism, and pro-Nazi attitude. He slams Brundage for placing sport above all else. Yet taking aim at Brundage is not original. There is no shortage of Brundage critics – including Mandell. Walters is far more sympathetic to Brundage's British counterparts in the boycott debate. He salutes the British for defeating boycott sentiments on the basis that they intended to show the Nazis what a liberal democracy could do, rather than adopt Brundage's championing of Hitler's hollow promises. Furthermore, Walters's portrait of British diplomat Sir Robert Vansittart as a pragmatist willing to participate in the Games in order to discover Nazi political intentions differs from fellow writer and journalist Duff Hart-Davis's assessment of Vansittart as an anti-Nazi hero. Yet his position falls in line with a more recent study by historian Richard Holt.³

The emphasis on the boycott issue is emblematic of the Anglo-American focus of the book. Not a single German archive was explored, and aside from comments on the exclusion of German Jews from participating in athletics only

a scant two pages are dedicated to the Nazi approach to sport. Also, the role of Carl Diem, Lewald's partner on the Organizing Committee, is curiously pushed to the margins.

Walters fails to offer new insights into the historical debates surrounding one of the most politically charged sporting events of the twentieth century. Despite the shortcomings of Mandell's earlier study, it ultimately became a classic – a natural starting point for researchers exploring this fascinating era of Olympic history. It is doubtful whether *Berlin Games*, despite its strengths and its appeal to the general reader, will achieve a similar level of success.

Endnotes

- 1 See *American Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (February 1972), pp. 174-175; and Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).
- 2 See Hans Joachim Teichler, "Coubertin und das Dritte Reich," *Sportwissenschaft* 12, no. 1 (1982), pp. 18-55, and Arnd Krüger, *Theodor Lewald: Sportführer ins Dritte Reich* (Berlin: Bartels & Wernitz, 1975).
- 3 See Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Olympics: The 1936 Games* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), and Richard Holt, "Great Britain: The Amateur Tradition," in Arnd Krüger and William Murray (eds.), *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 70-86.



The Bitter-Sweet Awakening: The Legacy of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games by Richard Cashman (Sydney: Walla Walla Press, 2006), 311 pp. Reviewed by Robert K. Barney, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

One of the most problematic arguments that Olympic Games bid committees advance in their efforts to win the "cherished prize" of hosting the grand spectacular is that the project will inevitably leave in its wake a great legacy for the public benefit. In fact, IOC members who make the final decision as to which city wins the bid pay close attention to the messages of prospective legacy. Sadly, the record of positive legacy outcomes resulting from hosting Olympic Games does not generally match the picture of the glorious claims made beforehand. In fact, the "beauty of legacy" often lies in the eyes of the beholder. With this realization in mind, Richard Cashman has attempted to investigate the subject of Olympic Games' legacy from the perspective of a general or broad-tapestry point of view. In his book, he examines "legacy" through the lens of one edition of the Olympic Games (including the Paralympic Games following), those his own country celebrated in Sydney in the early Australian spring of 2000.

Richard Cashman, a longstanding professor of history at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, now retired, maintains an adjunct profes-