

NAZI OLYMPICS

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The Olympic ideal since 1896 has been one of fairness and equality, the chance for a variety of nations to come together peacefully and compete. Various cultures can intermingle amongst each other and compete for their respective countries. The Olympics are supposed to be above politics, but this is not typical. Cold war tensions between the United States and Russia were illustrated in the American boycott of the Moscow games in 1980, and the Russians returned the favor in Los Angeles four years later. However, boycotting the Olympics for political reasons is not a recent phenomenon. The threat of boycott loomed large over the landscape of the 1936 games in Berlin. The fact that these threats were never realized is not because the international community refused to get involved in German affairs, but because of the Nazi Party's ability to placate the concerns of foreign countries, most notably the United States, regarding Jewish racism while continuing to maintain anti-Semitic policies.

Germany itself had only recently returned to the games. After being excluded from competing in 1920 and 1924, they returned in 1928 and finished second to the American team in total medals in the summer games held in Amsterdam.¹ Therefore, their selection as the host country for the 1936 Olympics in 1931 was a considerable achievement. The Committee met in July of 1931 in Barcelona to decide between Germany and Spain.² Yet this selection should not be seen as a gesture of good will towards the recently returned German flock

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¹Alfred Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1999), 51.

²Ibid., 50.

for the International Olympic Committee. It had much to do with politics and problems of the time. The threat of a Spanish civil war was gaining strength, and the potential for future political instability certainly played a role in the decision to give the games to Berlin, as the vote was 43-16.³

Within two years the Nazis would find themselves in power in Germany but the prospect of hosting the Olympics was not initially well-received. The Nazi party, referring to the 1932 games held in Los Angeles, denounced the Olympics as a "festival organized by Jews."⁴ Individual leaders within the party went even farther in their denunciations. Privately, Hitler himself considered the Olympics as nothing more than a "ploy inspired by Judaism which cannot possibly be put on by a Reich ruled by National Socialists."⁵ These negative feelings towards the games, while more racially explicit, were not restricted solely to the Nazis. Negative views of the Olympics were pervasive throughout German political society. German conservatives felt the Olympics were a foreign intrusion into German culture, and Communists in the Reichstag saw the games as only a way to serve nationalist pride.⁶ It would take the work of two organizers for the Berlin Games to alter that perception.

The two most prominent German organizers for the 1936 games were Dr. Theodor Lewald and Dr. Carl Diem who had previously advocated for and had been organizing the 1916 games in Berlin before they were canceled by World War I.⁷

³Ibid., 50

⁴Richard Cohen, *By the Sword: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions* (New York: Random House, 2002), 348.

⁵Ibid., 348.

⁶Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 51-52.

⁷Arnd Kruger, "The Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda and the Nazi Olympics of 1936," in *Global and Cultural Critique: Problematizing the Olympic Games*, Robert K. Barney, Kevin B. Wamsley, Scott G. Martyn, and Gordon H. MacDonald, eds. (London: International Centre for Olympic Studies, 1998), 34.

They quickly seized their second chance. Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who had been propaganda minister for less than a week, was visited by Lewald, who persuaded him to see the Olympics as a potential windfall for propaganda.⁸ Goebbels wasted little time. A separate propaganda committee was set up, headed by one of Goebbel's subordinates, Haegert, who informed Goebbels of everything dealing with the games and functioned as part of the German Olympic organizing committee that Dr. Carl Diem was responsible for.⁹ Unfortunately, his and Dr. Lewald's Olympic responsibilities were made virtually worthless.

Dr. Lewald and Dr. Diem became some of the earliest victims of Nazi policies regarding the games. Both Lewald and Diem had been members of the Olympic committee since before World War I and then under the now despised Weimar Republic, Lewald also had a Jewish grandmother, thereby making him a non-Aryan in the eyes of the Nazi party.¹⁰ As a result, they were both stripped of any real power. Hans von Tschammer und Osten, who was a National Socialist, became the Reich Sports Leader, and held the real power in the Organizing Committee.¹¹ However, Dr. Diem and Dr. Lewald were not discarded entirely. They would still remain General Secretary and President, respectively, of the German Organizing Committee. Their subservient position was illustrated in the American report after the summer games.¹² The treatment of Lewald and Diem would be characteristic of the way the Nazis would control the games.

⁸Ibid., 35.

⁹Ibid., 35-36.

¹⁰Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 1986), 9.

¹¹Ibid., 10.

¹²Fred Rubien, ed., *Report of the American Committee* (New York: American Olympic Committee, 1936), 21. While not explicitly stated in the report, the fact that the Reich Sports Leader's picture is listed first, followed by Diem's and Lewald's is telling as to whom the Americans saw as the leader of the German committee.

Almost immediately upon assuming control, the Nazis' took to shutting out the Jews from most of public society, including sports. By June of 1933, Jews were expelled from participating in youth, welfare, and gymnastic organizations.¹³ Individual sports also enacted their own regulations. The German Boxing Federation barred Jewish fighters or referees.¹⁴ These actions were fairly limited in scope, but quickly expanded. By 1935, Jews would not even be allowed on public or private practice fields in Germany.¹⁵ The 1935 Nuremberg Laws, while not specifically mentioning sports, would still have an effect on who could compete in the games. The Macacabee League of Jewish athletes in late November of 1935, announced that they were withdrawing their athletes from competing, because they were not considered citizens and therefore could not compete.¹⁶ These policies, just as quickly, resulted in skepticism and concern by the International Olympic Committee. The Committee met in June of 1933 in Vienna where Dr. Lewald had to pledge to the committee that Jews would not be excluded from Olympic teams.¹⁷ German officials grew worried that the Olympics would be taken away from Berlin. The President of the IOC himself, Baillet-Latour, had warned the German members about the concern over how foreign Jews would be treated during the games.¹⁸

Some Jewish participants of the games seemed oblivious to what was going on in Germany or ignored it, choosing the prestige of playing in the Olympics over any concerns of mistreatment. Many Polish, Czechoslovakian, and Hungarian Jews were on their respective Olympic teams.¹⁹ Others, however,

¹³Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 5.

¹⁴Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 52.

¹⁵Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 5.

¹⁶"Diplomats Exempt in Nuremberg Laws," *New York Times*, 1 December 1935, 35; in D.A. Kass, "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics," *Journal of Sports History* 3, no. 3 (Winter 1976): 226.

¹⁷Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 5-6.

¹⁸Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 53.

¹⁹Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 80.

did speak out against the games. Expression of disgust, and tentative movements towards boycotts were voiced in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Czechoslovakia.²⁰ However, out of all the countries to express concerns about the 1936 Olympics, the United States received the brunt of Nazi persuasion. United States participation was essential in the eyes of the Nazi party. Germans saw the United States as moderates after the war and willing traders.²¹ Events occurred in America that encouraged German intervention. American officials began considering a boycott of the games in April of 1933.²² The actions of the Nazis towards the Jewish population had reached the ears of some in the United States. Bernard S. Deutsch, president of the American Jewish Congress, sent a letter to the American Olympic Committee stating how Jews were being barred from sports organizations.²³ Avery Brundage, the president of the committee, also shared Deutsch's concern. A resolution voted on by the Amateur Athletic Union in November of 1933, to boycott the Olympics until Jewish athletes were allowed to compete, had Brundage's support.²⁴ Brundage soon, however, changed his opinion, thanks to Nazi efforts.

The American Olympic Committee initially refused Germany's invitation to the games.²⁵ This was a major concern for Germany as the idea of an American boycott of the Olympic Games scared the Nazis considerably.²⁶ They were determined to keep it from happening. They invited Brundage to come to Germany and experience for himself that Germans were not discriminating against the Jews.²⁷ The German propaganda machine worked quickly to back up these claims. In June of

²⁰*Olympiade a Berlin?* (Paris: Editions universelles,) 3; cited in *Ibid.*, 68.

²¹ Arnd Kruger, "United States of America: The Crucial Battle," in *The Nazi Olympics: Sports, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930's*, Arnd Kruger and W. J. Murray, eds. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 44.

²²D. A. Kass, "Issue of Racism," 229.

²³*Ibid.*, 230.

²⁴Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 6.

²⁵Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 53-54.

²⁶Mandell, *Nazi Olympics*, 76.

²⁷Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 6.

1934, the Nazis named five candidates for the Olympic team and would later declare that twenty-one Jewish candidates had been nominated.²⁸ Brundage appeared satisfied; as he later wrote,

every sort of social, political, and economic pressure was exerted...against the American Olympic team. The Committee had no funds with which to oppose this assault and the country was flooded with misleading propaganda until many people, who should have known better, were influenced.²⁹

Brundage may have been assured that the Nazis were non-discriminatory, but appearances were deceiving. He would meet prominent Jewish leaders that assured him things were fine, yet he always met them in cafes and they were always chaperoned by Nazi officials.³⁰ While Brundage may have been satisfied, the Nazis maintained their anti-Jewish policies. None of the 21 Jewish candidates invited showed up, without any explanation.³¹ However, it still appeared the concerns of the American Olympic Committee were placated by the Nazi party. Two Jews, Helene Mayer, a fencer, and Gretel Bergmann, a high jumper, were supposed to be invited to compete in the summer Olympics for Germany; one Ruid Bell, would compete in the Winter Olympics.³² Once again, though, appearances were deceiving. Mayer, who did eventually compete, never received an official notice inviting her to the team, and Gretel was told her results at the last Olympic trial were not good enough to make the games, even though she won her event and equaled the German record.³³ Nevertheless, the American boycott never materialized. The Nazis' true intent towards potential Jewish participants in

²⁸"Jewish Athletes Named," *New York Times*, 9 June 1934, 10 and "Jews Propose 21 for German Team," *New York Times*, 19 June 1934, 26, in D.A. Kass, "Issue of Racism," 225.

²⁹Avery Brundage, "Report of the President," in *Report of Committee*, ed. Fred W. Rubien, 31.

³⁰Mandell, *Nazi Olympics*, 73.

³¹Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 7.

³²Cohen, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 351 and 354.

³³*Ibid.*, 351-353 and 355.

the games was not known by other countries until it was too late. The letter informing Gretel that she would not make the Olympic team was not mailed until the day after the Nazis knew the Americans had left for Berlin.³⁴

Within Germany, care was also taken to appear as non-discriminatory as possible before the arrival of the foreign Olympic teams. The openly racist policies against Jews were temporarily suspended.³⁵ This resulted in some unusual situations. The Nazi party explicitly stated to Bavarian Police minister, that all signs or banners relating to the Jewish population, needed to be removed from railway lines and roads by January 1 of 1936, which meant the SS had to obey these orders, temporarily restricting its own newspaper.³⁶ Other German newspapers were also restricted in the types of things they could cover. These newspapers, under government control, denounced a potential American boycott as hostile to those around the world who should compete in a festival that was supposed to stand for friendship.³⁷ Even those papers who printed articles that would have otherwise been welcomed in Nazi Germany were affected. A newspaper, *Die Sonne*, was reprimanded for printing a section of a particularly racist book on sports before all the foreign nations had returned home.³⁸ Even the Nazi's desire to broadcast their Aryan superiority was suppressed. Medal totals, which had originally been published to show how well the German team was doing, were prohibited so as to not offend other countries.³⁹ This censorship continued to be seen throughout the Olympics against foreign competing countries. No other country except Germany, whose Leni Riefenshtahl would create *Olympia*, could make a film of the Olympics, and foreign cameramen had to be accompanied by a

³⁴Ibid., 355.

³⁵Kruger, "United States of America," 37.

³⁶Federal Archives, Koblenz, NS 19/1641 of 12 March, 1935, in Ibid., 37.

³⁷Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 55.

³⁸Kruger, "United States of America," 37.

³⁹Ibid., 37

German official who would act as an immediate censor.⁴⁰ All of this was done in an effort to discourage dissent, but Nazis were helped by past precedents that fit their propaganda needs. While only German photographers were allowed into the stadiums where the games were held, the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928 also saw photography rights being tightly controlled.⁴¹ New technologies, which worked to the Nazi's advantages, had their start in earlier Olympics. An early television station that showed pictures of the Olympics within Berlin had been experimented with in Amsterdam, but the Berlin Games were considered the first Olympics to broadly incorporate the use of television.⁴² These efforts culminated in what many participants considered to be the grandest Olympics that had been held up to that time. Avery Brundage himself wrote in his report of the American Olympic Committee that the games, "were unquestionably the largest and most magnificent yet held."⁴³

The Nazis succeeded in staging an Olympic games that had, despite the intervention of the international community, placated concerns over Jewish racism while continuing, secretly, the practices and policies that the party stood for. Their ability to not only meet the problems of building the Olympics, as well as eliminate almost all political objections to their staging in Berlin, speaks volumes of the Nazis' highly effective efforts. The fact that they had only been in power no more than three years prior to the games itself makes their feat even more remarkable. Unfortunately, this ability was only furthered by the United States and other countries' gullibility when it came to believing German promises of fairness and equality.

⁴⁰Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 68-69.

⁴¹Kruger, "United States of America," 38.

⁴²Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Games*, 60.

⁴³Rubien, *Report of Committee*, 31.