

THE NAZI OLYMPICS BERLIN 1936



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Hitler reviews 35,000 Storm Troopers.

In August 1936, Adolf Hitler's Nazi dictatorship scored a huge propaganda success as host of the Summer Olympics. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had awarded Berlin the

Games in 1931. When Hitler took power two years later, the United States and other countries considered but ultimately rejected the idea of a boycott. The world thereby missed the chance to take a stand that—some observers at the time claimed—might have strengthened resistance to Nazi tyranny.

NAZI GERMANY 1933–1936

When Hitler became German chancellor in 1933, he quickly turned the nation's weak democracy into a one-party dictatorship. Police arrested and imprisoned thousands of political opponents without trial in Dachau and other concentration camps. The introduction of military conscription in 1935—a violation of the Versailles Treaty of 1919—was a major step in Germany's remilitarization.

In the 1930s the Nazi regime carried out racial policies to “purify” and strengthen the so-called Aryan population. Doctors forcibly sterilized persons deemed “inferior,” including mentally and physically disabled persons, Gypsies (Sinti and Roma), and about 500 teenaged offspring of German women and colonial soldiers, mostly from North and sub-Saharan Africa, stationed in the Rhineland after the war. The boycott of Jewish businesses, the expulsion of Jews from government employment, and the Nuremberg racial and citizenship laws of September 1935 were steps in a relentless campaign to exclude Germany's one-half million Jews from all aspects of German life.

German national soccer team
on Nazi magazine cover

NAZIFICATION OF GERMAN SPORT

**“Every German athlete
should voluntarily participate in strengthening the military might of the German people.”**

—Hans von Tschammer und
Osten, Reich Sports Office
Director, April 30, 1933



In 1933 Hitler's new regime began to Nazify all aspects of German political, social, economic, and cultural life, even including the world of sport. The Nazi government harnessed sport in its drive to strengthen the "Aryan race," to exercise political control over its citizens, and to prepare German youth for war. Nazi officials assumed control of the 1936 Olympics.

German sports facilities and associations systematically excluded "Non-Aryans." For example, the German Boxing Association expelled amateur champion Erich Seelig because he was Jewish. Germany removed another Jew, Daniel Prenn—the nation's top-ranked tennis player—from its Davis Cup Team. Gretel Bergmann, a world-class high jumper, was expelled from her German sports club because she was Jewish. Gypsies, including the Sinti boxer Johann Rukelie Trollmann, were also purged from German sports. Bergmann and many other Jewish athletes barred from German sports clubs flocked to separate Jewish associations.

Gretel Bergmann (*foreground, in black tanktop*) poses with her Jewish sports club. Members had used their shovels to transform farm land into a sports field.





Track stars Jesse Owens
(left) and Ralph Metcalfe

Avery Brundage (left) and
Jeremiah Mahoney

THE BOYCOTT DEBATE

“Sport is prostituted when sport loses its independent and democratic character and becomes a political institution. . . . Nazi Germany is endeavoring to use the Eleventh Olympiad to serve the necessities and interests of the Nazi Regime rather than the Olympic ideals.”

—Jeremiah Mahoney’s pro-boycott “Committee on Fair Play in Sports,” New York, November 15, 1935

In 1933 the IOC considered moving the Games from Nazi Germany. After the IOC decided to proceed as planned, Olympic boycott movements developed in a number of countries. Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee (AOC), opposed a boycott, arguing that politics had no place in sport and that American athletes should avoid involvement in what he called a “Jew-Nazi altercation.” Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, president of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), supported a boycott, pointing out that Germany had broken Olympic rules forbidding discrimination based on race and religion. In his view, participation would constitute an endorsement of Hitler’s regime.

Despite widespread support of a boycott by American newspaper editors, a determined Avery Brundage maneuvered the AAU to a close vote in favor of sending a team to Berlin. The United States and 48 other countries competed in the Berlin Games, more teams than at any previous Olympics. President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not become involved in the boycott issue, continuing a 40-year tradition in which the AOC operated independently of outside influence.



Tulane University Jewish sprinter
Herman Neugass, who boycotted
Olympic trials



“The AAU shouts against the cruelties of other nations and the brutalities in foreign climates, but conveniently forgets the things that sit on its own doorstep.”

Program for counter-Olympics held in Randall's Island, New York

— *The Philadelphia Tribune*,
December 19, 1935

Addressing the boycott issue, journalists for major African American newspapers such as the *Philadelphia Tribune* underscored the hypocrisy of pro-boycotters who did not first address the issue of discrimination against Black athletes in “Jim Crow” America. Many saw the 1936 Olympics as an opportunity to foster a new sense of Black pride at home, since a large contingent of African Americans contended for places on the American team. In the end, 19 African Americans — 17 men and 2 women — sailed for Berlin, triple the number of Blacks in the 1932 Los Angeles Games.

The American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee, joined by the non-sectarian Anti-Nazi League, supported the boycott of the 1936 Games as part of a general anti-Nazi boycott of German goods. A number of American and European Jewish athletes boycotted the Olympics or Olympic trials, including American Jewish track stars Herman Neugass and Milton Green and Austrian swimmers Judith Deutsch, Ruth Langer, and Lucie Goldner. Counter-Olympics were held in Randall's Island, New York, and in Prague, Czechoslovakia. A major counter-Olympics was planned for Barcelona, Spain, from July 22 to 26, 1936, but was canceled after fighting began in the Spanish Civil War.

Poster promoting the Winter Olympics



THE NAZI OLYMPICS

The Olympics were a perfect arena for the Nazi propaganda machine, which was unsurpassed at staging elaborate public spectacles and rallies. Behind the glittering facade, however, a ruthless dictatorship persecuted its enemies and rearmed for war to acquire more “living space” for the “Aryan master race.”

The Winter Olympics and the Reoccupation of the Rhineland

In a prelude to the much larger Summer Olympics, Germany hosted the Winter Games at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps in February 1936. Yielding to the IOC’s insistence on “fair play,” German officials allowed Rudi Ball, who was part-Jewish, to compete on the

nation’s ice hockey team. Hitler also ordered anti-Jewish signs temporarily removed from public view. Still, Nazi deceptions for propaganda purposes were not wholly successful. Western journalists reported troop maneuvers at Garmisch, prompting the Nazi regime to minimize the military’s presence at the Summer Olympics.



Jerry Doyle’s cartoon “Watch on the Rhine” appeared in the *Philadelphia Record*, March 10, 1936.

international provocation that violated the treaties of Versailles and Locarno. German aggression only briefly revived discussion of an Olympics boycott.

Just 12 days after the Winter Olympics and 5 months before the Summer Games, German troops marched unopposed into the demilitarized zone between France and Germany. The reoccupation of the Rhineland on March 7, 1936, was a serious

Nazi Propaganda and the Façade of Hospitality

Germany skillfully promoted the Olympics with colorful posters and magazine spreads. Athletic imagery drew a link between Nazi Germany and ancient Greece just as Nazi racists claimed that superior German civilization was the rightful heir to an "Aryan" culture of classical antiquity. During the Olympics, the Nazi regime censored German media coverage, issuing directives, for example, that warned against "insensitive" "racial" reporting of sports events involving "American Negro" athletes. Propaganda efforts continued well after the Olympics with the world release in 1938 of *Olympia*, Leni Riefenstahl's controversial epic film.



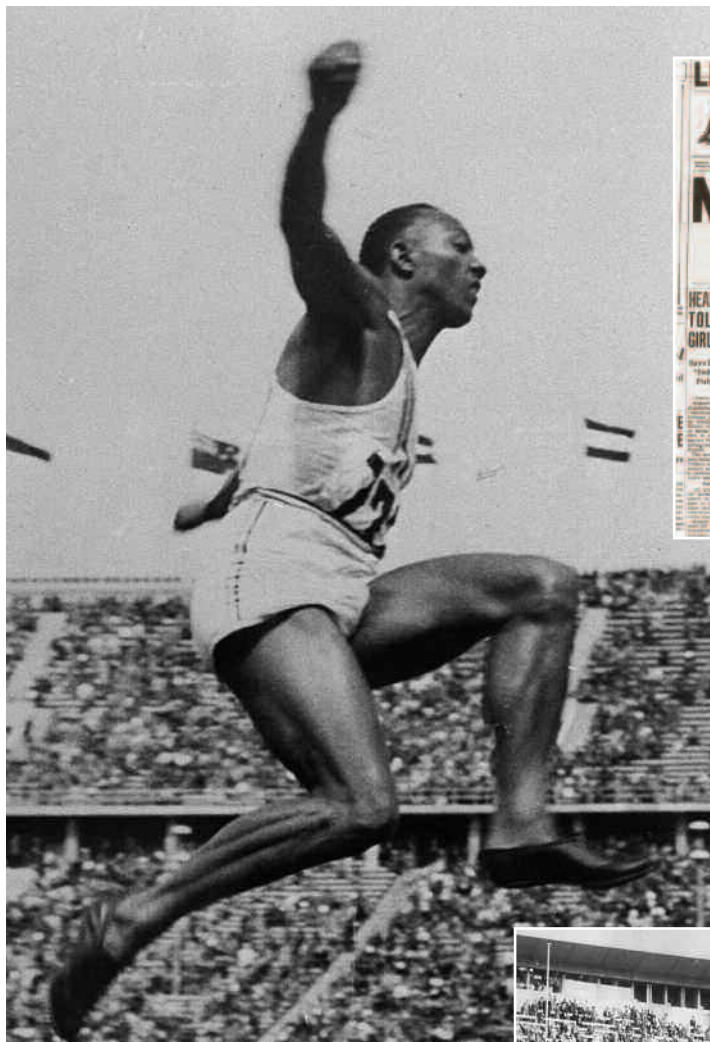
The 1936 Olympics were the first to feature the torch run.

Most tourists who arrived in festive, crowded Berlin for the Olympics were unaware that the Nazi regime had temporarily removed anti-Jewish signs. Nor would they have known of a police "clean up" that had swept Gypsy (Sinti and Roma) families off the streets and into a new internment camp. During the Games a major concentration camp, Sachsenhausen, was also being built near Berlin.

On August 1, 1936, Hitler opened the XIth Olympiad amid great fanfare. The inaugural festivities included a new Olympic ritual: a lone runner lighting a torch that had been carried by relay from the site of the ancient Games in Olympia, Greece.

Gypsies interned in a camp in the Berlin suburb of Marzahn





Americans swept the high jump event.
*From left: Delos Thurber,
 Cornelius Johnson, and David Albrighton*



Success of African American Athletes

To the chagrin of Nazi racists, African Americans won 14 medals and dominated the popular track and field events at the Games. The hero of the Olympics was four-gold-medal winner Jesse Owens, the son of former Alabama sharecroppers. Owens was enormously popular with the German people, but Nazi ideologues, ignoring press directives to avoid offending their guests, demeaned Owens and other Black medalists by referring to them as “auxiliaries.” The continuing social and economic discrimination the Black athletes faced upon returning home to “Jim Crow” America underscored the irony of their athletic triumphs in racist Germany.



*(Far left) Jesse Owens setting an Olympic record in the long jump
(Left) August 8, 1936, headline in a major African American newspaper*



Hungarian Ibolya Csák, whose father was Jewish, won the gold medal in the high jump.

Jewish Athletes and the Games

As a token gesture to mollify the West, German authorities allowed the part-Jewish fencer Helene Mayer to represent Germany in Berlin. But no other Jewish athlete competed for Germany. Two weeks before the Olympics began, German officials informed the outstanding high jumper Gretel Bergmann that she would not be on the team. The Hungarian Ibolya Csák, who won the event at Berlin, was part-Jewish; she cleared 5 feet 3 inches, the same height Bergmann had jumped at Stuttgart two months earlier. Besides Csák and Mayer, who won a silver medal, seven other athletes who were Jews or of Jewish descent were medalists at Berlin.

Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, the only two Jews on the American track team, were humiliated when their coaches withdrew them from the 4x100-meter relay team shortly before the race. The reason for the change still remains unclear. Glickman has said that Coach Dean Cromwell and Avery Brundage were motivated by antisemitism and the desire to spare the Führer the embarrassing sight of two Jews on the winning podium. The coaches claimed they wanted their fastest sprinters, Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe, on the team. The Americans' winning time for the event, 39.8 seconds, remained a world record for 20 years.



Marty Glickman (left) and Sam Stoller training prior to the Olympics



AFTERMATH

“In 1940 the Olympic Games will take place in Tokyo. But thereafter they will take place in Germany for all time to come, in this stadium.”

—Adolf Hitler, spring 1937

Germany emerged victorious from the XIth Olympiad.

Despite American domination of the track-and-field events,

Germany’s athletes captured the most medals overall, and warm German hospitality and lavish pageantry never before seen won the praises of visitors. Many newspaper accounts echoed Frederick Birchall’s report in the *New York Times* that the Games put Germans “back in the fold of nations.” Yet even as the post-Games reports were being filed, Hitler pressed on with grandiose plans for German expansion. These included taking over the Olympics forever.

In 1938, Germany incorporated Austria into the Reich and intensified the anti-Jewish campaign. On November 9–10, 1938 — *Kristallnacht*, “The Night of Broken Glass” — rioters burned hundreds of synagogues, vandalized and looted Jewish businesses and homes, and killed dozens of Jews. Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Within just three years after the Olympiad, the hospitable host of the Games had unleashed World War II, a conflict that resulted in untold destruction and the Holocaust.

THE HOLOCAUST

Between 1939 and 1945, Germans and their accomplices murdered six million Jews in occupied Europe as part of Nazi genocidal policy. Hundreds of thousands of Gypsies (Sinti and Roma) and mentally and



(Top) Architect Albert Speer’s model for a new 400,000-seat stadium at Nuremberg
(Above) Eberswalde synagogue in suburban Berlin. November 9–10, 1938

physically disabled persons were also killed, victims of Nazi racism. Countless others, including Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, political dissidents, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals, were executed or died from maltreatment during imprisonment in Nazi prisons and concentration camps. During the Holocaust, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, famous and unknown, were killed. Athletes, including participants in the Berlin Games as well as other former Olympians, were not spared. They included:



Alfred Flatow (1869–1942): Jewish gymnast and medalist for Germany at the 1896 Athens Olympics. In 1942, at the age of 73, he was deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. He died two months later, one of the 35,000 Jews who died from starvation and disease while imprisoned there.



Lili Henoch (1889–1942): Jewish shot putter and discus thrower for Germany. She was slated for the Paris Olympics of 1924 but did not compete because Germany was excluded. She was deported in 1942 to Riga, Latvia, where she and her mother were killed by *Einsatzgruppen* units (mobile killing squads).



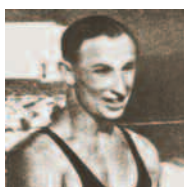
Roman Kantor (1912–1943): Jewish fencer and competitor for Poland in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He was arrested in Warsaw in 1942 and deported to the Majdanek concentration camp in occupied Poland, where he died in 1943. Kantor was one of nearly three million Polish Jews murdered during the Holocaust.



Janusz Kusociński (1907–1940): 10,000-meter runner and medalist for Poland in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Executed by the Germans in 1940, he was one of tens of thousands of Polish Catholics killed as part of the Nazi plan to destroy Poland's leadership classes and enslave the Polish people.



Werner Seelenbinder (1904–1944): Wrestler and competitor for Germany at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Seelenbinder, a Communist, was arrested in 1942 for resistance activities and was later executed for treason.



Ilja Szrajbman (?–1943): Jewish swimmer and competitor for Poland at the 1936 Olympics. He was one of tens of thousands of Jews who died from starvation, brutality, and disease during their imprisonment in the Warsaw ghetto of German-occupied Poland.



Johann Trollmann (1907–1943): Sinti (Gypsy) boxer, expelled from the German Boxing Association in 1933, died ten years later in the Nazi concentration camp at Neuengamme, Germany. Trollmann was one of an estimated 220,000–500,000 Gypsies (Sinti and Roma) killed across German-occupied Europe during the Holocaust.

Recommended Reading

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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum exhibitions program is supported in part by the Lester Robbins and Sheila Johnson Robbins Traveling and Temporary Exhibitions Fund, established in 1990.

Additional funding for the Museum's traveling exhibitions is provided by the Takiff Family Foundation.

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