

SCOTT MCGREGOR. Nazis: Hosts of the 1936 Olympics

Even though the weather was overcast for the opening ceremony of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, excitement prevailed throughout the day. Germany could not have appeared grander during the opening ceremony. Over 100,000 people were packed into the new stadium to witness the spectacle. A chorus of 3,000 sang the Olympic hymn while the largest zeppelin in the world, the *Hindenburg*, flew overhead. The Olympic torch was carried by a relay of runners from Greece, and 20,000 doves were released at the right signal. The Games were opened by Adolf Hitler, Germany's chancellor. He appeared to be a man of peace when he received a bouquet of flowers from the International Olympic Committee President's five year old daughter as he made his way to the reviewing stand.¹

A tremendous amount of effort was involved in planning these Olympic Games. It was the largest of the modern Olympics produced up to that time, and the first to be televised, at least within the city of Berlin. But was that just a product of the fact since it was the latest Olympiad? History has revealed that the Nazis had a hidden agenda behind their production of the Olympic Games. The Nazi regime used the Olympic Games to strengthen its hold on the German people, and to improve the image of the nation throughout the rest of the world by impressing foreigners with pageantry while keeping their true nature and philosophy hidden.

In the early 1930s, Germany was in political and economic disarray. Its people were in despair from trying to fulfill the demands of the Treaty of Versailles. The economic depression Germany faced was at times unbearable, with inflation reaching as high as one thousand percent. The country's government, the Weimar Republic, was failing to handle these extreme challenges. Millions of citizens lost faith in their political system and welcomed a new

¹ Richard D. Mandell, *Nazi Olympics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 162-164.

government that could restore order, prosperity, and pride to Germany. Many turned to a new, anti-democratic political faction commonly called the Nazis.

Before the Nazi assumption of power, in fact just prior to the Los Angeles Olympic Games of 1932, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) publicly announced, that the 1936 Olympic Games would be held in Germany. After Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor in 1933, the reports of racial discrimination being practiced by the Nazi regime influenced other nations to not support the games being held in Germany. An international boycott of the Games was formed as a pressure group to move the Games elsewhere, but a few prominent members of the IOC were able to keep the Games in Berlin.² The U.S. had a boycott movement, but officials in the American Olympic Committee concluded that Berlin would remain the hosting city. Other countries followed America's lead, and the boycott controversy was brought to a halt.³ After many countries succumbed to participation in the Games, it was confirmed that the 1936 Olympics would be held in Germany, under the supervision of the Nazi regime.⁴

There were two members of the IOC who had helped bring the Olympic Games to Berlin: Theodor Lewald and Carl Diem, Germany's Olympic Committee president. Both were former members of German sports federations. At first, the Nazis did not see any benefit in hosting the Olympics. Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, head of Germany's popular enlightenment and propaganda division, felt that the Games had no importance in the ideological agenda of the Third Reich. Lewald was the first to recognize how to exploit the use of the Olympics and convinced Goebbels to use the Games as propaganda to showcase German accomplishment under Hitler. The Nazis soon embraced the potential of the Games as propaganda at home, as

² Mandell, *Nazi Olympics*, 47-48.

³ George Eisen, "The Voices of Sanity: American Diplomatic Reports from the 1936 Berlin Olympiad," *Journal of Sport History* 11, no. 3 (1984): 69-77, <http://www.aafila.org>.

⁴ Mandell, *Nazi Olympics*, 48.

well as abroad. So, the regime began preparation for the Games by forming a planning committee under propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, and employing Hans von Tschammer und Osten as the national sports leader, in order to insure their influence of the Berlin Olympics.⁵

The Nazi campaign aimed to strengthen the German peoples' favor of the Nazi regime, and to improve the country's image with other nations. When Germany had surrendered World War I, it had also given up pretensions of being a world power. The economic troubles of the first half of the 1920s, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the accompanying political tumult confirmed the country's tumble from the front rank of great powers. A key aspect of the Nazis' effort was to show internationally that Germany had recovered the status of a world power and that the German people were more prosperous and content than ever.⁶

Germany's national Olympic Committee (OC) began promoting the Olympic Games in 1933 by mailing out bulletins and pamphlets advertising the Games in five different languages. After the initial effort by the OC, the Nazis' propaganda ministry, more commonly known as the Propaganda Ministry, exerted control over the OC.⁷ Although the Nazi regime had control over the nation's own propaganda, it still had to meet regularly the demands of the IOC. At first Hitler refused Goebbels's advice to remove all anti-Semitic material from Berlin, but the IOC forced him to make the order by threatening to cancel the games if it were not done.⁸

. The Nazi regime planned government projects that doubled as a way to decrease unemployment in the country; thousands who were previously jobless could find work in constructing immense athletic compounds. Also, it would impress other nations when they marveled at these showcase structures. The projects were to be massive in scale and fueled by

⁵ Arnd Kruger and William Murray, *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 17-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

full financial backing.⁹ Producing a new sports complex had already been a large project that began before the Nazis took over the reins in propagandizing the Games. The complex included a number of areas such as playing fields, schools, offices, and parking lots. The stadium, more commonly known as the Reichssportfeld, was the largest stadium of its time. When Hitler reviewed progress on the construction, he always considered it too small.¹⁰

A tradition that continues today was suggested by Carl Diem. He proposed that a relay of marathon runners carry a lit torch from Olympia, Greece, the site of the ancient games, to Berlin. Over three thousand runners were needed to cover the distance equally, each runner traveling around one kilometer.¹¹ A new torch was invented by a German company that would withstand the extreme wind, rain, cold, and heat so that the fire would remain lit as the runner carried it. This idea came from an ancient Greek tradition, so it fit well with the Nazis' interest in Greek antiquity.¹² Hitler had a deep admiration for Greek culture, and felt that Greek civilization had reached a pinnacle in all fields of life.¹³ Interestingly, a recent interpretation of the thirty-first Olympiad reveals how Nazis also viewed the sporting event as a revival of Greek paganism and the creation of a "new world order."¹⁴

Another way to impress and attract favorable press coverage was to show great hospitality to all of their guests. The regime wanted both the foreign guests and athletes to return home with a positive impression of the new government. The Olympic Village in Berlin

⁹ Ibid., 22. This is possibly the first time for a country's government to do so. It is arguable that Sweden was the first to do so, in that they used a national lottery to fund the Olympics.

¹⁰ Mandell, *Nazi Olympics*, 139-140.

¹¹ Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics* (Philadelphia: Harper & Row, 1986), 159.

¹² Ibid., 146-148.

¹³ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, with an introduction by Eugene Davidson (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1970), 96-97.

¹⁴ In his article, Pitsula argues that there was a concentrated effort on reviving Greek paganist culture. Although he downplays the hidden agenda in the Nazi production of the games perhaps too much, researchers on this topic should note Pitsula's discover of Nazi interest in Greek culture when they planned the Games. James M. Pitsula, "The Nazi Olympics: A Reinterpretation," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 8, (2004): 18.

represented a prime form of their hospitality. The Army of Engineers, led by Captain Wolfgang Fuerstner, also in charge of the Wehrmacht's sporting program, constructed the village in Doberitz, right outside Berlin, to house the athletes. It was constructed in a birch forest, near several lakes. The housing for the athletes in Berlin was by far more desirable than that of the previous Olympics in Los Angeles, where athletes lived in isolated housing in the California desert. There were 160 houses, mostly brick, stone, or concrete, and there were also some meeting halls in the village. There were two stewards for each house who spoke each team's native language. Services such as a barber and medical care were made available to the athletes. Also, special attention was given to each nation's customs in their accommodations. For example, each nation was provided with their usual food and their preferred bed styles.¹⁵ The facade of this resort as a village of peace has a disturbing irony to it; before the Olympics arrived, the area was used as a training ground for dive-bombers during German intervention in the Spanish Civil War, and the lakes were briefly used as a submarine training ground after the Games.¹⁶

The Promi regularly censored the news reports and public demonstrations in Germany during the Games to ensure that their nation promoted a prosperous and peaceful image of the nation. Promi officials regulated newspapers, the common media at that time, to remove any negative reporting of the Nazi party, specifically its anti-Semitic behavior. Newspapers that published anything noting displays of racial discrimination were dealt with, usually by firing the person who wrote the article. Newspapers that reported only positive material about Germany were praised. Hitler at first, of course, had no interest in concealing his regime's anti-Semitic behavior, but Diem, along with the IOC, ordered that any display of anti-Semitic activities could

¹⁵Mandell, *Nazi Olympics*, 99-101.

¹⁶ William Baker, "New Light on the Nazi Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 8, no. 2 (1981): 118-120.

not be present during the Games.¹⁷ Goebbels himself also attempted to rid the city of any racist material.¹⁸ He knew the potential the Games held to help Germany improve its international prestige.

The Nazis sought to give Germany a new, more positive image to the rest of the world, at least in this task. While tourists were in Berlin for the Olympic Games they would be walking on clean streets that were fully decorated for the Games. One article in the *New York Times* reported on the excellent behavior of the German people during the games:

But the strongest impression that visitors will carry away is the sense of having experienced exceeding courtesy, extreme consideration and hospitality organized to the last degree...But beyond the official assistance to tourists, the great body of German people has cordially endorsed and carried out in spirit and letter this idea of national hospitality to strangers...Few strangers, finding themselves in directional difficulties, have needed even to ask assistance.

The article stated that some of their good behavior was due to propaganda, but that most of it was because of their goodwill.¹⁹ Prominent guests were invited to large, showy parties that were held by high-ranking Nazis.²⁰

Although some propaganda was generally targeted towards foreigners, some of the Promi's efforts were meant for internal consumption. Propagandists wanted to impress the German people and to show the strength of the new Germany. These Olympic Games were the first to be televised. Twenty-five broadcast screens were setup throughout Berlin for its citizens' pleasure.²¹ The Games were also filmed by Leni Riefenstahl, who was appointed by Hitler for her ability to mix the regime's propaganda into compelling documentaries. Her previous work, *Triumph of the Will*, was a documentary of the Nazi rise to power, and glorified the new

¹⁷ Ibid., 103-104.

¹⁸ Ibid., 159

¹⁹ Frederick T. Birchall, "Visitors to Olympics Carrying Away Highly Favorable Impression of Reich", *New York Times*, August 16, 1936.

²⁰ Ralf Georg Reuth, *Goebbels* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 215-216.

²¹ International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Games*, http://www.olympic.org/uk/games/past/index_uk.asp?OLGT=1&OLGY=1936#

Germany and its leaders.²² Previews were immediately available and two years later the general public could obtain film copies of the entire games.²³

These Olympic Games would prove to be both a political success and a sports victory for Germany; the nation finished first in the medal count. Germans won more gold, silver, and bronze medals than competitors from any other country. Even though German athletes lost in certain specific contests, such as Jesse Owens' great performance in track and field, they were able to participate in all events. Many countries fielded teams for only selected events. As a result Germany did the best overall in the Games.²⁴ The great showing of the German athletes had in the Games did some of the propagandists work for them. One of the best ways for people to gain pride in their country was to have their own people win the Games. Germans would also have more faith in their government for being able to produce such a great display of athletes and hospitality.

But what did the world think of this display? The sudden change in Germany's performance from the previous Olympic games was striking. In the 1932 Olympics, Germany had placed ninth overall and won only three gold medals.²⁵ Before the Berlin Games, most observers felt that Germany was still attempting to recover from the Great War and that political disorder ran rampant throughout the country. The 1936 Olympics would impress other nations with Germany's first place performance, and delude people about the nature and intentions of the Nazi regime. Andre Francois-Poncet, the French Ambassador who witnessed the Games in

²² Reuth, *Goebbels*, 214.

²³ Kruger and Murray, *The Nazi Olympics*, 27.

²⁴ http://www.olympic.org/uk/games/past/index_uk.asp?OLGT=1&OLGY=1936#

²⁵ International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Games*,

http://www.olympic.org/uk/games/past/index_uk.asp?OLGT=1&OLGY=1936#

Berlin, stated: “This atmosphere, just as that of the Olympic Games, suggested that peace was solidly established and war forever banished.”²⁶

One way to measure the impact of the propaganda campaign is to consider the case of one country. The United States was one of the main targets of propaganda. America was always a strong performer in the Olympic Games and reported neutrally on Germany. Also, a boycott movement was active in New York at one point, so the *New York Times* would perhaps be somewhat critical of any rookie government in Germany. America’s response to the Berlin Games would be indicative of how the Nazis’ executed the production of the Games.²⁷

The U.S. government was aware of the propaganda potential before the games began; diplomats visiting Germany reported on the exclusion of Jewish athletes and the possible political intent of the Olympics, but the Roosevelt administration was silent on the matter.²⁸ The media did not pursue reporting on the Nazis’ use of the sporting events. The American people were still in an isolationist mood in the mid 1930s. For instance, the *New York Times* reported on July 31, 1936, that there was a possibility of Nazi exploitation of the Olympics for propaganda purposes but that Goebbels assured everyone there was no intent to use the games in a political manner. He supported his claim by stating that the German people had never looked happier and there was no need for it. The news reporter concluded that Goebbels could be telling the truth, but that it was hard to believe coming from a propaganda minister.²⁹

The Washington Post’s newspaper headlines on the opening day were less positive, but were aimed generally towards the overall conditions of Europe. It revealed that as a result of the

²⁶ Andre Francois-Poncet, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs of a French Ambassador in Berlin*, trans. Jacques LeClercq (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972), 218.

²⁷ Kruger and Murray, *The Nazi Olympics*, 29-30.

²⁸ George Eisen, “The Voices of Sanity: American Diplomatic Reports from the 1936 Berlin Olympiad,” *Journal of Sport History* 11, no. 3 (1984): 75-77, <http://www.aafila.org>.

²⁹ Frederick T. Birchall, “Goebbels Denies Intent to Use Games for Propaganda Purposes,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1936.

political turmoil in Europe, the runners of the torch relay were harassed along the way. The article ended with a comment concerning whether or not there would be fair play and sportsmanship in the upcoming Olympic Games.³⁰

On opening day, the *New York Times* was, however, more positive towards Germany. One article claimed that “the world is indebted to German scholars and archaeologists for the nineteenth century revival of interest in ancient Greece.”³¹ Another article in the newspaper that day boasted the effort that Germany was putting forth to become more peaceful and trying to build a global camaraderie.³² *The New Yorker* also cast a favorable light on the Nazi regime. On the day the Olympics began, the magazine quoted Goebbel’s comment in *Der Angriff*: the Games are “a veritably historic opportunity for Germany to remove all those prejudices which have been attached to the German people not only in recent years but for decades.” The article continued, stating how the German people were living in the safest and most prosperous Berlin to date.³³

The Olympic Games began on August 2, 1936. Before the games started, reports indicated that people had worried about the use of politics interfering with fair play. However, when the much anticipated Summer Games were underway in the grandest Olympic arena created to that time, spectators turned their attention to the sporting events.

The track and field games were the most popular part of the Games. All tickets for the events that took place in the new stadium were sold before the Olympics began.³⁴ Germany performed well in the women’s track and field events, but the U.S. excelled in the men’s

³⁰ “The Olympics,” *The Washington Post*, Aug 1, 1936.

³¹ Frederick T. Birchall, “The Light of the Torch”, *New York Times*, Aug 1, 1936.

³² Frederick T. Birchall, “Open Today in Gay and Crowded Berlin”, *New York Times*, Aug 1, 1936.

³³ “Berlin Letter,” *The New Yorker*, August, 1, 1936.

³⁴ Laura Foreman, ed., *The Olympic Century*, vol. 11, *The XI, XII, & XIII Olympiads*, by George Constable (Los Angeles: World Sport Research & Publications, 1996), 62.

contests. The U.S. team won 12 gold medals and one of the country's athletes, Jesse Owens, had delivered a spectacular performance that captured international attention.³⁵

Owens not only defeated his opponents on the field, but he also challenged the Nazis' goals of ideas of the superiority of the Aryan race. Furthermore, the track star weakened the regime's effort to mask their racial prejudice. At first, quite the opposite seemed to be true. Early on, when Owens participated in the one hundred meter race he was prepared for any racial insults hurled at him. He was surprised to find that the Germans cheered for him greatly in every one of his events.³⁶ Owens commented after the Games that the German people were tremendous.³⁷ He even struck a friendship with his German competition in the long jump event, Carl Ludwig.³⁸ Although he triumphed over German athletes on the track, his later comment is an indication of propaganda success for Germany.

However, a Nazi propaganda failure would result from Owens's victories. When Owens won one of his races, Hitler was not present to shake Owens' hands like he had done with previous gold medalists. Reports indicated that Hitler had left earlier because it was raining. The IOC president, Count Henri de Baillet Latour, ordered that Hitler shake every winner's hand or no one's. He congratulated no one afterwards.³⁹ A *Washington Post* article would report that Hitler did not congratulate Owens for his medals and that the German newspaper *Der Angriff* called African-Americans "black auxiliaries" that America shamelessly used to achieve a better performance in the Olympics. The American article analyzed *Der Angriff* further and uncovered more of its bias in questioning how the German soccer team could lose to Norway.⁴⁰

³⁵ International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Games*, http://www.olympic.org/uk/games/past/index_uk.asp?OLGT=1&OLGY=1936#

³⁶ Laura Foreman, *The Olympic Century*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁸ Susan D. Bachrach, *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁴⁰ "What Price Olympic Glory? America's Sports Public Demands", *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1936.

The other events were more of a triumph for Germany. Even though the U.S. did well in swimming and diving events, Germany won many of its medals in the remaining competitions. Germans dominated in gymnastics, field hockey, canoeing and rowing, boxing, and weightlifting. All of the equine events also resulted in gold medals for Germany.⁴¹ American reporting of Germany's victories was limited to factual data. Rarely did these reports indicate admiration of German athletic performance. At times, reports even questioned the Nazis' counting system, but it is clear that Germany performed best overall, with the most gold, silver, and bronze medals. If the Americans would not marvel at Germany's victories, the German people would gleefully embrace the accomplishment and further accept their new government.

After the Games ended, the *New York Times* returned to generalizations about the overall environment of the Olympics. On August 16, 1936, the *New York Times* reported with great optimism about Germany:

Foreigners who know Germany only from what they have seen during this pleasant fortnight can carry home only one impression. It is that this is a nation happy and prosperous beyond belief; that Hitler is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, political leaders in the world today, and that Germans themselves are a much maligned, hospitable, wholly peaceful people who deserve the best the world can give them.

The article concluded with hopes that Berlin would remain as peaceful as it appeared during the Olympics.⁴²

The Washington Post was once again less generous that day. An article entitled "What Price Olympic Glory? America's Sports Public Demands" was heavily focused on the racist behavior of the Nazis during the game. There was mention of Hitler's absence when he should have been shaking Jesse Owens' and other African-Americans' hands when they received their

⁴¹ Laura Foreman, *The Olympic Century*, 62.

⁴² Frederick T. Birchall, "Olympics Leave Glow of Pride in the Reich", *New York Times*, August 16, 1936.

medals. There was also some attention given to the Nazis' anti-Semitic behavior. Although writers did report some of the Nazis' racist acts, they did not capture the extent of violence directed against ideological foes already present in Germany.⁴³ The Nazis did not present a counter to the American press; they felt it was unnecessary to defend against *The Washington Post's* remarks of their racist behavior since the American South had a similar perspective.

The United States government was vaguely aware of the Nazi regime's use of the games as propaganda. Some reports also discussed this aspect of the 1936 Olympics and hinted at racist displays and violence, but there was still hope that Germany could one day be a peaceful nation alongside other European countries. The Games fed into a belief that the Nazis would gradually become more civilized as they faced the responsibility of governance. Also, The Nazis were overall successful in consolidating their power at home. German people, both in the Reich as well as outside of it, could be proud of their nation again, and they attributed their new found pride to the leadership of the new regime.

Other nations naturally harbored different views on the Berlin Olympics. In some countries like England, Italy, and France dwelt on the sporting events and gave little attention to the politics involved. These countries marveled at Germany's improved performance, and sought to duplicate their training methods. The Japanese were also impressed at the German victories, but others expressed concern that the Games should not have been administrated by a dictator. Some countries, such as Finland, Sweden, and Denmark were aware of the politics involved and were hesitant to be supportive of the Berlin Games. However, in the end, they had participated in the Games, and their admitted knowledge of the Nazis' violent actions towards the Jewish

⁴³ "What Price Olympic Glory? America's Sports Public Demands", *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1936.

community and other ideological enemies would not gain much attention, much less generate action against the German state.⁴⁴

The 1936 Olympic Games carried political significance with them when they were successfully utilized by the Nazi regime. If the Nazis had been less careful in censoring information and did not play the role of genial and generous hosts, then the reality of their behavior towards people of other countries and races would have been revealed sooner. However, the Nazis used the games to their full potential. The Nazi propaganda effort was well prepared and successfully executed. The goals that the regime had set out were accomplished. Other countries reported on the German people as kindhearted and their new statesmen as appropriate leaders, while anti-Semitic behavior was only paused for the time being. Even at that point, a handful of concentration camps were in use and Hitler was planning his next step in conquering Europe. Similar to the way Shakespeare's *Macbeth* prepared for his evil act, the Nazis knew that "false face must hide what false heart doth know" and they created their own version of false face: propaganda.

⁴⁴ Kruger and Murray, *The Nazi Olympics*, 80-207.