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## Socialism and Democracy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csad20>

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Published online: 26 Jul 2011.

To cite this article: Mario Kessler (2011) Only Nazi Games? Berlin 1936: The Olympic Games between Sports and Politics, *Socialism and Democracy*, 25:2, 125-143, DOI: [10.1080/08954300.2011.579476](https://doi.org/10.1080/08954300.2011.579476)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08954300.2011.579476>

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# Only Nazi Games? Berlin 1936: The Olympic Games between Sports and Politics<sup>1</sup>

Mario Kessler

At the 29<sup>th</sup> session of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1931, delegates met in Barcelona, Spain to determine the location of the 11<sup>th</sup> Olympic Summer Games. One month later the IOC awarded the 1936 Olympic Games to Berlin. While in 1925 the Locarno Treaty had signaled the return of Germany to the community of states (and the Olympic family in 1928), this award clearly established the Weimar Republic as a trustworthy partner despite all of its problems. However, by the time the Games took place from 1–16 August 1936, Hitler had been in power for three years and German democracy, including its athletic community, lay in ruins. Nazi anti-Semitism, particularly with the introduction of the Nuremberg “race laws” in September 1935, led to broad international discussions about the appropriateness of holding Olympic Games in a country that had so clearly violated the humanitarian principles underlying the Games.

This subject has been amply documented. The standard works on the subject – from Arnd Krüger’s pioneering study to David Clay Large’s most recent book<sup>2</sup> – show how the Hitler regime sought to use the Games as an opportunity to increase its popularity inside the country while at the same time disguising the true nature of the

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1. The original version of this article was published under the title: “Berlin 1936 – nur Spiele der Nazis? Olympia zwischen Sport und Politik” in *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 10, No. 2 (2011).
  2. Arnd Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936 und die Weltmeinung: Ihre außenpolitische Bedeutung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der USA* (Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt: Bartels & Wernitz, 1972); David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007). For an extensive bibliography see Arnd Krüger and William Murray, eds., *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 247–251.

*Socialism and Democracy*, Vol.25, No.2, July 2011, pp.125–143

ISSN 0885-4300 print/ISSN 1745-2635 online

DOI: 10.1080/08854300.2011.579476

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regime abroad. The Nazi regime subsequently interpreted the failed international campaign to boycott the Games – which also involved the working-class sports movement – as a sign of success for the National Socialist leadership.

This article ties into these scholarly debates.<sup>3</sup> In general, it analyzes whether the Berlin Games were simply “Nazi Games” (a view shared by the working-class movement), or whether additional characterizations might emerge from a longer-range analysis. In this connection, we examine, in turn, the IOC reactions once it became clear that the Nazis sought to instrumentalize the Games for their own purposes; the efforts of the boycott movement, including the working-class sports movement; the non-participation of Jewish athletes, a group whose size has long been underestimated; the impact of the boycott movement on the instrumentalization of the Games; and finally, the successes of Jewish and African-American athletes at the Games, and how the presence of these two groups (whose common humanity was categorically denied by the Nazis) has affected the historical assessment of the Berlin Games.

Questions about the athletic successes of African-Americans have been explored for some time now.<sup>4</sup> Any discussions about Jews and the Berlin Games, on the other hand, have until recently focused entirely on the extent of their participation in the international boycott movement. It has only been in the last decade that Paul Yogi Mayer and Paul Taylor studied the possible effects of Jewish Olympic victories on the collective consciousness of a social minority.<sup>5</sup>

### **The IOC and Nazi sports policies**

The Nazi rise to power initially led the IOC to pose some critical questions. After the Nazi regime announced its “Jewish Boycott” on 1 April 1933, IOC President Henri de Baillet-Latour asked the German government for a written guarantee that it would honor the values established in the Olympic Charter: that all Game participants are equal. This meant specifically that Jewish or Black athletes would not be mistreated in public. At the IOC’s annual meeting in Vienna

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3. Special thanks go to Eleanor Yadin of the Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library, for helping to obtain sources.
  4. See for example, Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: The African-American Athlete in Track and Field* (New York: Warner Books, 1993).
  5. Paul Yogi Mayer, *Jews and the Olympic Games: A Springboard for Minorities* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004); Paul Taylor, *Jews and the Olympic Games: The Clash between Sports and Politics* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004).

in June 1933 it was noted that the Games might be moved away from Berlin should the German government be unwilling to issue such a guarantee. Concerned about its international reputation, the Hitler regime committed itself to a full implementation of Olympic rules. This public commitment satisfied the IOC and it subsequently awarded the fourth Winter Games in 1936 to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.<sup>6</sup>

The decision was not uncontested. Prior to the June 1933 meeting, the American Jewish Congress (AJC) spoke out against holding the Games in Germany. Among other things, it highlighted the negative impact on the United States and other countries if Jewish athletes were prevented from participating in the 1936 Summer Games.<sup>7</sup> In October 1933, AJC President Bernhard S. Deutsch pointed out that the situation for Jews and Jewish athletes in Germany had deteriorated further since the IOC affirmed the Berlin Games in Vienna.<sup>8</sup> In response to these challenges, IOC member Charles Sherill stated that the Committee would assure that Olympic principles were protected, and that the Berlin Games' Organization Committee (OC) would work independently of politics.<sup>9</sup> The OC's president, Theodor Lewald, who had been appointed by the Weimar Republic, was himself of "mixed race" according to the new racial categories, a fact that did not prevent the regime from using his international connections and his loyalty to the Olympic cause for their own purposes.

Prior to 1933, enthusiasm for the Olympic Games was decidedly limited among the National Socialists. However, after January 1933 the Games' possible propaganda value outweighed their circumspect views about international cooperation. The Nazis wanted to present the image of a "healthy" new Germany, and the Games provided a unique showcase. The president of the *Reichsbund für Leibesübungen*, the German Sports Association, Hans von Tschammer und Osten, was tasked with integrating the Olympic campaign into official ideology. Carl Diem, General Secretary of the OC, played a key role in the planning and execution of the Games. Diem, although not a member of the Nazi Party, shared many of the regime's guidelines in terms of nationalism and anti-Semitism.

Avery Bundage, President of the US Olympic Committee (USOC), traveled to Germany at the end of August 1934 to investigate the state

6. See Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 65.

7. "Protests Olympic Games," *The New York Times* (NYT), May 31, 1933.

8. "Olympics Unit Here Reopens Nazi Row," *Ibid.*, October 9, 1933.

9. See Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 49–53.

of preparation of the Games. Von Tschammer und Osten, who was fluent in English, succeeded in winning Brundage's support for the Nazis' athletic leadership.<sup>10</sup> Upon his return Brundage expressed deep satisfaction about the quality of his talks with German sports functionaries and his conviction that the Games would take place without any trouble. He further expressed his sense that reports about discrimination against Jews were exaggerated in the US.<sup>11</sup>

After his trip to Berlin in October 1934 Charles Sherill reported that the German foreign minister Konstantin von Neurath had provided assurances that Jewish athletes would have equal opportunities on the German teams. Sherill also warned his Jewish friends that a boycott movement would only cause a wave of anti-Semitism and he wrote: "Many prominent Jews with whom I have talked here and abroad feel the same way: that it would be overplaying the Jewish hand in America as it was overplayed in Germany before the present suppression and expulsion of the Jews were undertaken"<sup>12</sup> Brundage and Sherill agreed that American participation "and the unhindered continuance of the Olympic movement were more important than the German-Jewish situation."<sup>13</sup>

In the end, IOC President Baillet-Latour overcame his initial hesitancy and committed to keeping the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. Baillet-Latour was especially convinced after the USOC and Bundage accepted Berlin's invitation over the opposition of one of its members, Charles L. Ornstein. As a result Baillet-Latour decisively influenced the direction taken in IOC deliberations, in particular by removing Ernest Lee Jahncke, an American supporter of the boycott, from the Executive Committee. Jahncke's position was clear after he publicly exposed the ongoing discrimination against Jews as well as

10. See Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 64-65.

11. Arnd Krüger, "'Wenn die Olympiade vorbei, schlagen wir die Juden zu Brei': Das Verhältnis der Juden zu den Olympischen Spielen von 1936," *Menora: Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte*, Vol. 5 (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1994), 331-346, here 337-339.

12. "Sherill Rebuffs Olympic Ban Plea," *NYT*, October 22, 1934. After talks with Hitler at the end of 1935 both Sherill and Baillet-Latour accepted assurances that anti-Semitic propaganda would not be visible in either Berlin or Garmisch. However, they were unable to extract binding assurances that Jewish athletes would be able to participate with their German teams. See A. Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 108, 137-138.

13. Stephen R. Wenn, "Talks of Two Diplomats: George S. Messersmith and Charles R. Sherill on Proposed American Participation in the Berlin Olympics," *Journal of Sport History*, 16, No. 1 (1989), 27-43, here 36.

their removal from German sports clubs.<sup>14</sup> He was replaced by Brundage, who worked especially closely with Sweden's Sigfrid Edström as well as with Karl Ritter von Halt, President of the OC for the Olympic Winter Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. This trio would serve as the primary guarantors that the IOC would not oppose Nazi sports policies.<sup>15</sup>

### Against Hitler's Games (I): The boycott movement and its failure

By the mid-1930s, boycott movements emerged in an effort to prevent the Games from taking place in Berlin. The "Comité international pour le respect de l'esprit olympique" was founded in Paris in 1935. It had members in Great Britain, France, The Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium, including the president of the Labour and Socialist International, Emile Vandervelde. In June 1936 the Committee held a conference in Paris in defense of the Olympic ideals, at which novelist Heinrich Mann spoke. The conference supported a counter Olympics in Barcelona, an idea that was initiated among others by Léo Lagrange, Secretary for Sports at the French Ministry of Education.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of boycotting the Berlin Games was not popular in Great Britain. However, boycott supporters included the Labour Party politician and future Nobel Peace Prize winner Philip Noel-Baker, who had won a silver medal at the 1920 Olympics in the 1500-meter race. The House of Commons deliberated the issue on 23 March 1936 and confirmed the traditional view that government could not forbid athletes from participating in the Berlin Games. The Amateur Athletic Association likewise supported the participation of a British team in Berlin, arguing that a boycott of the Summer Olympics made little

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14. Jahncke summarized his views in an urgent letter to Baillet-Latour dated 25 November 1935. See Robert H. Abzug, *America Views the Holocaust, 1933–1945: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 63–66.
  15. Wendy Gray and Robert Knight Barney, "Devotion to Whom?: German-American Loyalty on the Issue of Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games," *Journal of Sport History*, 17, No. 2 (1990), 214–231. As no government funds were available the travel costs for the US Olympic Team were covered by donations amounting to roughly \$350,000. See "Trials and Tryouts," *Time*, July 20, 1936, 50–54, here 53–54.
  16. See, *inter alia*, Karl Heinz Jahnke, *Gegen den Mißbrauch der olympischen Idee 1936. Sportler im antifaschistischen Widerstand* (Frankfurt: Röderberg, 1972), 19–20, 83–84; Fabrice Abgrall and François Thomazeau, 1936. *La France à l'épreuve des Jeux Olympiques de Berlin* (Paris: Alvik, 2006), especially 41–53; André Gounot, "Barcelona gegen Berlin: Das Projekt der Volksolympiade 1936," in Michael Krüger, ed., *Der deutsche Sport auf dem Weg in die Moderne* (Berlin: LIT, 2009), 119–130.

sense given that the team had already competed at the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, influential sports functionaries and sports journalists in France demanded the relocation of the Games and ultimately a boycott. Among them were Jules Rimet, president of the World Soccer Association, Jacques Goddet, editor of the sports magazine *L'Auto*, and Gaston Bénac of *Paris-Soir*. The voices of opposition intensified after the German occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936. Nevertheless on 19 June 1936 French Prime Minister Léon Blum allowed a French team to participate in the Berlin Games despite communist votes against such participation. A subsequent parliamentary vote on 9 July was a mere formality.<sup>18</sup>

On behalf of the Germans in exile, the *Pariser Tageszeitung* attacked the "international sports leaders" who had deliberately "closed their eyes" in order to "present a victory to German propaganda."<sup>19</sup> Another article argued that "nobody appeared to have thought of declaring the leaders of modern sports to be in the vanguard of the intellectual progress of our times."<sup>20</sup>

The boycott movement was strongest in the United States, where the issue was actively debated. An early meeting protesting the Games, and organized among others by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), took place in New York on 7 March 1934.<sup>21</sup> A series of other events followed, but the creation of the "Committee on Fair Play in Sports" (also known as the "Fair Play Committee"), headed by George Gordon Battle as president and William Chamberlain as general secretary, received the most international attention. The Committee was supported by a number of organizations and individuals, including the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) as the umbrella organization for American amateur sports, the AFL, the Jewish Labor Committee, and politicians such as New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, New York Governor Al Smith, and Massachusetts Governor James Curley. Support also came from Christian circles including the Catholic *Commonweal* and Protestant *The Christian Century* magazines,

17. Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games*, New York 1986, 110-111; Richard Holt, "Great Britain: The Amateur Tradition," in Krüger and Murray, eds., *Nazi Olympics*, 70-86.

18. Abgrall and Thomazeau, 1936, p. 25-26; William Murray, "Liberty, Equality, and the Pursuit of Fraternity," in Krüger and Murray eds., *Nazi Olympics*, 87-112, here 98-99.

19. William Atkins, "Die Olympische Komödie in Berlin," *Pariser Tageszeitung*, June 12, 1936.

20. Manuel Humbert, "Plädoyer für die Olympiade," *Ibid*, August 2, 1936.

21. See "Nazis Convicted of 'World Crime' by 20,000 in Rally," *NYT*, March 8 1934.



and from athletes such as the 1932 Olympic medalists Helen Madison and James Bausch.<sup>22</sup>

Most German Americans supported the Berlin Games. The pro-Nazi German-American *Volksbund* carried out a broad campaign in support of participation. Even non-Nazis such as Dietrich Wortmann – who had participated in the 1904 Olympics on the American wrestling team – actively supported the Berlin Games. A native of Leipzig, Germany, Wortmann founded the American Olympic Fund Committee in order to raise money in support of the American Olympic team.<sup>23</sup> These activities prompted the New York-based *Aufbau* to accuse Wortmann of having abandoned his democratic principles.<sup>24</sup> Wortmann's view that discrimination against Black Americans in the US might also disqualify US participation in the Olympics was overwhelmingly ignored in "white" America, with the notable exception of the working-class movement.<sup>25</sup>

Opinion within the African-American community was divided. Walter Francis White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the most important black civil rights organization, emphasized at an event sponsored by the Fair Play Committee in New York on 3 December 1935 that black athletes could not in good conscience participate in Berlin. Such participation would run counter to all principles underlying the Olympic Games. Nevertheless several prominent athletes, among them Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe as well as high jumper Cornelius Johnson, announced that they would compete in Berlin.<sup>26</sup> Most African-American newspapers also supported the participation of Black athletes in Berlin, as their expected achievements would destroy ideas of the superiority of the "Aryan race."<sup>27</sup>

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22. A. Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 109–131; Richard A. Swanson, "'Move the Olympics!', Germany must be Told!: Charles Clayton Morrison and Liberal Protestant Christianity's Support of the 1936 Olympic Boycott Effort," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, 12 (2003), 39–50; Large, *Nazi Games*, 69–109. The Jewish Makkabi Global Athletic Association and its president Selig Brodetsky did not demand a general boycott of the Games but called on Jewish athletes not to compete.
  23. See Gray and Barney, "Devotion to Whom?" (note 15), 214–231. As no government funds were available the US Olympic team ultimately received donations amounting to roughly \$350,000. See "Trials and Tryouts," *Time*, July 20, 1936, 50–54, here 53.
  24. See Eduard W. Jelenko, "Weltgewissen und Olympiade," *Aufbau*, 2, No. 1 (1935), 1–2.
  25. Arnd Krüger, "United States of America: The Crucial Battle," in Krüger and Murray, eds., *Nazi Olympics*, 44–69, here 48–49.
  26. "Negro Athletes for Olympics," *NYT*, December 4, 1935.
  27. David K. Wiggins, "The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin: The Response of America's Black Press," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 54, No. 3 (1983), 278–292.

The Roosevelt administration deliberately stayed out of the debate and left the question of participation to the AAU. The AAU annual convention was scheduled to take place in New York in December 1935, at which time US participation was to be decided. Various organizations and athletes made their opinions known ahead of the gathering. AAU president Jeremiah Mahoney advised against the participation of American athletes but did not support a formal boycott. Brundage, on the other hand, argued that if the AAU failed to fully support US participation in Berlin, then supporters would have to found their own organization in order to allow amateur athletes to participate. He further argued that the US Olympic Committee rather than the AAU had the sole authority to decide on the participation or non-participation of American athletes.

On 7 December 1935 a preliminary vote in the AAU's executive committee led to an even split.<sup>28</sup> Realizing that the AAU conference might well decide against participation, Brundage was able to postpone the vote to the following day. He phoned other delegates throughout the night, urging them to show up for the vote in New York. Those favoring participation in the Olympics won the deciding vote on 8 December 1935 by a final count of 58 to 56 against the Mahoney camp.<sup>29</sup>

The pro-Berlin vote strengthened Brundage's position against mixing sports and politics. He saw himself as a strict opponent of any such mixing and denied the political character of any decision, even when one was patently obvious.

The decision would have significant impact on public opinion in the US. To be sure, critical voices continued to be heard, and Jewish and working-class newspapers continued to call for a Berlin boycott. Other voices supported participation, noting that "not the smallest sign" of religious, political, or racist prejudice had been visible at the Olympic Winter Games, as though that were a particularly praiseworthy fact.<sup>30</sup> As would later be done in Berlin, any reference to the discrimination against "non-Aryans" had been removed from public view at Garmisch-Partenkirchen – at least for the duration of the Games.<sup>31</sup>

In the summer of 1936, the Comité international pour le respect de l'esprit olympique and Dutch artists organized an exhibit in Amsterdam entitled "De olympiade onder dictatuur" (Olympics Under

28. "Even Split in A.A.U. on Olympic Cause," *NYT*, December 7, 1935.

29. Gutman, *The Games Must Go On*, 74.

30. See, for example, "Games at Garmisch," *Time*, February 17, 1936.

31. On the Winter Games see Large, *Nazi Games*, 110–146.

Dictatorship). The acronym of the exhibit motto, "D.O.O.D." is the Dutch word for death (*dood*). Local artists included the Dutch painter Peter Alma and the sculptor Hildo Krop, as well as the German émigré Karl Schwesig. Other participating artists included Max Ernst, Jacques Lipschitz and Ossip Zadkine; also Otto Freundlich (who lived in France and was murdered in the Majdanek concentration camp in 1943) and the photographer Robert Capa. Noteworthy exhibits included John Heartfield's photomontage showing Goebbels pulling athletes on five Olympic nose rings (which became a frequently reprinted motif), and Christopher Nevinson's portrait of Rodin's "Thinker" surrounded by bayonets, warplanes, cannons and burning buildings.<sup>32</sup>

The Dutch government of Prime Minister Hendrikus Colijn was unsure how to act after Berlin protested against the supposedly anti-German exhibition. The Mayor of Amsterdam, Willem de Vlugt, criticized its sharply anti-Nazi tone and decreed that it would not be permissible to show the exhibition in public spaces. In the end, space was found in the private Geelvinck Museum. This Dutch exhibition stood in stark contrast to the Olympic art competitions in Berlin at which Arno Breker exhibited his work, for example, and received a silver medal.

The German government was able to successfully defend itself and the Berlin Games by carefully recruiting supporters. Most prominent among these was Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the IOC. Plagued by financial difficulties in his old age, Coubertin had been promised a pension should he opt in favor of the Berlin Games. In fact, Hitler made an "honor gift" payment of 10,000 Reichsmark to him in May 1936. In addition the regime began a campaign to award Coubertin the Nobel Peace Prize retroactively for 1935. Although this effort fell short (the prize going to the pacifist Carl von Ossietzky), the Nazi plan nevertheless partially succeeded: Coubertin sent the Olympic Committee a laudatory greeting and declared at the conclusion of the Games that they had been the best to date. He also included Hitler in his praise.<sup>33</sup>

32. See Dominik Bartmann, ed., *Die Olympiade unter der Diktatur: Rekonstruktion der Amsterdamer Kunstolympiade 1936* (Berlin: Stadtmuseum, 1936).

33. See, for example, Hans Joachim Teichler, "Coubertin und das Dritte Reich: Zur Vorgeschichte eines unveröffentlichten Coubertin-Briefs an Hitler aus dem Jahre 1937," *Sportwissenschaft*, 12, No. 1 (1982), 18–55; W. J. Murray, "France, Coubertin and the Nazi Olympics: The Response," *Olympika*, 1 (1992), 49–69; Abgrall and Thomazeau, 1936, 137–143.

In retrospect, while active and effective on some fronts, the boycott movement never had a chance to succeed against the IOC, especially since it was insufficiently coordinated at the international level.

### **Against Hitler's Games (II): the working-class movement in isolation**

Although the international working-class movement was vocal within the boycott movements in France and the USA, its voice was nevertheless drowned out by the overall movement. Many social democrats and particularly communists in the US movement were recent immigrants, who had little familiarity with American ways, which limited their ability to effectively engage in the politics of sports.<sup>34</sup> Besides, the working-class movement's rejection of the "bourgeois" Olympic Games was well known and had led to an alternative social-democratic Worker Olympics. By taking themselves out of the mainstream Olympic community, the working-class movement lacked the political clout to attack "Hitler's Olympics," as those not close to the Left simply saw its rejection of the Games in Germany as a continuation of its well known attacks on the Olympic Games in general.<sup>35</sup>

In spring 1936 the communist Red Sport International and the Socialist Workers Sport International declared in a joint appeal that the Games planned in Berlin had "grown beyond a sports event... Those presently holding power in Germany are using the Olympics as a propaganda project for fascism... In fascist states sports do not serve peaceful competition among youths but rather the preparation for war."<sup>36</sup> Both organizations called for Worker Olympics to take place in Barcelona. This plan fell victim to the Spanish Civil War, however. A smaller Worker Sport Fest took place in Prague without much acclaim. Similarly, several well known athletes who had not made the cut for the Berlin Olympic teams participated at the New York World Labor Athletics Carnival, among them the sprinters Eulace Peacock and Ben Johnson.<sup>37</sup>

34. See Mark Naison, "Lefties and Righties: The Communist Party and Sports during the Great Depression," Donald Spivey, ed., *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 129–144.

35. For example, the Communist Party of the USA had organized its own counter-events to the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. See William J. Baker, "Muscular Marxism and the Chicago Counter Olympics of 1932," S. W. Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 284–299.

36. The appeal is reprinted in Jahnke, *Mißbrauch*, 87–88.

37. See Edward S. Shapiro, "The World Labor Athletics Carnival of 1936," *American Jewish History*, 74, No. 3 (1985), 255–273.

Resistance also took place within the Berlin Olympics. Communist and social-democratic worker athletes smuggled a series of relevant publications to Berlin in order to distribute them there. Among them was the wrestler Werner Seelenbinder, a member of the illegal German Communist Party and participant in the Berlin Olympics.<sup>38</sup> The courier services of a Trotskyist mountaineering group led by Käthe and Wenzel Koslecki, who brought such publications into Germany from Prague, have only been honored recently.<sup>39</sup> Among these publications was a special Olympic edition of the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ) published in Prague, as well as a secretly coded pamphlet entitled *Lernen Sie das schöne Deutschland kennen: Ein Reise-führer, unentbehrlich für jeden Besucher der Olympiade* (Get to Know Beautiful Germany: An Indispensable Travel Guide for Every Visitor at the Olympics). Both publications showed quasi travel routes that led either to concentration camps or to prisons.<sup>40</sup>

All of these publications were premised on Hitler's victory over the Olympic idea and sought to expose the Games as a gigantic Nazi propaganda project. To what extent these publications – brought to Berlin at great risk – had any effect on the guests at the Olympics remains unclear, although their impact was probably negligible. The censors intercepted a series of flyers from abroad. Even those publications that were mailed to Olympic athletes from inside Berlin only rarely reached their destinations as the postal service in the Olympic Village was controlled.<sup>41</sup> Despite these controls a few Berlin families who hosted Olympic guests received flyers.<sup>42</sup> According to a Gestapo announcement the Danish Olympic team received flyers as well as a "Guide to the Olympics" – apparently the AIZ special edition.<sup>43</sup>

38. On Seelenbinder, see Karl Heinz Jahnke, *Ermordet und ausgelöscht: Zwölf deutsche Antifaschisten* (Freiburg: Ahriman, 1995), 106–114.

39. See Barbara Weinhold, *Eine trotzkistische Bergsteigergruppe aus Dresden im Widerstand gegen den Faschismus* (Cologne: ISP, 2004). The group also smuggled German Communist Party materials into Germany.

40. AIZ. *Das Illustrierte Volksblatt*, June 1, 1936: *Führer durch das Land der Olympiade*, Special Issue. See also Jahnke, *Mißbrauch*, 103–105; Margot Pikarski and Günther Uebel, eds., *Der antifaschistische Widerstand der KPD im Spiegel des Flugblattes 1933–1945* (Berlin: Dietz, 1978), Supplement III.

41. See A. Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 194, 199–200.

42. See Jahnke, *Mißbrauch*, 63.

43. *Ibid.*, 54.

### The non-participation of athletes – voluntary or forced?

In order to demonstrate their supposed loyalty to Olympic principles, the Nazi sports leadership maintained that German Jewish athletes, if qualified, would not be prevented from participating in the Berlin and Garmisch-Partenkirchen Olympic Games. However, despite this and other overtures, Jews were increasingly prevented from training with “Aryan” athletes beginning in spring 1933 and had to resign from general athletic clubs. The establishment of the *Reichsausschuss* (Central Organization) of Jewish athletic clubs as well as the passage of government guidelines on 5 October 1934 for the athletic activities of Jews had conveyed a false sense of security. What became clear, however, is that the Jewish clubs (whose membership was limited to Jews) were in such poor material conditions that it was impossible to speak of equal opportunities between Jewish and non-Jewish athletes.<sup>44</sup>

In June 1934 the Nazi sports leadership declared that it would invite five – and later even 21 – Jewish athletes to the Olympic training courses, but these turned out to be simple deceptions to mislead world public opinion.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the leadership allowed onto the German team only one athlete in the winter and one in the summer Games who, as “half Jews,” did not meet the Hitler regime’s racial criteria. There were the ice hockey player Rudi Ball and the fencer Helene Mayer, one of the sports idols of her time. Mayer was a student at Mills College in California but came to Berlin stating that it was an honor to fence for Germany. She won the silver medal in the foil fencing competition and showed the “Hitler greeting” at the award ceremony in the Olympic Stadium, probably in order to protect her remaining relatives in Germany who were suffering under Germany’s racial laws.<sup>46</sup>

Contrary to the long held view that only a few “individual Jews” decided against participating in Berlin in protest against the anti-Semitic policies of the “Third Reich,” in fact a good number boycotted the Games.<sup>47</sup> Among them were the American sprinters and hurdlers

44. See Hajo Bernett, *Der jüdische Sport im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–1938* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1978), especially 16–37.

45. “Jewish Athletes Named,” *NYT*, June 9, 1934; “Jews Propose 21 for German Team,” *NYT*, June 19, 1934; “Seeks Acceptance of Olympic Bid,” *NYT*, June 22, 1934.

46. Milly Mogulof, *Foiled. Hitler’s Jewish Olympian: The Helene Mayer Story* (Oakland, CA: RDR Books, 2002), 167–168, 176. The “Hitler greeting” was mandatory for German medalists. Helene Mayer had not been raised in the Jewish tradition but was nevertheless considered a Jew in some of the Jewish media. See, for example, “Jüdische Olympiasieger,” *Jüdische Revue*, 8, No. 8 (1936), 62–63, here 63.

47. Krüger still argued this in “Wenn die Olympiade vorbei” (note 11), 342. See also Large, *Nazi Games*, 106–107.

Milton Green, Herman Neugass and Norman Lee Cahners (who later became a well-known publisher); the discus thrower and 1932 Olympic champion Lilian Copeland; the sprinters Sybil ("Syd") Koff and Sybil Cooper; the boxer Louis Gevinson; and the basketball players Jules Bender, Benjamin Kramer, Leo Merson and William Schwartz. The Canadian boxers Yisrael ("Sammy") Luftspring and Normal Jack shunned the Berlin Games, as did the entire Canadian water polo team whose members were both Jewish and non-Jewish. Others who refused to participate were the middle-distance runner Fred Feuermann (later Feran) from Czechoslovakia; his countryman and marathoner Oskar Hekš (one of the organizers of the failed Worker Olympics in Barcelona); the fencer Albert Wolff from France; the boxers Harry Cohen from Australia and Ben Brill from the Netherlands; the swimmers Judith Deutsch, Ruth Langer and Lucie Goldner from Austria; as well as the wrestler Abraham Kurland and the fencer Ivan Osiier of Denmark. Likewise, Charlotte Epstein, who had coached the female US swim team from 1920 to 1928, refused to go to Berlin. The entire team representing the British mandate in Palestine withdrew its commitment to participate. Before that, bobsledders Philippe de Rothschild and Jean Rheims from France had decided not to start at the Winter Games.

The boycott was not exclusive to Jewish athletes, as some non-Jewish athletes also decided against competing in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Berlin, including: the French figure skating couple Andrée and Pierre Brunet, who won gold at the 1928 and 1932 Olympics; the speed skaters and Olympic champions John Shea from the United States and Bernt Evensen from Norway; and the Dutch world record-holding sprinter Tollien Schuurman.<sup>48</sup> Although each of these public refusals to participate at the Berlin Olympics was honorable, they failed to impress the IOC and even less the National Socialist sports leadership.

Despite earlier inquiries, the IOC failed to intervene on behalf of Jewish athletes who were expelled from their German Olympic teams. Thus the sprinter Werner Schattmann, the middle-distance

48. See Jahnke, *Mißbrauch*, 30–31; Allan Guttman, Heather Kestner, and George Eisen, "Jewish Athletes and the 'Nazi Olympics'," Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, eds., *The Olympics at the Millennium: Power, Politics, and the Games* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 51–62; Susan D. Bachrach, *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2000), 61–70; Steve Lipman, "The Olympics and the Holocaust," *The Jewish Week*, August 13, 2004, [www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=70615](http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=70615) as well as the obituaries of these athletes published on the Internet.

runner Franz Orgler, and weightlifter Max Seeligmann and finally the high jumper Gretel Bergmann were prevented from participating in the Berlin Games against their own wishes.<sup>49</sup> Gretel Bergmann's elimination from the team was not announced until immediately before the start of the Games, a fact that got lost in the general "media frenzy" and found little notice in world public opinion.<sup>50</sup>

### Only Nazi Games?

Would a boycott of the 1936 Olympic Games have made political sense? Opinions continue to divide on this issue. Of course a boycott, particularly by the United States, would have constituted an important loss of image for the Hitler regime, exposing it as a pariah. My view is that a boycott would in no way have changed, nor ameliorated, the policies of the regime.<sup>51</sup> Instead, the Games should have been relocated well before 1936. The fact that this did not happen can be laid at the feet of the top IOC functionaries as well as USOC president Avery Brundage. Ultimately each was untouched by the policies of the Nazi leadership. Karl Heinz Jahnke wrote about the "sympathy of the majority of the members of the International Olympic Committee vis-à-vis the policies of the Hitler regime," and

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49. See, *inter alia*, Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 77–78; in more detail Hans Joachim Teichler, "Der Ausschluss der deutschen Juden von den Olympischen Spielen 1936," in Manfred Lämmer (ed.), *Die jüdische Turn- und Sportbewegung in Deutschland* (St. Augustin: Academia, 1989), 45–64; Volker Boch, *Berlin 1936: Die Olympischen Spiele 1936 unter Berücksichtigung des jüdischen Sports*, Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 2002; Berno Bahro and Jutta Braun, *Berlin '36: Die ungläubliche Geschichte einer jüdischen Sportlerin im "Dritten Reich"* (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2009) (on Gretel Bergmann). For an important contemporary source that documented the exclusion of Jews from the German sports movement after 1933, see the anonymously published work by Lily Korpus, *Der gelbe Fleck: Die Ausrottung von 500,000 deutschen Juden, mit einem Vorwort von Lion Feuchtwanger* (Paris: Editions du Carrefour, 1936), esp. 187–195.
50. Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 129. The USA withdrew two already selected Jewish athletes, the sprinters Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, officially for performance reasons. See for example, William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York and London: Free Press/Collier-Macmillan, 1986), 102–106. In his autobiography Glickman speaks of a barely disguised anti-Semitism among American coaches and officials. See Marty Glickman, *The Fastest Kid on the Block* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 17–35.
51. Holding the Games actually gave German Jews, and especially their athletic movement, a "grace period" as the worst repressions were temporarily suspended or weakened ahead of the Games. See Bernett, *Der jüdische Sport*, 86–89, 103–104.



Hans Joachim Teichler even refers to this as the “fascist era of the IOC.”<sup>52</sup>

According to Teichler the thesis that the Nazis abused the Olympic Games should not ignore the fact that important international athletic leaders were all too willing to tolerate or even to support this abuse. In return they received, according to Krüger, “the best organized, propagandistically best prepared, and the best attended Olympic Games up to that point in history.”<sup>53</sup> However, in Nazis’ first large international show, Olympic ideals became a “farce.”<sup>54</sup> According to Walters, Hitler “stole” the Olympic dream.<sup>55</sup>

But did the Berlin Games only favor the Nazis? In terms of propaganda success, this was largely but not entirely the case. Many visitors were impressed by the monumental choreography, and the organizers did everything in their power to avoid mistakes. State and party organizations ordered their employees to show maximum courtesy to the guests – even when they were visibly recognizable as “non-Aryans.” A circular distributed by the top echelon of the SA leadership dated July 22, 1936 stated: “In these coming weeks of the Olympics we want to show foreigners that it is a lie spread abroad that the persecution of Jews is a daily occurrence in Germany.”<sup>56</sup> The rabidly propagandistic *Der Stürmer* was not distributed in Berlin during the Olympics. Outside Berlin, the “daily petty warfare against Jews was not reduced or even stopped for one moment,” according to the *Deutschland-Berichte*, the illegal reports of the Social-Democratic Party in exile.<sup>57</sup>

Hitler’s domestic opponents rarely succeeded in showing the real nature of the regime to Olympic visitors, something that undoubtedly contributed to the picture of the Nazi Olympics. Many attendees simply failed to look behind the shining façade. Germans, for their part, were willing to ignore the political problems because of the

52. Jahnke, *Mißbrauch*, 49; Hans Joachim Teichler, “Die faschistische Epoche des IOC,” *Historical Social Research*, 32, No. 1 (2007), 14–42.

53. A. Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 227.

54. Large, *Nazi Games*, 12.

55. Guy Walters, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream* (London: John Murray, 2006).

56. Quoted in Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 198. The African-American historian W.E.B. Du Bois was on a research stay in Germany during the time of the Olympics. As a fluent German speaker it seemed to him “that most Germans behaved far more correctly in public when encountering well-bred gentlemen of a different color than white Americans.” David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, Vol. 2: *The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000), 398.

57. *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934–1940*, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1980), 973.

successes of “their” team, which earned 33 gold medals (to lead all countries in the medal count, and nine more than the United States, which had the second highest count). Furthermore the public was unaware of the “collection camp” established in Marzahn at which Berlin’s Sinti and Roma population was interned ahead of the Games.<sup>58</sup> The Games were still going on when the concentration camp Sachsenhausen opened up. At the same time the first units of the Condor Legion and the Italian *Corpo Truppa Volontarie* left for Spain in order to support the fellow fascist Francisco Franco. The social-democratic journal *Neuer Vorwärts* characterized the Olympic peace of 1936 as a chimera, a “Burgfrieden” of the deceived that allowed Hitler free rein to implement his surreptitious policy of aggression.<sup>59</sup>

But does the term Nazi Games fully capture the reality? The foreign press particularly that of the United States, remained remarkably critical vis-à-vis the regime in its reporting during the Games.<sup>60</sup> Besides that, Olympic contestants from various nations formed athletic friendships, such as between Jesse Owens and Lutz Long, his rival from Leipzig in the long jump. This clearly violated the ideology of National Socialism.

From a historical perspective it is more important, however, that Jewish and African-American athletes were able to leave their mark on the Games. This also could not have been desired by the Hitler regime. The successes of the athletes had different effects on their respective communities due to the strategies of Jewish and African-American leaders with regard to the social function of sports. Among Jews the most important function was advancing the self-image of “strong” Jews in order to overcome the stereotype of the “weak” Jew in light of a dramatically accelerating anti-Semitism. For African Americans the main concern was to improve their social status within US society via athletic achievements.

58. Wolfgang Wippermann and Ute Brucker-Boroujerdi, “Nationalsozialistische Zwangslager in Berlin III. Das “Zigeunerlager” Marzahn,” in: *Berlin-Forschungen II* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1987), 189–201.

59. “Der Burgfrieden der Betrogenen,” *Neuer Vorwärts*, July 26, 1936.

60. See Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936*, 142–151, 202–206; Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust* (New York and London: Free Press, 1986), 63–85; Ewald Grothe, “Die Olympischen Spiele von 1936 – Höhepunkt der NS-Propaganda?” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 59, Nos. 5/6 (2008), 291–307. On foreign media reports and their assessment by the Nazis, see Jürgen Bellers, ed., *Die Olympiade Berlin 1936 im Spiegel der ausländischen Presse* (Münster: LIT, 1986); Hans Joachim Teichler, *Internationale Sportpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1991), 163–184. Germans were not allowed to speak to foreign journalists without permission from the OC.

A total of nine male and female Jews won Olympic gold in Berlin. This was a close second to the eleven gold medals won by Jews at the 1928 Amsterdam Games. They were particularly successful in fencing. Gold medalists Ilona Elek from Hungary, Helene Mayer from Germany, and Ellen Preis from Austria were all either fully or “partially” Jewish. Endre Kabos won a gold medal in individual saber competition and also belonged to the victorious Hungarian saber team. Hungarian Jewish Olympic champions also included the high jumper Ibolya Csák, the water polo players György Bródy and Miklos Sárkány and the wrestlers Károly Kárpáti and Marton Lörincz. The weightlifter Robert Fein became Olympic champion for Austria. Samuel Balter belonged to the victorious US basketball team. Other Jewish participants were among the top competitors: Jadwiga Wajs from Poland won a silver medal in discus throwing, the Austrian Viktor Kalisch a silver medal in canoeing and the Canadian Irving Maretzky in basketball, Árpád Lengyel won a bronze medal with the Hungarian swim relay (4 x 200 meters free style), as did Gérard Blitz with the Belgian water polo team.<sup>61</sup>

Few Olympic visitors and athletes were aware of how many Jewish medalists there were at the Games. The successes of Jewish athletes were mainly registered “internally.”<sup>62</sup>

In distinction to Jewish participants it was always easy to recognize African-Americans as such. For them participation in the Games symbolized a breakthrough in international recognition. This was the case particularly for the Olympic champions Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe in sprint and long jump, Cornelius Johnson in high jump, as well as Archie Williams and John Woodruff in 400 and 800 meter races.

The German public celebrated Jesse Owens, the hero of the Games. His outstanding achievements, which brought him four gold medals as a sprinter and long jumper, as well as his skin color rendered the Nazi “Aryan” ideal absurd. “Hitler declared Aryan supremacy by decree. . . but Jesse Owens is proving him a liar by degrees,” reported the *Washington Post* in a play on words.<sup>63</sup> The anticipated presentation of “Nordic” beauty as expression of the National Socialists’ idea of power was shown its limits in Owens’s athletic dominance.

Further additions to the Olympic chronicle were Matthew (“Mack”) Robinson, second in the 200-meter race (and brother of the

61. See Taylor, *Jews and the Olympic Games*, 106–107 (plus supplements).

62. For a general discussion, see Gideon Reuveni and Michael Brenner, eds., *Emancipation Through Muscles: Jews and Sport in Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). The Berlin Games are not discussed specifically, however.

63. Shirley Povich, “This Morning. . .,” *Washington Post*, August 5, 1936.

baseball star Jackie Robinson); David Albritton, second in high jump; as well as James Lu Valle and Frederick Pollard, bronze medalists in 400 meter and 400 meter hurdles.<sup>64</sup> Boxer Jack Wilson achieved the same with his silver medal in the bantamweight class. Overall, ten of the nineteen African-American competitors won 14 medals, eight of them gold.<sup>65</sup> In addition there was the Afro-Canadian physician, Dr. Philip Edwards, who won his fifth (!) bronze medal in the 800-meter race at the 1936 Games.<sup>66</sup>

The successes of black Olympic icons and also of the boxer Joe Louis did much to shake up race “theories,” not only in Germany. Social reasons, and not supposed “Negroid” characteristics, motivated African Americans to such high achievements.<sup>67</sup> Contemporary studies rightly argued that their concentration in track and field was due to the relatively low financial costs involved.<sup>68</sup>

Several decades later John Woodruff stated that he could not remember any type of doors opening for Black athletes after their victories. “After the Olympics, we had a track meet to run at Annapolis, at the Naval Academy. Now here I am, an Olympic champion, and they told the coach that I couldn’t run. I couldn’t come. So I had to stay home, because of discrimination. That let me know just what the situation was. Things hadn’t changed.”<sup>69</sup>

Even Olympic champions had a difficult time being accepted in the dominant society. Black commentators found only fleeting signs of recognition in the praise of “white” media and argued that African Americans needed to prove that they were competitive outside a sports stadium. However, black athletes were shown a great level of recognition outside of the United States.<sup>70</sup> The successes of black athletes

64. As a renowned chemist, James Lu Valle became a member of the group of researchers that developed methods of producing color films at Kodak Company.

65. In 1924, African Americans won three medals, in 1928 none, and in 1932 five medals. See Ashe, *Hard Road to Glory*, 69.

66. Edwards became an expert in research on tropical diseases.

67. David K. Wiggins, “‘Great Speed But Little Stamina’: The Historical Debate over Black Athletic Superiority,” Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History*, 312–338.

68. See Maurice R. Davie, *Negroes in American Society* (New York, Toronto, and London: McGraw-Hill 1949), 380.

69. As quoted from the website exhibition in the US Holocaust Museum. Transcript under: [www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics/detail.php?content=aa\\_athletes&lang=en](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics/detail.php?content=aa_athletes&lang=en) (viewed on February 8, 2011).

70. Reports posted from Berlin by the African American (and Left) press made much of the fact that Black athletes were being celebrated there while they were not allowed to carry out joint competitions with Whites in the American South. See Wiggins, “The 1936 Olympic Games” (note 27), 290.

undoubtedly had a positive effect on the level of self-confidence among African Americans, as they grew increasingly aware that there was no need to be ashamed of their skin color or origin.<sup>71</sup>

African-American athletes – as well as musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington – laid the foundation for successive generations to take decisive steps forward and not to be content with symbolic successes.<sup>72</sup> Social equality was not tied to such outstanding individual achievements, but rather to the collective action necessary to force equal rights inside their own country. In the turbulent year 1968, black athletes and musicians protested both visually and audibly against the ongoing lack of equality. They thus became an important part of the civil rights and Black Power movements.

The contributions of African Americans in culture and sports, as well as in the general life of American society, were openly acknowledged in 1976. It was in that year that the US Congress elevated Black History Month from a private initiative to the rank of a public month of observances. The congressional representative who played a decisive role in this was a member of the Democratic Party from the State of Illinois, none other than Berlin Olympic Champion Ralph Metcalfe.

Long before the starting shot was fired in Berlin, the Games stood at the intersection of politics and sports. They continue to be tied to an unparalleled instrumentalization by a racist regime, to the supporting role played by the international athletic leadership, to the failed boycott movement, and the non-participation of many Jewish athletes. All of these factors make the 1936 Summer Games unique.

These Games were undoubtedly Games of the Nazis. But they were more than just that. For one thing, they put on display the abilities even of a decimated Jewish contingent. To an even greater extent, they became a turning point in the collective consciousness of African Americans, who showed themselves to the world, for the first time, as winners. It was thus that the Berlin Games, completely contrary to the intent of their organizers, became a springboard for a minority on its long path to social emancipation.

*Translated by Brigitte H. Schulz and Douglass Karl Hansen*

71. This assertion ultimately rests on the results of a large sociological study carried out by Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers 1944), with an explicit reference to Jesse Owens and Joe Louis (734).

72. This objective role of athletes and musicians is irrespective of the fact that Owens, for example, did not participate in the civil rights movement (until 1972).