**1936: The 'Nazi Olympics'**

*Adolf Hitler tried to turn the Berlin Games into a showcase for 'Aryan superiority.' But a black American track-and-field star spoiled his party.By Courtney Potts*

**To go or not to go?** That was the dilemma facing the United States in 1936, when German Chancellor Adolf Hitler hosted the Olympic Games in Berlin.

There were plenty of reasons to stay home. Hitler's theories about the genetic superiority of blue-eyed, blond-haired "Aryans" were well known. German Jews were being persecuted in nearly every aspect of German life, and had, in effect, been banned from competing at the Games.

In short, Hitler's racist rhetoric and anti-Semitic policies flew in the face of the spirit of the Games. Would participating implicitly condone those ideas?

Reasoning that the Games should first and foremost be about athletics, the U.S. decided to attend—even though it was clear that Hitler's agenda had little to do with sports.

Hitler wanted to prove his theories of Aryan supremacy to the world. But by turning the Olympics into a two-week propaganda spectacle, he set the stage for one of the most famous moments in Olympic history: the brilliant performance of black track-and-field star Jesse Owens, who became the first American to win four gold medals in a single Olympiad—and shattered Hitler's Aryan dreams for the Games in the process.

Seventy-five years later, the "Nazi Olympics" are remembered for Owens's remarkable feat against the backdrop of the racial and political tension surrounding the Games, just three years before Germany invaded Poland to start World War II. The 1936 Games are also considered the start of the politicization of the modern Olympics.

"From the standpoint of the Games as a propaganda venue, it starts big-time in 1936," says Olympic historian John Hoberman.

**Hitler's Rise**

Germany had been selected to host the 1936 Olympics in 1931. At the time, it had a democratic government known as the Weimar (*VY-mahr*) Republic, which had been in power since Germany's defeat in World War I in 1918.

But when Hitler, the charismatic and anti-Semitic leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, came to power, he turned Germany into a police state. Hitler had built his political movement from the ground up, starting in the 1920s. Germany and its economy were in ruins after the war, and Hitler, a persuasive speaker, promised a return to the powerful, militaristic Germany of the past, blaming the nation's ills, especially its ailing economy, on the Jews.

Through careful maneuvering, Hitler was appointed chancellor (similar to prime minister) in January 1933. Two months later, he forced through legislation that effectively made him dictator.

Once in power, Hitler wasted no time in remilitarizing Germany and carrying out his anti-Semitic program. In April 1933, the Nazis called for a boycott of Jewish businesses. Less than a week later, the Reichstag (parliament) passed a law requiring the removal of Jews and other non-Aryans from government jobs.

In 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws stripped German Jews of their citizenship and prohibited them from marrying non-Jews. Hundreds of similar laws were passed, all with the goal of excluding Jews from German society.

Fearing that Jewish athletes would not be treated fairly in Berlin, the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) considered moving the 1936 Games to Rome or Tokyo. But committee members were persuaded by German promises of fair competition for all athletes.

In the U.S., President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was up for re-election in 1936, never weighed in on the issue. After much debate, the American Olympic Committee and the Amateur Athletic Union voted to go to Berlin.

The Games themselves became "the greatest publicity stunt in history," in the words of one *New York Times* reporter. Hitler spared no expense to impress the 150,000 foreign visitors who attended. He ordered all anti-Semitic signs—like those proclaiming *Juden sind hier unerwŸnscht*("Jews are unwanted here")—to be removed during the Games.

**Kept Off the Team**

His efforts were, by most accounts, successful. Visitors left with the impression that Germany was prosperous, well run, and hospitable. But in a report to Washington, the American ambassador to Germany wrote that Germany's Jews awaited the end of the Olympics with "fear and trembling."

As always, the Games started with the lighting of the Olympic Flame. And for the first time, in what has since become an Olympic tradition, the flame was lit in Olympia, Greece, and carried to the site of the Games by torch.

True to their promise, the German team had allowed Jewish athletes to try out, but only one—Helene Mayer, a half-Jewish fencer with blond hair—actually competed. Others were kept off the team on technicalities.

The biggest star of the Games turned out to be Owens, the son of a sharecropper and the grandson of a slave. He was born in Alabama in 1913; when he was 9, his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio.

By the time Owens graduated from East Technical High School in Cleveland, he had tied the world record in the 100-yard dash. As a sophomore at Ohio State University, he tied that record again and broke three more—the broad jump, the 220-yard dash, and the 220-yard low hurdles—on the same day.

The first day the 22-year-old Owens competed in Berlin, he won the 100-meter sprint. The next day, he picked up the gold medal in the long jump—after getting advice on how to improve his jump from Carl Ludwig "Luz" Long, a German athlete who ended up placing second to Owens. The day after that, Owens won the gold in the 200-meter dash. A few days later, Owens won his fourth gold, in the 400-meter relay.

The crowd greeted each of his four gold-medal wins with thunderous applause, and Owens's victories discredited Hitler's belief that Aryans would triumph in competition against "inferior" races.

For Owens, the trip to Germany was not his first experience with racism. Because of segregation in the U.S., he later wrote in his autobiography, Owens couldn't always sleep in the same hotels as his Ohio State teammates during road trips. And as for his reception at the Olympics, he wrote: "I wasn't invited to shake hands with Hitler, but I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the president either."

The Berlin Olympics were "widely considered to have been a foreign policy success," says Hoberman, the Olympic historian. "I think that they did fool a lot of people into thinking the Nazis were less interested in war-making in Europe than they actually were."

During the closing ceremonies in Berlin, Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, president of the I.O.C., invited everyone to reassemble in Tokyo, Japan, four years later—but the 1940 Olympics never took place.

Nazi rule became increasingly harsh: "Undesirables"—including Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals—were sent to concentration camps, where millions would perish. In September 1939, World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland. Two years later, Japan attacked the United States, bringing America into the war.

**The Beijing Games**

Taking place 40 years after the birth of the modern Games, the 1936 Olympics marked the first major collision of athletics and politics at the Games. But it was hardly the last.

For the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, the Chinese government spent a record $40 billion to showcase the country's meteoric economic rise and emergence as a world power.

While there was criticism of the I.O.C. for awarding the Olympic Games to an authoritarian state like China, human rights advocates saw the Olympics as a chance to focus the world's attention on China's human rights abuses, including its occupation of Tibet and its restrictions on freedom of expression.

"The line from the I.O.C. on China was that giving the Olympics to Beijing was a form of constructive engagement that would help open the country up politically," Hoberman says. He notes that it hasn't worked out that way, with China even more politically repressive today.

**'Inherently Political'**

Derrick Hulme, author of *The Political Olympics*, says that in selecting China for 2008—and Brazil as the host of the 2016 Games—the I.O.C. is indeed making a statement, but of a slightly different sort: It's simply recognizing both nations as emerging global powers.

In fact, Hulme says, the Olympics in their modern form were intended to be political.

"The 1936 Games were simply a particularly dramatic moment in which the world recognized the incredibly close relationship between politics and sports," he says.

"The Games don't allow individuals to participate," Hulme adds. "Athletes participate on behalf of a country, so in that sense the Olympics are inherently political."

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