

The Berlin Summer Olympic Games of 1936 allowed the world its first comprehensive insight into the propagandised war machine that was Hitler's Third Reich. The Leni Reifenstahl film *Olympia* provides an uncomfortable and enduring legacy of such propaganda.

Some critics believe that Hitler hijacked the Games for his own immoral purposes, yet by the 1930's, clear evidence of anti-Semitism and human rights violations, meted out by the German government, already existed. In the face of such evidence, why did the International Olympic Committee still award the Games to Hitler, given that it would jeopardise the conditions of the Olympic Charter itself?



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### The Berlin Games

The Berlin Olympic Games were certainly a propaganda victory for Hitler. By hiding anti-Semitic activity for the duration of the Games, the Third Reich achieved a greater level of recognition by the international community.

Such activity included the removal of Anti-Jew signs from public display (during the Games)

and a minimisation of violence towards Jews throughout the duration of the event. However, whilst overt, outward displays of anti-Semitism were kept to a minimum in this Olympic period, it would be a mistake to conclude that discriminatory activity did not continue.

*"Neither Americans nor the representatives of other countries can take part in the Games in Nazi Germany without at least acquiescing in the contempt of the Nazis for fair play and their sordid exploitation of the Games."*

- Ernest Lee Jahncke, American member of the IOC, in a letter to Count Henri Baillet-Latour, President IOC, November 25, 1935

Furthermore, it would be a mistake to believe that such a lack of overt evidence of anti-Semitism explained the decision of many nations not to boycott the Games. Many nations were in fact painfully aware, by this point, that there had been a rise in anti-Semitism preceding the period before the Games.

### Considerations of a Boycott

Soon after Hitler acquired power in 1933, observers in the USA and other western democracies questioned the morality of supporting an Olympic Games that would be hosted by a Fascist dictator. This led Avery Brundage, then President of the American Olympic Committee, to comment that: *"The very foundation of the modern Olympic revival will be undermined if individual countries are*

*allowed to restrict participation by reason of class, creed, or race."*

Brundage initially considered the move of the Games from Germany to another venue, but later reneged, stating that his recent visit to a German sports facility reassured him that Jews were being treated fairly and that no discrimination was taking place. However, his views were not widely shared. That same year, the American Jewish Congress, the Jewish Labor Committee and the Anti-Nazi League staged mass rallies to protest against Nazi persecution of Jews and other ethnic groups. These groups supported the boycott of the 1936 Games as part of a wider general boycott of German goods.

### ***Opposing A Boycott***

By the end of 1934, Brundage was vocal in his opposition to a boycott, of the Berlin Games, arguing that sport was apolitical. Stated Brundage: *"The Olympic Games belong to the athletes and not to the politicians."* Brundage further stated that American athletes should not become involved in *"the present Jew-Nazi altercation."* By 1935, Brundage was alleging the existence of a "Jewish-Communist conspiracy" to keep the United States out of the Olympic Games.

### ***Upholding Olympic Values***

Brundage's main American rival in discussions over a possible US boycott was Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, then President of the Amateur Athletic Union. Mahoney believed that Germany had contravened Olympic rules

that forbade discrimination the grounds of race and religion, and was particularly concerned that engagement in the Games might at the same time be seen as an endorsement of Hitler's Third Reich.

At the same time, the Catholic journal *The Commonwealth* (November 8, 1935) advised boycotting the Berlin Olympic Games to avoid a move that it viewed would *"set the seal of approval upon the radically anti-Christian Nazi doctrine of youth."*

### ***Boycotts by Individual Athletes***

Individual Jewish athletes across Europe and the US were to also make a stand. Milton Green, Captain of the Harvard University track team, took first place in the 110-meter high hurdles in regional US pre-Olympic trials, but symbolically declined his place. His Jewish teammate Norman Cahners also joined him in declining his place as a means of boycotting the Games.

### ***FIND OUT MORE***

Olympic Games Website History section:  
Berlin Games

<http://www.olympic.org/en/content/Olympic-Games/All-Past-Olympic-Games/Summer/Berlin-1936/>

Berlin Games: How the Nazis Stole the Olympic Dream

Guy Walters, Harper Collins, 2006.

### ***CREDITS***

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