Five Rings Beneath the *Swastika*: An Olympic-Sized Appeasement

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A nation obsessed with the principles of race and strength, Germany began to foster a sporting culture shortly after the takeover of the National Socialists. As early as 1928, 1.5 million Deutsch Marks were allocated annually for athletics and physical education.[1] Through the process of *Gleichschaltung* (coordination), existing amateur sports clubs were absorbed into state sponsored entities and lavished with better facilities and funding. Initially, the mixing of cultures and races that occurs at the Games was lauded as fostering growth for Germany. Dr. Carl Diem, a leader of the German Olympic movement, felt that the foreign contact wherein common rules were enforced created an exchange of ideas and brotherhood rarely found in day to day politics.[2] These lofty ideas stand in stark contrast to the expulsion of Jews and others deemed undesirable from sporting events, regardless of international prowess.

This Janus-like approach of providing one quote to international media and another to Germans at home is typical for the Nazis. Germany operated largely by their own moral laws. The expulsion of famous sports personages for questionable, racial reasons made some waves in the United States and Europe, but was treated as a

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[1] Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 31.

[2] "Berlin Optimistic on Olympic Games," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1928.

matter of course inside the Reich.[3] That the Olympics were largely remembered as a pleasant event is due both to the organizing efforts of the Germans and mitigation of some anti-Jewish bias and the willingness of foreign nations to look the other way and ignore questionable behavior.[4] How could the Nazi elite manage to run a world class, supposedly politically neutral event, while continuing to marginalize undesirables and further their racial propaganda? It would take a massive effort, but this apparent willingness to be deceived found in the participating countries made it possible after all.

Preparations for the German Olympic Games began even before the election of Adolf Hitler and his party to the leadership. Initially awarded the Olympiad of 1916, the outbreak of the catastrophic Great War put the games far from the minds of those caught in the conflict. No contest would occur in 1916, and Berlin was passed over in 1920 due largely to postwar resentment.[5] As the modern Olympic movement, which had only been founded in 1896, began to gain steam as the pinnacle of world sports competition, Germans looked to the event as a way to regain some national pride during the Great Depression. Despite dire financial circumstances, the German Olympic team was the third largest sent to America in 1932, and was expected to win more medals than even the host country.[6] The fact that they only won a single medal in rowing added to the sting of being promised the games in 1916 and then never receiving them.[7]

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[3] "Nazis Seek to Oust 1936 Olympic Head," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1933.
[4] Susan Bachrach, *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 2000), 106.
[5] Bachrach, *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936*, 11.
[6] Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*, 42-43.
[7] Ibid, 44.

Eventually, in 1931, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) rewarded Berlin once again with the privilege of holding the Olympics five years later.[8]

From the start, Germans realized that the Olympics were a chance to raise their international reputation after being demonized as the warmongers of 1914-1918. Even so, the new ruling party of the state and their supporters, particularly young people, found the games to be a distraction from empire building. According to an April article in the *London Times*,

> The student's athletic committees of 18 German universities and high schools recently passed a resolution calling for the cancellation of the Olympic games altogether on the ground that "really national tasks such as... land settlement"...were more consonant with the national dignity.[9]

This is a significant statement by Germany's younger generation, swayed already by Hitler's grandiose "race and space" propaganda, which stated that the two tasks central to a strong Reich were increasing its land area and ensuring the "Aryan" purity of its people. However, as Dr. P. J. Goebbels, the German Minister of Propaganda and Hitler himself both realized the ability of such an event to make an impact and boost the standing of a nation formerly perceived as an international "bully;" later propaganda would ensure that the majority

[8] "1936 Winter Olympics Assigned to Germany," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1932.
[9] "Nazi Ideals in Sport," *The Times*, April 18, 1933.

of citizens would support such an opportunity to show the world the glory of the new Reich.[10]

Predictably, if one knows the philosophies of Adolf Hitler, the Jews would receive the worst of the ugliness before the Games. Many successful sports stars of the Weimar Republic and before were of Jewish origin. The strength and finesse that these athletes showed conflicted with Hitler's theories that the Aryan was clearly superior to all other races. To uphold this tenet (by eliminating opportunity), beginning in 1933 Jews were excluded from nearly all sports competition.[11] One of the most blatant, inflammatory moves was the removal of Dr. Theodor Lewald from the German Olympic Committee. Lewald was one of the driving forces behind securing the Berlin Games, and was once awarded an eagle escutcheon, the state's most important civilian decoration, for his contributions to German sports promotion. Attacked with accusations of Jewish ancestry, Lewald was forced to resign and was replaced by a radical Nazi, Hans von Tschammer und Osten. During his reign, discrimination against Jewish athletes would peak.[12]

Swiftly and surely, famous Jews were removed from their careers or fled voluntarily. Daniel Prenn, a renowned tennis player, was banned in effect when the German Lawn Tennis Association announced that no non-Aryan could compete in match play. The *London Times* responded, with an air of confusion,

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[10] "Nazi Ideals in Sport," *The Times*, April 18, 1933; "Berlin Optimistic on Olympic Games."

[11] Alfred Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1999), 52.

[12] "Nazis Seek to Oust 1936 Olympic Head," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1933; Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*, 62-3.

> It is unthinkable that Germany, which is systematically expelling Jews from the public services and professions, should call on Dr. Prenn to represent her [in the Davis Cup] simply because he is the best [tennis] player in the country. It is a further complication that Dr. Prenn, who has been naturalized in recent years, belongs to that immigrant eastern Jewish stock which enjoys the particular enmity of the Nazis and to which they attribute so many of Germany's troubles.[13]

This announcement came only a few weeks after Lewald's defamation. After Prenn moved to England to continue his career, the Reich spat on his legacy by stating that English-made tennis balls were now illegal for match play.[14] In Austria, Ruth Langer and Judith Deutsch outright refused to compete in the women's swimming events they were invited to. They held multiple world records, and were part of a Jewish sports club that contained a few other expected medalists. For this act of protest, they were banned from competing in Germany or Austria for a full two years, long after the Games concluded. Neither woman could find the will to compete with such perversion of the Olympic ideals visible to them.[15]

Besides the outright banning of Jews, the state would find in the Olympic planning process a convenient excuse to further racial policy in the name of public health and safety. The Sinti and Roma peoples, commonly known as Gypsies or *Zigeuner* were considered to

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[13] "Nazis Seek to Oust 1936 Olympic Head," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1933.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "Austrian Jews and the Olympic Games: Women Swimmers Refuse to Compete," *The Times*, July 23, 1936.

be technically Aryan, but consisting of the absolute dregs of that lineage. This important distinction made persecution possible without creating a discrepancy in Hitler's philosophy.[16] In an attempt to clean up the streets of Berlin, the official reasoning being that the itinerant people were carriers of disease, a decree was issued on June 6th of 1936 to arrest all Sinti and Roma and deport them outside Berlin proper. The seized wagons and people were transported via freight to Marzahn, a suburb of Berlin, and simply left to their own devices under police guard. Over 600 people inhabited a group of moldering caravans surrounded by barbed wire, located near graves and a sewage pit. Diseases and death among the "community" naturally followed due to unsanitary and cramped conditions, but life in Berlin went on. A local newspaper even proudly declared, "Berlin without Gypsies," undoubtedly read by many but apparently contemplated by few. After the games, rather than let the sequestered return to their lives, Marzahn would become a permanent penal camp for Gypsies, most of whom were forced to work and eventually deported to killing centers in the 1940s.[17]

Preparations presented a public relations challenge for the Reich, but one that they would eventually rise to with the help of smooth talk and deception. After the 1932 games in Los Angeles came to a close, the young Reich became next in line. International eyes would have to be averted or distracted from the rising tide of anti-Semitic violence in Germany. The Germans responded the same way they had and would to international diplomacy. By making false

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[16] Ed. Ada June Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), 382-3.
[17] Michael Berenbaum & Abraham Peck, *The Holocaust and History,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 390.

promises and whitewashing some of the more brutal aspects of their policies, the Reich could almost always convince the world outside that everything would be just fine. The optimism and reluctance of the international community to acknowledge Nazi wrongs was an instrumental part of the successful completion of the Games. Some dissenters stood out among the mass of apologists, and would be the last bulwark the Nazis had to hurdle on their quest to a few weeks of worldwide spotlight.

Why could not any observer outside Germany see this racial hatred brewing? As it turns out, a complex battle erupted behind the scenes in the American sporting community. Some were able to see that Hitler's anti-Semitic policies would tarnish the essential spirit of oneness so integral to the Games. They made their discontent known with a bold effort—to avoid the games altogether and hopefully provide an example for friendly countries to follow. This was not unheard of; the Soviet Union had never participated in an Olympic Games despite having a strong athletic culture. Instead, they held the *Spartakiad*, a competing sports festival held in opposition to the (perceived) bourgeois and capitalist Olympiad. It is therefore somewhat likely that the United States, as a powerful and prosperous nation, could have fielded some similar alternative or simply ignored the competition altogether. However, some strong personalities in the States would eventually derail this plan.[18]

American eyebrows were noticeably raised during the Reich's fervent efforts to build Berlin into a shining example of an imperial capital in time for the Olympic ceremonies. American journalists

[18] "Moscow Postpones Counter-Olympics," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1933.

reported in July of 1935, "It is to be the occasion for showing the world 'what Germany really is.'"[19] A great deal of positive sentiment is given, crediting the Germans and Hitler himself with putting together an unprecedented Olympic Village and world-class sports facilities. The piece goes on to report that Germany has of course pledged to be impartial as far as athlete selection. The most harrowing quote comes at the end, where after discussing an outburst of racial hatred against Jews in Berlin that had recently taken place, the author writes, "This, perhaps, was the last chance for racial intolerance to raise its head and indulge its peculiar characteristics. And it may have been considered polite to permit the indulgence."[20] Asserted here is an optimistic viewpoint that would prove one hundred percent false over time. Seemingly drawing on prior experience with the respectable, Prussian tendencies of the Second Reich, the author was confident that this extremism and hatred against Jews was some odd element within the youth and would be dissolved after the young men's upcoming mandatory conscription to the military. Such a viewpoint is characteristic of American media of this time. There is an almost desperate willingness to believe that stories of persecution are exaggerated and abnormal, as opposed to commonplace and directly ordered by the Nazi government itself.[21]

As rumors of Jewish persecution intensified, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), America's adjunct association to the Olympic Committee, could no longer ignore their moral obligations. Jeremiah Mahoney, who once served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was

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[19] Frederick Birchall, "Berlin Riots Mar Olympic Planning," *The New York Times*, July 26, 1935.
[20] Ibid.
[21] "Berlin Riots Mar Olympic Planning."

elected head of the AAU and refused to allow any corruption of the athlete selection process on accounts of Nazi racial doctrine. In 1933, Hitler's first year as chancellor, the AAU had passed a unanimous resolution stating that the United States could not compete in the Games if it were reasonably proven that Germany was discriminating against Jewish competitors. Mahoney was a lifelong sportsman and harbored a love for track and field. The reports of persecution against Jews in an Olympic host country especially plagued his conscience as someone close to the Olympic Movement; he had been invited to take place in the third modern Olympiad in 1906 but was unable to attend. Much like the previously discussed *New York Times* article that stated racial hatred would be a thing of the past in the New Germany, Mahoney was also an optimist and an idealist. He declared in a *New York Times* article in August 1935 that "racial discrimination [is] unknown in American sport," despite documented injustices suffered by African Americans and other minority groups that attempted to organize sports leagues in the early 20th century. Such faith in the human spirit, while typically admirable, contributed to apathy toward controversial policies that ought to have been resisted.[22]

Mahoney would prove to be the biggest critic of the Nazi Olympics. His opponent and eventual victor in the debate was Avery Brundage, another charismatic sportsman and the previous head of the AAU. Brundage's involvement in the Olympic story begins around 1933. In November of that year, the AAU pledged that they would not send any athletes to the Olympics if Germany did not allow Jewish competitors. In this era, all Olympic athletes were required to be

[22] "Mahoney Pushes Plea on Olympics."

amateurs and the vast majority were members of the AAU; this proclamation amounted to a boycott. In June of 1934, Hitler instructed his committee to relent and issue a statement relating that Jews would not be excluded from Germany's teams, and in fact twenty-one Jewish athletes were to be accepted into training camps as of that month. *The New York Times* of June 8, 1934 quoted Theodor Lewald as saying, "What has happened is another proof of the spirit of fellowship that sport engenders… your Mr. Garland of Los Angeles was good enough to express the wish and belief that the next Olympic festival in Berlin would be a great success."[23] Recall that previously, Lewald himself had been kicked out of the Olympic Committee for his Jewish grandmother, and is hardly a credible official of the Reich at this point, having only been reinstated to a figurehead position due to IOC protests.[24] Sensing something about this concession was out of place considering the way Nazis had fervently defended their racial ideology since 1933, the American Olympic Committee sent Avery Brundage to Berlin to examine what was really afoot.

There, Brundage would himself be caught up in Nazi spirit and find ample evidence to oppose Jeremiah Mahoney's boycott. Notified of his impending visit, Hans von Tschammer und Osten signed a new decree stating that non-Aryans could once again join sporting clubs, an important step in gaining membership to the Olympic team. Meeting with a prearranged group of Jewish athletes, Brundage went over several accusations against Germany recorded by the American Jewish Congress, most of which were denied or avoided. The Germans also

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[23] John MacCormac, "Reich Keeps games, Giving Way on Jews," *The New York Times*, June 8, 1933.
[24] Alfred Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games*, 52-55.

used a bit of political trickery by bringing up the fact that they, an entire nation, not just a race, had not been allowed to compete in the 1920 and 1924 Games as a result of negative perceptions of the "aggressors" of the Great War. By the American's logic, those events should have been considered illegal and boycotted as well. The German newspaper, *Deutsche Allegemeine Zeitung* requested that Brundage discuss this tidbit of information at the eventual hearing, in the interest of fairness. The American Committee could find no issue with Brundage's findings, which gave an overall picture of a lenient and cooperative Germany. The United States would participate in the Games after all, and the efforts of Mahoney and others were effectively crushed.[25] Samuel Untermeyer, president of the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Campion Human Rights, was quoted in *The New York Times* with a rare dissenting opinion, "...it will be impossible for any self-respecting Jew from any part of the world to... subject himself to the degradation that would be involved in his participating in the Olympiad of 1936 [in Germany]."[26]

As the cauldron surged forth with flame in Berlin to begin the Olympiad, the losers of the debate were disregarded and the world watched the spectacle with bated breath. The Nazi political machine spared no expense to impress the spectators—such innovations as televised contests and ceremonies and the actual torch relay itself, now so respected as a symbol of human cooperation, were German innovations. Ten thousand dancers twirled in acrobatic displays to a dramatic piece produced by Carl Diem, one of the head organizers of

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[25] Alfred Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games*, 56-58.
[26] Arthur Daley, "U.S. Will Compete in 1936 Olympics: Germany's Bid Is Accepted Without Dissenting Vote After Brundage Report," *The New York Times*, September 27, 1934.

the event. Hitler himself was presented with an olive branch brought from Athens by the winner of the first modern Olympic marathon. It seems that such a display would be a proud moment for the Fuehrer; the old Greek empire giving its blessing to a new thousand year Reich. It very nearly didn't happen. Confronted with intense rumors and some direct evidence of the murderous anti-Semitic policies that would become the norm for the next nine terrible years, some journalists and strong personalities like Jeremiah Mahoney would speak out against this act of acceptance. However, their voices were buried beneath an increasing torrent of writers and critics who were all too content to have the wool pulled over their eyes and fall into an Olympic stupor. Certainly, they thought, the Jews would speak up if these terrible things were really happening. Who could remain silent or even feign contentedness if such atrocities were perpetrated against them? Unfortunately, there are vast areas of grey in a world the media prints in black and white. It became the path of least resistance to say, 'let Germany take care of Germany, and what business is it of ours?' Souls in Marzahn cried out for food and water while a choir of children not far away performed "Ode to Joy" in the Olympic Stadium for an international crowd, beneath a beaming Hitler.[27] Such a bizarre tableau, with more that would follow could only be made possible by willful naiveté and indifference of observers not just in the United States, but all over the world.

[27] Alfred Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games*, 60.

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