# The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games: The World Responds to Notions of Aryan Superiority

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If the arc of history bends towards justice, then the sports world has always been ahead of the curve. When politics create perceptions of racial, religious, cultural, national, and ideological superiority, the sports world gives the oppressed a platform to prove the fallacy of these ideas, and provides for people a chance to rethink their prejudices. No better sporting event represents this ideal than the Olympics, which welcomes amateur athletes of all races, religions, nationalities, ideologies, and cultures from all over the world to participate in friendly competition. In the summer of 1936, Adolf Hitler had hoped to use the Olympic games, hosted by Berlin, to prove to the world the superiority of the Aryan superiority race and to justify a German Aryan takeover of Europe. However, the mere presence of popular and winning non-Aryan athletes at the Games, such as Jesse Owens, discredited his racial philosophy. Not only did Owens defeat Hitler's Aryan athletes, but also, he was cheered by crowds of as many as one hundred ten thousand screaming German fans chanting his name. German athlete Luz Long, who offered advice to a nervous Owens in the broad jump competition, befriended him.[1] Although Germany dominated the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the appreciation of the non-Aryan athletes in the Games demonstrated by the

[1] Jesse Owens, *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and White Man* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970), 188-89, 191, http://solomon.bltc.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bltc/getvolume.pl?S8198.

German crowd suggests that the belief in Aryan dominance, as held by Adolf Hitler, was not universal in 1930s Germany.

The 1936 Olympic games in Berlin provides fascinating evidence of an ideological disconnect between Hitler and the German people. The "Nazi Olympics" also faced opposition from all over the world, including several of the world's most competitive nations who threatened a boycott of the Games in response to Nazi Germany's discriminatory and anti-democratic practices concerning the rights of minority citizens. Hitler had hoped the Olympic games would be the perfect propaganda tool to put German Aryan superiority on display, but the world and the German people rejected Hitler's racial philosophy, instead incidents during the Games created the possibility of heroic displays of international cooperation and racial pluralism.

Berlin was awarded the Olympic Games in 1931 to welcome Germany back into the international community since its defeat in World War I, but the decision was faced with criticism shortly after Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor in January of 1933.[2] European nations that considered boycotting the Olympic Games in Nazi Germany included France, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Czechoslovakia. In voting to approve one million francs to Germany for the Olympic Games, Florimond Bonté, a Communist Deputy of France "violently opposed the credit," citing racial discrimination in Germany.[3] The United States, aware of Germany's racial and religious discrimination, was the loudest voice against the Games being held in Berlin.

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[2] Jacqueline Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 39.
[3] "Credit for Olympics is Voted in France," *New York Times*, July 10, 1936, 14.

In April 1933 there was already talk of cancelling the Games or moving them to either Rome or Tokyo.[4] Amidst allegations of the Nazi government barring Jewish Germans from participating in the Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) launched an investigation into the country's alleged unethical treatment of Jewish athletes. Avery Brundage, President of the American Olympic Committee (AOC), held that the United States' participation in the Games would be contingent on the IOC's findings. The country, which would be Germany's greatest competition, would not boycott the Games despite pleas from human rights groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).[5] Jeremiah T. Mahoney, president of the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States (AAU), led the movement to boycott the Olympic Games and sent a letter alleging Germany's racial and religious discrimination to Dr. Theodore Lewald. Lewald, the chairman of the German Olympic Committee (GOC) and who had Jewish heritage, once experienced discrimination personally in Nazi Germany when Hitler objected to his position as chairman of the GOC.[6] In his letter to Lewald, Mahoney declared that "the present German government has injected race, religion, and politics into sports in general and into the Olympics in particular." Mahoney then accused German Olympic teams of excluding Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant athletes from participating in the Games who did not "[submit] supinely to the Nazi will in all spheres including the sphere of conscience." He then boldly claimed that if there were no "Jewish athletes of Olympic caliber, this is because [Germany] had denied them adequate facilities for

[4] Arthur J. Daley, "Berlin Faces Loss of Olympic Games," *New York Times*, April 18, 1933, 18.
[5] "Event Split in A.A.U. on Olympic Issue," *New York Times*, December 7, 1935, 7.
[6] Daley, "Berlin Faces Loss of Olympic Games," 18.

training and competition and has forced them into exile and suicide."[7] Lewald countered with a letter of his own, in which he contradicted Mahoney's assertions, and stated that politics should not be inserted into the Olympic Games, a sentiment that was shared by Brundage, who voted in favor of the United States participating in the Games. "The Olympic Games," said Lewald, "have nothing to do with any political or religious question, irrespective of whether the charges against Germany are true or false."[8] Though Lewald expressed his belief that the Olympics are free of religious or political ideologies, he did address several questions about discrimination in Germany.

While Lewald faced questions about discrimination in the athletic ranks, he answered by citing two specific Jewish candidates who had been considered for the German Olympic team: female high jumper, Gretel Bergmann, and the half-Jewish female fencer, Helene Mayer, who was residing in California at the time. However, he claimed there was only "one serious candidate" among the Jewish candidates; ultimately there were no Jewish athletes on the German Olympic team.[9] Despite the claim by Lewald that every athlete was given a chance to join the German Olympic team, Reich Sport leader Herr von Tschammer und Olsen required athletes to "express through their bearing and character the new mode of life of the German nation."[10] In other words, athletes were at least required to show support for the Nazi Regime, and he added, "German sports are for Aryans… and not for Jews."[11] Further evidence of discriminatory practices in Germany came with the denial to

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[7] "Nazis and the Olympic Games: American Allegations," *The Times*, April 18, 1933, 10.
[8] "Germans Reject Olympic Protests," *New York Times*, October 19, 1935, 1.
[9] "Germans Reject Olympic Protests," 8.
[10] "Showing the 'Spirit of Nazi Germany'," *The Times*, July 18, 1936, 14.
[11] D.A. Kass, "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics," *Journal of Sports History* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 1975): 230.

admit Dr. Daniel Prenn to the German Davis Cup team despite his apparently excelling in the game of tennis. *The Times* wrote of this move by the Germans:

> the Nazi point of view, as privately expressed, is that it is, in present circumstances, unthinkable that Germany, which is systematically expelling Jews from the public services and professions, should call on Dr. Prenn to represent her simply because he is the best player in the country.[12]

Because Prenn was regarded by some in the press as the best tennis player in Germany, his absence from the German Davis Cup team, adding the fact that he was Jewish, understandably raised questions of anti-Semitic discrimination by Germany's Olympic team. In addition to addressing allegations of discrimination in the athletic ranks, Lewald also addressed allegations of racial discrimination in athletic training facilities. Lewald acknowledged that some private sports organizations might discriminate by disallowing some into their facilities, but that other sports organization were open to all visiting athletes regardless of their religious or political beliefs.[13]

The question of Germany's practices of discrimination were not the only question of concern to the other countries, they were also concerned with how Germany would accommodate visiting fans, especially visiting Jews. The world was well aware of Nazi Germany's suppression of civil liberties and the atrocities perpetrated against racial, religious, political, and other minorities, so the pressure was on Lewald to prove that the nation would be accommodating to all visiting peoples and not just visiting Aryans. Lewald's job was complicated by Hitler and

[12] "Nazi Ideals in Sports," *The Times*, April 18, 1933, 10.
[13] "Germans Reject Olympic Protests," 8.

the Nazi Party who viewed Jewish and African Germans as a "racial infection," and passed laws limiting their rights and privileges.[14] One such law, the 1933 Peasants Farm Law, stated that only peasants could take land and that only Germans could be peasants. The law defined a German as a person who does not have paternal or maternal ancestors with "Jewish or colored blood in their veins."[15] Laws such as these made it clear that the Nazi Party believed that a racial hierarchy existed and that the "Aryan race" was at the top. Lewald would have to prove that despite these laws, the Germans would not treat visiting non-Aryan athletes and guests as they had treated non-Aryan Germans. He promised American critics that there would be no differentiating between Jews and non-Jews when it came to the care of Olympic athletes and assured them that he had witnessed fair treatment of Jews in the streets of Berlin during the summer of 1935, the year before the Olympic Games.[16] Lewald's accommodating sentiment was reinforced by the removal, just prior to the Olympic Games, of anti-Semitic and otherwise offensive propaganda that once appeared throughout the streets of Berlin.[17] Though the Nazi Regime embraced the Aryan philosophies taught by Hitler, they also realized that they needed to be accepting of all athletes from around the world; thus they were accommodating not only to Aryan athletes but also to visiting Jews during the Olympic Games.

However genuine Lewald was in displaying an accommodating Germany to the visiting world, the Nazi Regime still used the Olympic Games in Berlin as a propaganda tool to further an agenda of Aryan

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[14] Judy Scales-Trent, "Racial Purity Laws in the United States and Nazi Germany: The Targeting Process," *Human Rights Quarterly* Vol. 23, No. 2 (2001): 294.
[15] Scales-Trent, "Racial Purity Laws," 295.
[16] "Germans Reject Olympic Protests," 1.
[17] Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography*, 40.

superiority. Initially, strongly nationalistic Hitler was opposed to the international cooperation represented by Olympic Games, but he was persuaded by his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, to use the Games as a propaganda event for the country. Goebbels had noted that, for Germany, sports had "only one task: to strengthen the character of the German people, imbuing it with the fighting spirit and steadfast camaraderie necessary in the struggle for its existence."[18] Though he was never very athletic himself, Hitler did see the value of sports in strengthening his "Race-Nationalist state." In his "Race-Nationalist state," Hitler said, "the school itself must set aside infinitely more time for physical conditioning."[19] Hitler's belief in athletic instruction for young people could be attributed to his belief that the confidence of young Aryans in their physical abilities could replace the sense of pride Germany had lost when the nation was demilitarized as one of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. In the absence of a forceful military, Hitler had hoped to use the Olympics to exert his nation's physical dominance, a fear held by many who considered the boycott of the Games. Hitler put so much stock into the importance of physical activity among Germany's Aryan youths in his demilitarized nation that he had the educational system reformed to promote the "aggressively physical over the pensively intellectual."[20] The aforementioned French Communist Deputy Florimond Bonté claimed that the Germans "regarded sports as a preparation for war," an "exact contradiction to the Olympic spirit."[21]

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[18] Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography*, 41.
[19] Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillion, 1971), 234. Quote taken from the 1940 NSDAP publication of Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, page 454-56.
[20] Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*, 234.
[21] "Credit for Olympics is Voted in France," 14.

Once Hitler conceded that the Olympic Games would be an effective propaganda tool, he led his Olympic committee in creating the most extravagant opening Olympic Ceremony in the Games' history. The introduction of the participating nations proved, to a degree, the intention of the Nazi Regime to the use the Olympics to showcase their physical dominance to the world. While other nations' athletes dressed in formal—and some casual—wear as they marched to their places on the field, Germany's athletes wore militaristic uniforms and held the Nazi salute as they marched past the Führer to their designated spot for the opening ceremonies. Several other nations' athletes also held the Nazi salute (not to be confused with the similar Olympic salute of stretching one's right arm upward and to the right of one's body), but more in the manner of honoring the host country rather than to express support of the Nazi Regime. Germany's future enemies—the French, British, and Americans—held the "eyes right" position, facing the Führer, but not saluting him. The United States, in fact, did not "dip" their flag, a long-held Olympic tradition to honor the hosting country's leader. The U.S. had not dipped their flag since the Games were held in London in 1908 when they declared, "this flag dips for no earthly king."[22] At Hitler's announcement that the Games had begun, twenty thousand white doves were released by the Hitler Youth, followed by a 21-gun salute to signal the arrival of the final Olympic Torch runner.[23] To a crowd of one hundred ten thousand, the Olympic Games opened with a perfectly Aryan German man sprinting down the track of The Olympiastadion (Olympic Stadium) and lighting the Olympic Torch as the crowd of thousands honored the Führer with the Nazi Salute, followed by a

[22] Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*, 50.
[23] Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography*, 44.

singing of the German National Anthem by the crowd. In the opening ceremonies, Hitler appeared confident and jubilant, eagerly awaiting his athletes to prove Aryan superiority to the rest of the world. His jubilance would shortly be replaced with frustration at his athletes' inability to defeat the United States' athletes, particularly the African American sprinter and long jumper, Jesse Owens, the audience's support for Owens, and the insistence of people in his cabinet, and the IOC, to show support for all athletes at the games.[24]

Jesse Owens' victories at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin extended beyond the track: winning the support of the German crowd and befriending German athlete, Luz Long. Owens' arrival to the games was long awaited by the Germans who greeted him upon his arrival in Berlin by chanting his name and bombarding him for autographs before he even took to the track.[25] Owens went on to win four gold medals at the Games, each time cheered by the German crowd. Most famously was his competition with his future and long-term friend Luz Long in the broad jump. In solidarity, Long raised Owens' fist and impelled the crowd of one hundred ten thousand to cheer Owens' name, which in their German tongue, Owens recalls, sounded more like "Jaz-eee-ooh-wenz."[26] Long was posthumously awarded the Pierre de Coubertin medal for his extraordinary show of sportsmanship during the 1936 Olympic Games.[27] During Long's recored-breaking long jump event, Hitler had been seen cheering on Long. In the very next jump, Owens' jump shattered Long's record, and Hitler left the stadium.[2829]

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[24] *Olympia,* DVD, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1938; Venice, CA: Pathfinder Home Entertainment, 2006).
[25] Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography*, 42.
[26] Owens, *Blackthink*, 191.
[27] Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography*, 49.
[28] *Olympia.*

When Hitler walked out of the stadium after Owens' win, it was not the first time he had "snubbed" Owens, or any athlete in the Games. The first time came after Owens' fellow African Americans, Dave Albritton and Cornelius Johnson, in addition to Delos Thurber swept the high jump competition.[30] This marked the first time Hitler had not invited the winners of an event up to his private box to shake their hands and personally congratulate them on their victories. Previously, Hitler had invited gold medal German shot putter Hans Woellke to his personal suite along with the other medalists in the event to congratulate them. The other two medal winners were from the Finish team, thus all three medalists in this event were Aryan. When the two African American high jumpers from the United States defeated their Aryan opponents, however, Hitler left his private box before they even took to their victory stands.[31] Some contended that Hitler was leaving the stadium to avoid a threatening rain storm while others believed he left the stadium to avoid acknowledging that a non-Aryan athlete had bested his athletes, and other Aryan athletes, during his Olympics. After Hitler's failure to congratulate the African American athletes in the same way he treated the Aryan athletes, both the IOC and Nazi officials suggested to Hitler that he either personally congratulate all of the winners, or none of them. After this suggestion, Hitler invited no other medal winners to his private box.[32]

Owen's success in the Games delivered a major blow to Hitler's hopes of using the Berlin Olympics as a forum to spread his beliefs of

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[29] Lerone Bennet Jr., "Jesse Owens' Olympic Triumph Over Time And Hitlerism," *Ebony*, September 1988, 145.
[30] Arthur J. Daley, "110,000 See Owens Set World Record at Olympic Games," *New York Times*, August 3, 1936, 1.
[31] Bennet, "Jesse Owens' Olympic Triumph," 146.
[32] Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography*, 49.

Aryan superiority. A second factor was the Germans' favorable response to the success of non-Aryan athletes. Japanese Naoto Tajima, gold medal winner of the triple jump competition, was also cheered on by the German audience as he set up for his final jump, which set a new world record.[33] Of course, the Germans could not have won every event, and Hitler surely recognized that, but the Berlin Olympics would serve to disprove Hitler's theories of Aryan supremacy, than to prove them. The world responded with its own racial philosophies; but rather than contend one group was superior to all others, it answered with racially diverse Olympic teams, which one writer summed up in a *New York Times* article,

> America's "black auxiliaries" at the Olympics are not the only problem for Nazi race philosophy. Here, for instance, is India defeating the United States in field hockey at Berlin, and of the ten men fighting for India five are called Emmett, Cullen, Grewal, Michie, and Phillips. They are in the line-up with players called Chand, Roopsingh, Jafar and Ahsan Khan. And here again is Argentina beating the British in polo in Berlin, and two of the four Argentinians are called Duggan and Cavanagh.
>
> It all goes to show that mankind outside present-day Germany is imperfectly totalitarian. It accepts racial inconsistencies and nationalist anomalies for the sake of a good game of polo or hockey or a fast 100-meter sprint.[34]

The presence and success of racially diverse athletes at the Games showed that the rest of the world was either unwilling to accept Hitler's race philosophy, or that nations were unconcerned with race when it came to picking the best athletes to represent their country in the Olympics.

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[33] *Olympia.*
[34] "Topics of *The Times*: Race at Berlin," *New York Times*, August 10, 1936, 18.

In the end, the Germans took away the most medals by a wide margin (Germany earned 101 total medals—38 gold—followed by the United States with just 57 total medals), but Hitler lost his battle to prove Aryan superiority.[35] The wins of non-Aryan athletes over Aryan athletes, especially those by Jesse Owens, undermined Hitler's race philosophy. The 1936 Olympic Games were never without controversy. Just months after Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany, nations around the world considered a boycott of the Games if Germany could not prove to be fair in its treatment of Jewish athletes. Ultimately, these nations did join the Games, and they contradicted Hitler's philosophy of Aryan superiority by sending the best athletes to compete, regardless of their race. The world, especially the nations that would eventually defeat Germany in World War II made it abundantly clear to the Nazi leader that they did not accept his notion of Aryan superiority. Perhaps the most significant outcome was the rejection of his racial philosophy by the German crowd who cheered non-Aryan athletes before and after they won gold in their respective events. This sentiment could be seen in the close friendship that developed between Jesse Owens and Luz Long, who secretly admitted to Owens that he did not believe in Aryan superiority.[36] The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was Hitler's chance to convince the world of Aryan superiority, but despite Germany's many victories in the Games, the world, the German crowd, and even Germany's own athletes were unwilling to accept Hitler's race philosophy.

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[35] "Medal Count for the 1936 Olympics," accessed November 21, 2010, http://www.databaseolympics.com/games/gamesyear.htm?g=11.
[36] Owens, *Blackthink*, 192.

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