Modern History

1936 Berlin Olympics

HSC National Study – Germany 1918-39 | Roydon Ng
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The Olympic Games or Hitler’s Game?

From a fortnight in August 1936, Hitler’s totalitarianism regime disguised its extremist and prejudiced attitude in hosting the world to the Olympic Games. The Nazi government delivered what the world naively wanted to see, a tolerant and peaceful German society by taking a temporarily lifting its anti-Semitic restrictions and aggressive foreign policies. The international community were conned into accepting a supposed image of a new Germany under Nazi rule.

Background to the 1936 Olympic Games

Following years of post-war isolation and struggle, the International Olympic Committee’s announcement to award the 1936 Olympic Games to Berlin was a major step in Germany’s realignment with the international community. World War One had concluded with Germany signing the Versailles Treaty under protest leading subsequent political unrest and internal instability. Through the divide of political ideologies arose the far-right Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nazi Party) formed in 1919 as an anti-Communist workers association. Adolf Hitler was inducted as German Führer by President Paul von Hindenburg in 1933 marking the start of the totalitarian regime. Initially the Third Reich led by Adolf Hitler rejected the announcement as Berlin was declared Germany’s imperial capital and also as the fundamentals of National Socialism contradicted the IOC’s “Olympicism”. The rise of the Nazi regime in 1933 resulted in an overflow of long standing tensions with the Jewish population spilling over into extreme racial hatred and discrimination. Introduction of racial policy such as the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 was aimed at promoting the superiority the “Aryan”, people with German biological heritage as the master race over others especially Jews whom were labelled as subhuman. Jews were outcaste from German society and subjected to violent anti-Semitic attacks from the SA and right wing groups. Under the regulations of the International Olympic Committee, such discriminatory restrictions were lifted in Berlin for the 1936 Olympic Games. Public signs segregating Jewish people from other Germans were removed and non-Aryan athletes were permitted to compete at the Games. The decision to decline the hosting of the Olympics was quickly reversed as the Nazi Party saw the Olympic Games as an idealist opportunity to broadcast its views on Aryan Supremacy and other political agendas. The 1936 Olympic Games is characterised by a deceitful and temporary cover up of hardline Nazi policies in Germany. Controversy and debate raged amongst conservative countries such as the United States by whether participation would be seen an endorsement of Hitler’s extremist Nazi policies. The Nazi Party and the German Olympic Committee commissioned Leni Riefenstahl to produce documentary film titled Olympia to promote the successes of 1936 Olympic Games. Olympia became central a stunning propaganda campaign for the Nazi Party with a triumphant reception.

1 Rennen, Ward (2007) Cityevents: Place Selling in a Media Age. Amsterdam University Press, Pg 100
2 Bennett, William (2007) America: The Last Best Hope (Volume I): From the Age of Discovery to a World at War (Thomas Nelson Publishing)
Key Features of the 1936 Olympic Games
The 11th Olympic Games was officially opened in Berlin on August 1st 1936 by Hitler alongside the arrival of the first torch relay from Greece. Through the manifestation of a police state, Jews were subjected to the most discrimination with intense anti-Semitism in Germany and violence against the Jewish population. In response with international concerns, Jewish athletes were given primitive training facilities prior to the Berlin Games but were barred from actual competition. In another sign of Hitler’s growing power swastika flags rivalled the presence of the Olympic flag in Berlin. The Nazi party “cleared” Berlin of gypsies and other potential “disruptions” to bolster its image of Aryan wealth. The SS and Brownshirts were instructed to operate with a less authoritarian approach prior to the games as means of giving the softened and reputable Nazi view of Germany to the world. The issues of racial discrimination and human rights abuses were sidelined for a fortnight of the Summer Olympics. The Nazi attitude to society extended to all aspects of society including sport where Hitler’s regime sought to strengthen the outlook of the Aryan race and prohibit subhuman groups such as gypsies and Jews from participating in the Olympic Games. The Louis-Schmeling Fight helped fasted the Nazi’s views of it’s racial attitudes. Just one and half months before the opening ceremony on June 19, 1936, the previously undefeated African-American boxer Joe Louis was knocked out by Germany’s Max Schmeling. The Nazi weekly journal Das Schwarze Korps (The Black Corps) commented: “Schmeling’s victory was not only sport. It was a question of prestige for our race.” Just as Jesse Owens were to upstage Luz Long in the Olympics, Louis would defeat Schmeling in one round in 1938. “German sport has 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.” — Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, April 23, 1933.

The United States sent the second largest competitive team of 312 members including 18 African-Americans, most notably with Jesse Owens as a track athlete. The Berlin Games was the start of a mass propaganda campaign for the Nazi regime with Hitler drawing comparisons of the ancient Greek Olympians to the Aryans with heroic, blue-eyed blonds with finely chiseled features as means of asserting the Aryan superiority. The most memorable moment of the 1936 Olympic Games was the significance of African-American athlete Jesse Owens defying Hitler’s Aryan racial supremacy attitudes by defeating German athlete Luz Long and Hitler’s subsequent refusal to acknowledge Owens during the medals presentation. The Nazis excelled in their broadcasts of the Olympic Games especially through the use of radio for the media. A total twenty transmitting vans and over three hundred microphones were allocated to the international press. Radio broadcasts from the Olympic Games were available in nearly thirty languages from forty-one different countries. The technical capabilities of German drew praise from NBC America which was a multilayered victory for Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minter.

1936 Berlin Olympics’ Influence on Germany
The 1936 Berlin Games cemented Hitler’s position not only in Germany but also on the world stage with the international being naive about the realities of the Nazi regime. Albert Speer noted that many of the sizes of the sporting venues were not of Olympic standards, but this proved to be no

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3 Hilton, Christopher (2006) Hitler’s Olympics (Stutton Publishing)
http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/1936_berlin_olympics.htm 16/3/12
concern for Hitler as he believed that Germany would host all future Games after 1940. Domestic media coverage which was primarily state controlled had imprinted an ultra-nationalistic focus on Germany hastened the politics of the Nazis. The Nazis had excelled in their broadcasting of the Olympic Games through film and radio and by doing so were able to spread their subtle message with sporting commentaries. With the conclusion of the Berlin Games and perhaps more importantly with the reduced spotlight placed on Germany, the Nazis were free to return to their brutal racial and gender obsessions without fearing international outrages. The Nazi regime insisted that the success of the Games would not have been possible without the implementation of its ideals. Building upon the strength and dominance achieved from the Games, in 1939 Hitler and his forces occupied Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia through which, only three years earlier, the Olympic torch had come. Leni Riefenstahl's blockbuster motion picture production Olympia was a stunning success setting the standard for future sporting films. Through Riefenstahl's film the opening ceremony of the Berlin Games encapsulated Hitler's “omniscient” charisma on the German consciousness. From this point onwards, German society would feel the presence of Hitler’s dominance in society and the promotion of the Aryan race along with hatred of the Jews. Hitler’s major role in the film does not extend far beyond the scenes of the opening ceremony but through such the use of the documentary as propaganda, it achieved amazing success in firming the Nazi grip over Germany. Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia was released in 1938 with a large impact on following political events and judgments on the Nazi regime. For the rest of the world who watched Olympia with the exalted images of Germany and Hitler were given an image of an idyllic and peaceful Germany led by a joyous Führer. The Olympic Games and the film by Leni Riefenstahl had drawn growing “awareness” which was an invaluable asset for the Nazis.

**Historical Interpretations into the 1936 Berlin Olympics**

The 1936 Olympic Games would go down in history as the most controversial sporting event of world history in the modern era. Held during the prime of the right Nazi dictatorship interested in furthering its own agenda in the midst of the Olympic euphoria, the Games was a mere spectacle for a world community wanting to believe of a new Germany. Many countries especially the United States considered a boycott to the Berlin Games, questioning the morality of attending as some feared it would act as an endorsement of the Nazi regime. The American Amateur Athletic Union’s campaign to boycott the Games was voted down by 2 and half votes upon the return of the American Olympic Committee chief Avery Brundage whom have been given favourable treatment in Germany. For a fortnight Berlin Games played a showcase for Nazi conceit and racial hatred, but also amongst the chaos of the Third Reich a friendship born differing ideological backgrounds was forged between the African-American athlete Jesse Owens and Nazi Germany’s Luz Long. One of the most debated areas surrounding the 1936 Olympics will be Adolf Hitler’s failure to prove his theories claiming that the Aryan people were the ‘master race’. The Berlin Olympics is largely remembered with its popular hero, the African-American athlete Jesse Owens not winning four gold medals but ‘defying’ Hitler on the world stage. Hitler refused to place the gold medal around Owen’s neck during the medals ceremony. Even with the supposed harmony of the Olympic Games it was not able to alleviate the tensions of conflicts, global politics, and difficulties. The 1936 Olympic Games is a superb example of sport triumphing over politics, where despite the anti-Semitic and Nazi led oppression of the Jews, international opinion forced the hand of the German government.

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8 Maule, David (2000) The Olympics (DK Publishing) Pg. 11 - 15
by permitting the half-Jewish fencer Hélène Mayer to compete with the German team. Mayer went on to win a silver medal in her individual fencing event.

References

Websites


Books


Video/Film
