

The 1936 Berlin Olympics¹

The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games were more than just a worldwide sporting event, they were a show of Nazi propaganda, stirring significant conflict. Despite the exclusionary principles of the 1936 Games, countries around the world still agreed to participate.

- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Key points:

- **Nazi Germany used the 1936 Olympic Games for propaganda purposes.** The Nazis promoted an image of a new, strong, and united Germany while masking the regime's targeting of Jews and Roma as well as Germany's growing militarism.
- For the first time in the history of the modern Olympic Games, people in the United States and Europe called for a boycott of the Olympics because of what would later become known as human rights abuses. Although the movement ultimately failed, it set an important precedent for future Olympic boycott campaigns (such as those in 2008 and 2014).
- Once the boycott movement narrowly failed, Germany had its propaganda coup: the 49 nations who sent teams to the Games legitimized the Hitler regime both in the eyes of the world and in Germany. **Not a single country boycotted the Games.**
 - Canada sent 29 athletes (22 men, 7 women).
- German sports imagery of the 1930s served to promote the myth of "Aryan" racial superiority and physical prowess. In sculpture and in other forms, German artists idealized athletes' well-developed muscle tone and heroic strength and accentuated ostensibly Aryan facial features. Such imagery also reflected the importance the Nazi regime placed on physical fitness, a prerequisite for military service.



Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels sign autographs for members of the Canadian figure skating team

¹ This handout was created using information from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum webpage "The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936."

- In April 1933, an "Aryans only" policy was instituted in all German athletic organizations. "Non-Aryans"—Jews or individuals with Jewish parents and Roma—were systematically excluded from German sports facilities and associations.
- In August 1936, the Nazi regime tried to camouflage its violent racist policies while it hosted the Summer Olympics. Most anti-Jewish signs were temporarily removed, and newspapers toned down their harsh rhetoric, in line with directives from the Propaganda Ministry, headed by Joseph Goebbels. Thus, the regime exploited the Olympic Games to present foreign spectators and journalists with a false image of a peaceful, tolerant Germany.
- Germany skillfully promoted the Olympics with colorful posters and magazine spreads. Athletic imagery drew a link between Nazi Germany and ancient Greece, symbolizing the Nazi racial myth that a superior German civilization was the rightful heir of an "Aryan" culture of classical antiquity.
- The torch relay from Greece was introduced by Nazi officials to the Berlin Olympic Games. Recently, it was discovered that the idea for a relay originated with Alfred Schiff, a member of the *German Reich Committee for Olympic Games*, who was dismissed in 1933 because he was Jewish.
- As post-Games reports were filed, Hitler pressed on with grandiose plans for German expansion. Persecution of Jews resumed. Two days after the Olympics, Captain Wolfgang Fuerstner, head of the Olympic village, killed himself when he was dismissed from military service because of his Jewish ancestry.





Jesse Owens, center, salutes during the presentation of his gold medal for the long jump at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

- 18 Black Athletes from the United States (16 men and 2 women) competed in the 1936 Olympic Games, bringing home 14 medals: 8 gold; 4 silver; and 2 bronze. Jesse Owens was the most successful athlete to compete in Berlin, winning four gold medals. Since he challenged Hitler's racist belief in "Aryan racial superiority," the Nazi leader refused to put a gold medal around 4-time winner's neck.
 - After the Olympics, the athletes returned to a country segregated by race, to a nation where they were treated as "second-class" citizens. While the 1936 Olympic victories were a source of pride for the African American communities in the United States and a step toward alleviating discrimination in American sports, they did not have an immediate impact on the daily lives of Black athletes at home or on American race relations in general.

After I came home from the 1936 Olympics with my four [gold] medals, it became increasingly apparent that everyone was going to slap me on the back, want to shake my hand or have me up to their suite. But no one was going to offer me a job.

- Jesse Owens, 1972

- Jewish Toronto boxer Sammy Luftspring had been training for the Olympics for many years (he had wanted to be a boxer since he was nine years old). However, in a joint letter to the Globe's sports editor printed July 7, 1936, Luftspring and fellow Jewish boxer Norman (Baby) Yack wrote: "... we would have been very low to hurt the feelings of our fellow Jews by going to a land that would exterminate them if it could."²
- Irving "Toots" Meretsky played basketball at Windsor's Assumption College and was eventually chosen to represent Canada at the Berlin Olympics. The only Jewish member of Canada's basketball team, Meretsky decided to attend the Games.
 - While in Berlin, Meretsky quietly visited a Jewish neighbourhood. "It was obvious they were all scared," he later reported.³
- Just before he left for Berlin to compete as part of Canada's Olympic track and field team, Phil Edwards was awarded a degree in medicine from McGill University. Winner of multiple medals and one of the first Black athletes to represent Canada at the Olympics, he was also the first winner of the prestigious Lou Marsh Trophy in 1936. Edwards went on to serve in the Canadian Army during the Second World War. He earned the rank of Captain. After the war he joined the staff of Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital and became a tropical disease expert. He was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in 1997. Edwards died on September 6th, 1971.⁴



Phil Edwards

² Lederman, M. (2009, October 13). A glimpse of Canada at the 1936 Nazi Games. The Globe and Mail. Retrieved November 2, 2022, from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/a-glimpse-of-canada-at-the-1936-nazi-games/article1203920/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Krieger, N. (2009). The politics of sport: Bodies & Pageantry: More than just games. The Politics of Sport | Bodies & Pageantry | More Than Just Games. Retrieved November 2, 2022, from https://www.vhec.org/1936_olympics/bodies_and_pageantry.htm