
Last year saw a plethora of books chronicling the 1936 Olympic Games published in honor of the 70th anniversary of those Games. I, like many others, hoped for revelations only time could provide. Unfortunately few provided this. My last hope was David Clay Large's NAZI GAMES: THE OLYMPICS OF 1936.

A prolific writer on modern Germany with nine books to his credit, Large is a professor of history at Montana State University (USA). He utilized the key Olympic repositories - the IOC research center, the German Olympic Committee, the "Diem Archiv" and the "American Olympic Committee" (a phrase not used in almost 60-years since the current NOC is the United States Olympic Committee), in addition to what seemed like every library in the western world. Large also acknowledged numerous experts in Olympic history, including ISOH president Karl Lennartz, and even visited the sites of the 1936 Olympic Winter Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and the Berlin Olympic facilities, mentioning that he actually took the time to run the 1936 marathon route through Berlin, which must have been a sight to motorists driving through the city. With such credentials I hoped it would be the book I was longing for over the years. Unfortunately the book did not live up to my anticipation.

From the beginning I was suspicious of the method of documentation Large used. Unfortunately the current trend amongst popular publishers is to avoid the use of footnotes or endnote numbers thinking that it interrupts the flow of the reader and distracts from enjoying the book. As a historian I feel just the opposite. The form of notation used in this book is regrettably becoming increasingly popular. After checking numerous style manuals and colleagues I could find no name for the style used, so until one is found I call it the “quotation method.” The author takes a short phrase of the text as a reference point and places it in the endnotes along with the page number where it is found and attaches a source for the fact. This is one of the most inaccurate methods of documenting information I have experienced and is very frustrating when trying to verify a source. There are many sections of the book that go for pages without any documentation at all. One such example is where Large goes into great detail to describe the Wehrmacht’s use of the Berlin Olympic Village prior to the Games on pages 157-159. There is only one endnote that touches on the suicide of Wolfgang Fürstner, the head of the village complex.

The book is well written and captured my attention immediately, but gradually small errors began to emerge. On page 57 Large states, "An LA innovation that Diem would later copy in Berlin (and that would reappear in all subsequent Olympiads) was the practice of having the three top finishers in each event receive their medals on a tiered podium - the gold medal winner looking suitably patriotic and humble as his or her national anthem sounded over the loudspeakers.” The fact is that the tradition actually began, as Robert K. Barney proved, at the 1932 Lake Placid Winter Games as a result of an IOC directive on medal ceremonies.* From the later sarcastic comments in this statement you get the impression that Large views the Olympic Games with skepticism and scorn.

Throughout the book the errors and vitriolic comments became more frequent. On page 124 Large states “Hitler was to travel to ‘Gapa’ (his acronym for Garmisch-Partenkirchen) from Munich by special train ... he would then walk to the stadium along a route sealed off in advance by his personal bodyguard, the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler.” However the first photo after page 178 shows Hitler in a car with the caption, “Adolf Hitler greeting crowds as he is driven to the opening ceremony of the 1936 Winter Games at Garmisch-Partenkirchen.” On page 198 Large states, “For the 1948 London games the IOC recycled the 1932 hymn; and in 1956 it commissioned a new one, a practice it has followed ever since.” Besides not supporting this statement with sources he is wrong once again. The 1896 Olympic Hymn, by Spyros Samaras and Kostas Palamas, was adopted as the official Olympic Hymn by the IOC in 1957 and has not changed. Each Olympics may have their own music, but not their own Olympic Hymn. Later on the same page he claims that the final torch bearer, Fritz Schilgen, “loped through the ranks of athletes amassed on the infield.” Just a cursory viewing of Leni Reifenstahl’s Olympia, which he critiques in detail later in the book, shows that Schilgen ran on

the track past Hitler’s box on his way to the urn at the other end of the stadium, not through the athletes on the infield. He would have also seen in the film that 1896 marathon champion, Spiridon Louis, marched by the Greek flag bearer carrying an olive branch instead of carrying the flag as he claimed on page 194. On page 281 he announced that Jacob Thams (Norway) became the first Olympian to win a gold medal in both the Winter Games (ski-jumping 1924) and he Summer Games (yachting 1936). In actuality it was Eddie Eagan (USA) who won a boxing gold in 1920 and bobsled gold in 1932, thus making him the first by four years. Even mistaken facts, such as the German annexation of Austria which he dated as March 13, 1936 when it actually happened in 1938, made it into the book.

Sometimes Large shows such poor scholarship that it is ludicrous and you hope he is trying to present a poor joke. Such is the case on page 252 when concerning the discus competition he states, “Americans had often triumphed in this event in Olympics past, including the first contest in 1896, won by that Princeton man who had never even seen a discus before completing his victory toss.” How much effort would it have been to find the name of Robert Garrett? Would any educator tolerate such an academic effort from a student? I must admit that after reading this passage I almost felt like closing the book for good. Still at other times his comments border on the tasteless. On page 196 he refers to the Opening Ceremonies crowd suffering “dung bombing” by pigeons and on page 257 he felt compelled to point out that the marathon was “another grueling test of staying power and sphincter control.”

In the later stages of the book he seemed to tire of the subject and began to quickly tumble to a conclusion. To show the relevance of his research he kept referring to current events in Olympic history as if they had their roots in the Berlin Games. When writing on sports introduced in Berlin leads the author to comments about the 1972 Soviet-USA gold medal basketball game and the 1992 “Dream Team,” while discussing baseball led to comments about how Cuba controlled “America’s Game” and the failures of US fortunes in Olympic baseball competitions in the late 20th century.

Whereas Large does touch on some interesting subjects such as marketing at both the 1936 Winter and Summer Games and the fates of some of the key players, his lack of supporting evidence diminishes his contributions. He has the knack of finding the occasional interesting anecdote but at times fails to sustain them with credible sources. In short, it is interesting reading, but not as the scholarly work it is purported to be.