Review Essay


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If, according to some historical accounts, the “Modern Era” began in the Enlightenment, by those same standards it may be said to have ended in the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Such stark pronouncements are inevitably disturbing; just as they vex those scholars whose subjects simply do not engage the origins of twentieth-century genocide, reckonings of this sort upset widespread assumptions about human progress. Yet for all the material innovations which have been cast as contributions to “Western Civilization” between the mid-eighteenth century and the first years of our own time—from the invention of stunning new modes of transportation and communication to medical discoveries like anesthesia and the X-ray—indeed, for the all the qualities of mind elaborated in the intellect and imagination of such figures as Rousseau, Jefferson, Blake, Marx, Mill, Darwin, Freud, and Einstein, there was yet another significant strand of modern thought, ominous in its implications, that sought not only to calibrate the differences among diverse peoples but also to rank the “races.”

The variety and complexity of “the modernizing experience” compel our caution in generalizing about causes and effects, the relationship between ideology and state policy. Within a rapidly expanding intellectual cosmos, however, the tendency to map social boundaries in terms of heritage and culture—a course of thought literally embodied in the marking of phenotypical variations among human beings—emerged as the hallmark of racial science during the nineteenth century. Both in its foundations and its conclusions, that newly-defined field of study reinforced the imperialist ambitions of the European powers just as it advanced a purportedly rational discourse on the subject of slavery in the Americas. Significantly, beyond the notion of white supremacy, the rhetoric of innate and immutable “racial” difference was also brought to bear on what had long been called “the Jewish Question,” then within the prevailing terms of modern Christian culture, the “problem” of assimilation.

Broad-based and deeply-rooted, racism and antisemitism had been expressed in many forms well before the Scientific Revolution, of course: Before anthropologists of the Victorian era began to use the skulls in the collection of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach to classify “the families of man,” before Joseph-Arthur, comte de

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Gobineau, wrote his voluminous text, *The Inequality of Human Races*. But the construction of fixed and firm “racial” hierarchies and cultural taxonomies—grounded in references to measurable distinctions, among other pretensions to scientific objectivity—lent academic authority to popular thought and practice. And in an increasingly secular age, such discriminations became all the more influential. To survey the vast landscape of Western Civilization as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth certainly would not be to foresee the corpses at Auschwitz or the consequences of the decision to drop the atomic bomb; there is nothing so direct or determined about the historical process. Yet over the span of several centuries, as a growing number of scholars have emphasized, particular elements in the dominant discourse on race and culture did point toward the Final Solution and total war.  

**The Nazi Olympics**

The current exhibit on the Nazi Olympics of 1936 at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum may not conjure such ponderous questions about historical research and interpretation among all those who view the installation and who listen to the recollections—captured on videotape—by some of the athletes who competed in the Berlin Games (or were not allowed to participate). But both in its visuals and text, the exhibition has clearly been conceived in expansive terms, aiming to take us far beyond the Olympic stadium and conventional renderings of athletic performance—the gold medal here, a world record there, dramatic finishes everywhere—to explore the vitally important politics of sport. Within frames of analysis that derive perhaps only indirectly from the notion of “postmodernity”—as variously as that term is defined—the exhibit nevertheless presents the connections between Olympism, nationalism, and racism through a different lens than what we find in most treatments of the 1936 Games. What is more, it urges us to think beyond a specific point in time to reflect on the larger meanings (and uses) of athletic ritual and spectacle.
Without risking a great deal of debate, it can be said that no event in the history of modern sport has been more significant in either its impact or implications than the Summer Olympics of 1936. “Hitler’s Games,” as the event has sometimes been called, was by far the most magnificent staging of the quadrennial competition to that date; in a setting at once carefully managed and festive, it featured the participation of nearly 5000 athletes from 49 nations, who competed before crowds ranging up to 100,000 people a day. Far more important than such numbers, though, were the purposes sport was made to serve. The Berlin Olympics bespoke not just the efficiency but also the ideology of the Nazi regime: a glorification of the German state, according to many commentators, that loomed over and above the internationalist ideals of Baron de Coubertin. The juxtaposition of numerous compelling symbols and enactments captivated the daily press and dominated the weekly newsreels at the time. Then two years later, the grandeur of the XI Olympiad was “recorded” in Leni Riefenstahl’s epic documentary *Olympia*, distinguished by its fascination with the human form in motion as well as its allusions to classical antiquity. At once boldly and artfully rendered, “Riefenstahl’s Olympics” elaborated a heroic vision of athletic triumph and travail; at the same time it embodied Hitler’s views on race and empire.6

![Spectators in the Olympic stadium give the Nazi salute. August 1, 1936.](image)

Keeping in mind the omnipresent Nazi swastika and salute, as well as the medals won by German athletes in a variety of events, contemporary observers of the Berlin Games were also inclined at times to refer to the athletic pageant as the “Jesse Owens Olympics.” The victories by Owens in the 100 and 200 meter dashes, the long jump and sprint relay—as well as the stellar accomplishments of Ralph Metcalfe, Archie Williams, John Woodruff, Cornelius Johnson, and other African-American competitors—had a profound impact not just on contemporary sports coverage but on racial ideology as well. In 1936 the Nazi press called them America’s “black auxiliaries.” Four years earlier the same press had called for their exclusion from
Olympism. The triumphs by African-Americans at Berlin directly challenged longstanding racialist notions of “Aryan” (or Anglo-Saxon, or Nordic) athletic superiority.

Jesse Owens, “the fastest human being,” captured four gold medals and became the hero of the Olympics. In the long jump he leaped 26 feet 5 1/2 inches, an Olympic record.

From one vantage, those accomplishments served the cause of “interracial education” and “muscular assimilation,” winning some converts to the cause of fair play and sportsmanship on and beyond the playing fields. Yet in a cruel irony, they also accelerated the process by which prevailing assessments of sports performance were substantially qualified and ultimately recalculated—in light of new “scientific” discoveries in anatomy and physiology—so as to accommodate black achievement and at the same time maintain traditional cultural and social hierarchies. In the short term, though, the repeated presence of African-American athletes on the medals podium called attention to the racial policies and practices not only in the country hosting the Olympics but also in their own homeland, where segregation was the ruling custom, South and North, when it was not also the law.

Within a creative, powerful narrative, the exhibit on the Berlin Olympics at the U.S. Holocaust Museum brings together such themes as the Nazification of German sport and the exclusion of Jewish athletes from competition, as well as the subversion of prevailing racial theory by Owens, et. al and their contributions to the campaign for civil rights in America. The exhibit describes the controversy when two
American Jewish athletes, Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, were removed by their coaches from the 4x100 relay just hours before the race, and it tells the stories of numerous European Jewish athletes and what they faced throughout the 1930s. It recounts the discriminatory acts by Nazi authorities that inhibited their opportunities for training and held them out of competition; ultimately, it documents the fates of a number of Jews and other “non-Aryans” during the Holocaust.

Photo credit: Beth Redlich, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

At the center of this presentation of history and memory, appropriately, stands the debate that took place in the United States--and in other nations--over a proposed boycott of the Nazi Games. This controversy is critical both to Holocaust Studies and Olympic Studies, for the Games of 1936 were inextricably bound to Hitler’s policies of “racial purification” and rested on the foundation of discriminatory and exclusionary acts against Jews and other “minorities.” “Sport is prostituted when sport loses its independent and democratic character and becomes a political institution,” one protest committee declared. And from within the Olympic movement itself, Ernst Lee Jahnke (American member of the IOC) announced that “neither Americans nor the representatives of other countries can take part in the Games in Nazi Germany without at least acquiescing in the contempt of the Nazis for fair play and their sordid exploitation of the Games.” Yet despite calls for a boycott from within Germany and from abroad, the Games went on.

Drawing on newspaper reports and magazine photographs from the period, official documents concerning Nazi racial policy and the vivid poster art of the era, as well as striking film and audio clips, the exhibit meticulously lays out the political, social, and cultural context of the Games of the Eleventh Olympiad. It is significant that in 1931 the IOC awarded the Games to Berlin in part to restore Germany to the world community after its defeat in the First World War. Yet within a year of Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in 1933, freedom of speech was suspended in
Germany, as were freedom of assembly, and of the press; the first concentration camp was opened at Dachau; a boycott of Jewish-owned business was organized; and a law calling for the forced sterilization of handicapped persons, Gypsies, and Blacks was passed. During the next two years, the Nazis conducted the first wave of arrests of homosexuals and Jehovah’s Witnesses, then they enacted the Nuremberg Laws which deprived Jews of their citizenship. Two weeks before the Opening Ceremonies, the Third Reich interned 800 gypsies in a camp located in the Marzahn suburb of Berlin. (Most of those people, we learn later from the exhibit, would be transported to Auschwitz during the war and exterminated).

Against this backdrop of authoritarianism and intensifying racial persecution, the Nazis developed a formidable sports apparatus, devised to advance Hitler’s idealization of a rugged “Aryan” people and at the same time to lay the groundwork for German triumphs at the Berlin Games. As the host nation, Germany was compelled to work with the International Olympic Committee and, ideally, to engage the principles of Olympism. In fact, the Nazification of German sport meant the systematic exclusion of Jews and other “non-Aryans” from the majority of athletic facilities and associations. Though the exhibit is rather brief about the roles played by Dr. Carl Diem and Dr. Theodor Lewald in the staging of the Nazi Olympics, it is expansive about the prohibitions on Jewish athletes. As early as March, 1933 the city of Cologne forbade Jews from using city playgrounds and sports facilities; while other cities adopted the same policy during the next several years, the Reich sports office, as well as the national boxing federation and gymnastic society, all outlined the doctrine that “Aryans only” could participate in state-sanctioned sport.

In presenting the stories of the Jewish boxer, Eric Seelig, who was expelled from the German Boxing Association, and of Daniel Prenn, who was removed from Germany’s Davis Cup team, the exhibition offers the first set of personal narratives, which throughout the remainder of the installation convey a sense of the impending tragedy of the Holocaust. Alongside the pictures of Seelig and Prenn is that of Johann Trollmann, a Sinti (Gypsy) boxer who was also banned from his sport for “racial reasons.” Then there is the story of Gretel Bergmann, perhaps the most famous of the Jewish athletes to have been barred from competition in Berlin. Media coverage surrounding the Atlanta Games of 1996 devoted considerable attention to the exclusion of Bergmann, a world-class high-jumper, from the German team sixty years earlier. A monitor placed in the midst of the exhibit panels features a videotaped interview with Margaret (Gretel Bergmann) Lambert, who recounts in telling detail her encounters with the Nazi regime.

Such poignant episodes frame the exhibition’s coverage of the boycott debate. One element of that debate, the struggle between Jeremiah Mahoney of the Amateur Athletic Union and Avery Brundage of the American Olympic Committee may be the most thoroughly studied issue in modern Olympic history. Here, “The Nazi Olympics” draws on the prevailing historiography to reveal the intricate political maneuvering that went on in the United States between 1933 and 1935. It examines the personalities of the individual protagonists as well as the coalitions which came together in opposition to the staging of the Olympics in Berlin. Impressively, the exhibit sets the American debate over racial exclusion and human rights in Nazi Germany within the context of antisemitism and “Jim Crow” at home, discussing, in
brief, the German-American Bund and the fulminations of the “radio priest,” Father Charles Coughlin, as well as quoting *The Chicago Defender* on the hypocrisy of amateur athletic leaders who criticized the policies of the Nazis while remaining silent about racial persecution in the United States.  

Beyond the elaboration of the more familiar aspects of the boycott debate--and beyond an intriguing depiction of the proposed Counter-Olympics and the “People’s Olympiad,” planned for Barcelona but cancelled after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War--the exhibit adds a significant dimension to Olympic Studies by documenting both individual and collective acts of conscience, captured in the statements by Jewish athletes from around the world who vowed to boycott the Games. In addition to Gustav Flatow, who had won first-place medals for Germany in the Athens Games of 1896 but rejected an invitation to make an appearance at Berlin, the list included three Austrian swimmers; Philippe de Rothschild, a Jewish bobsledder from France; and Herman Neugass, a promising sprinter from the U.S. Two Canadian-Jewish boxers announced their decision not to attend the Berlin Games in the most stark and revealing statement of all. “We would have been very (loath) to hurt the feelings of our fellow Jews, by going to a land that would exterminate them if it could,” declared the boxers, Sammy Luftspring and Norman “Babe” Yack.

The nation “that would exterminate them if it could” first put on the most lavish athletic spectacle in modern history to that point. The pageantry and propaganda attesting to the glories of the German state and “Aryan” ideal were mounted in the midst of the remilitarization of the Rhineland; they also appeared while Nazi police
were “cleaning up” the host city for tourists. This was a sweep that temporarily removed anti-Jewish signs from the streets and censored the most vicious racial references in the Nazi press; and in a gesture to foreign visitors, for three weeks Germany effectively rescinded its anti-homosexual laws. Yet at the same time the program of hospitality removed hundreds of Gypsies to a camp at the edge of Berlin. And even as the games went on, German engineers were supervising the construction of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp just 18 miles north of the city. It would be ready for use in the fall of 1936.

“The Nazi Olympics” engages the actual sporting competition principally through the breathtaking footage of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*. But it retains its focus by highlighting the stunning achievements of the African-American athletes (7 gold medals, 4 silvers, and 2 bronzes), then juxtaposing those stellar moments to the less-remembered participation by Jewish athletes in the Games of the Eleventh Olympiad. Before the Berlin Games, European Jewish athletes had garnered literally hundreds of medals in gymnastics, fencing, and weightlifting; Hungarian Jews had dominated Olympic fencing for decades. At Berlin, twelve Jewish athletes won medals. One, Samuel Balter, collected a gold medal, along with the rest of the U.S. basketball team. Another, Helene Mayer, a fencer, represented Germany. And even as the exhibit establishes her presence in Berlin as “Nazi tokenism,” it displays her, on film and in a still photograph, giving the Nazi salute, in the manner of all German medalists.

Add to Sam Balter’s the name of Herman Goldberg, a catcher on the American baseball team at Berlin, though baseball was only an exhibition event at the time. Place Sam Stoller and Marty Glickman—the two Jewish athletes removed from the sprint relay team—next to them and you have established important case studies in the history of athletics and assimilation. The experiences of the formidable Hungarian fencers and of such German athletes as Grete Bergmann—before Berlin—would also bear witness to the ways athletics, ideally, might modify traditional patterns of culture and social relations. That was not essentially Coubertin’s internationalist ideal, but no matter. For the notion of “muscular assimilationism” carried enormous weight among those who strove to move from margins to mainstream within their own countries.

That the Nazi Olympics embraced a body of thought that thoroughly—indeed viciously—ran counter to the aims of integrationists and assimilationists is a lesson that was taught in two ways. One was in the systematic exclusion of Jews and other “non-Aryans” from German sport. The other occurred when African-Americans triumphed in the Games. In response, *Der Angriff* (The Attack) editorialized, “If the American team had not brought along Black auxiliaries . . . one would have regarded the Yankees as the biggest disappointment of the Games.” Yet for a deeper understanding of the racial politics inscribed in sport, one does not have to quote the Nazi press. Listen to Dean Cromwell, one of the track-and-field coaches for the U.S. Olympic team in 1936: “It was not long ago,” he later wrote, “that his [the black athlete’s] ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle. His muscles are pliable, and his easy-going disposition is a valuable aid to the mental and physical relaxation that a runner and jumper must have.” Significantly, and not just ironically but in some sense tragically, Coach Cromwell played a critical role in
the decision to remove Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller from the U.S. relay team and to replace them with Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe. The Berlin Olympics was everywhere in testifying to rigid notions of “race.”

As the exhibition sadly demonstrates, the ideals of Olympism had no effect on Nazism, the rituals and spectacles of the Games were ruthlessly exploited to further the aims of the Nazi state, and officials like Avery Brundage, who had vouched for Hitler, had been as cynical as they were naive concerning such notions as the democracy of sport. While numerous scholars have engaged the subsequent twists and turns of Olympic ideologies and practices, down to our own time, and others have delineated the contours of racialist thought through their study of sport, what remains is the fact that Olympic authorities were clearly implicated in the promotion of the Third Reich.

In a set of panels that chronicles the aftermath of the Games, the exhibition aims us away from the Olympic Stadium and towards the Holocaust. Kristallnacht, “The Night of the Broken Glass,” when rioters torched more than 1000 synagogues and looted some 7000 Jewish businesses and homes, killing scores of Jews in the process, lay two years in the future. Thereafter, a parallel plan of action emerged: the close counterpart of German invasions of foreign territory were the Nazi policies of extermination. At the conclusion of the exhibit--after all the quotations and commentary on “racial” imposition and prohibition--a long panel asserts itself, and as a summary and projection of all that came before, it takes your breath away. On it stands a huge blow-up of a photograph of Auschwitz-Birkenau in winter, from a distance and from above: just a row of buildings in the falling snow. Below that stark rendering is a row of photographs, depicting eight young men in their athletic prime. Each picture is captioned in five lines. You read down and across as fast and as best as you can--that would be reckoned a “postmodern” impulse:

Alfred Flatow (1869-1942), then his cousin, Gustav Flatow (1875-1945) both first place finishers in gymnastics at the Athens Games, both died of starvation in the Theresienstadt ghetto; János Garay (1889-1944) a Hungarian fencer who won gold, silver and bronze medals in the 1924 and 1928 Games, died in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria; Dr. Oskar Gerde (1883-1943), gold medal fencer, 1924, deported from Hungary and died in Mauthausen; Attila Petschauer (1904-1943) winner of several team gold medals and an individual silver medal for Hungary in fencing, tortured to death in a Hungarian forced labor camp during the war; Werner Seelenbinder (1904-1944) barely missed a medal at Berlin; a Communist staunchly opposed to Nazism, he was later a member of a resistance group in Germany, ultimately arrested and beheaded for treason; Ilja Szrajzman (?-1943) a Polish swimmer, “one of tens of thousands of Jews who died from starvation, brutality, and disease in the Warsaw ghetto”; Johann Trollman (1907-1943), expelled from the German Boxing Association in 1933; he was one of an estimated 220,000-500,000 Gypsies (Sinti and Roma) who were also killed in the Holocaust.
A Final Word

An exhibit that is at once stunning and manifestly learned needs to be placed in context, especially in these times when historical authority is so vehemently contested. Beyond the temporary installation concerning the Nazi Olympics stands the multi-faceted collection of the Holocaust Museum which documents in detail the policies and programs effectively devised to liquidate European Jews as well as other peoples whom the Nazis deemed “inferior.” That is the most obvious point of reference. And to the credit of the curators, there is almost a seamlessness to the presentations. Both exhibitions speak to an ideology of difference; both address the means as well as the ends of Nazi hegemony, then of the terror of Hitler’s rule. Ultimately it is with insight and without sacrifice of historical nuance that the “Nazi Olympics” links that athletic spectacle to the many other dimensions of the Holocaust.

Photo credit: Beth Redlich, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Such a presentation of the past stands in sharp contrast to other museum displays (or non-displays in some instances) where the authority of the scholars and public historians who aimed to mount a thorough exhibition of fact and interpretation was challenged by special interest groups brandishing their own particular version of an event. The *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution is instructive in this regard. Document by document, detail by detail, the Air Force Association and the American Legion erased the original script of the installation. The controversial decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, which the first panel of historians had cast in all its political, military, and diplomatic complexity and addressed in terms of culture and morality as well as strategy, was reduced by veterans’ groups to nothing more than a patriotic act. Finally, the exhibition was cancelled, and all that remained on display at the Air and Space Museum was the fuselage of the aircraft.
itself. If the “Nazi Olympics” lends insight into the art and craft of public history, the Smithsonian controversy clearly illuminates the politics of historical representation.17

Writing in a somewhat different context about history and popular consciousness, Leon F. Litwack, has contended that “it is not enough for historians . . . to impart the facts. It is incumbent upon them to make people feel those facts, to make them see and feel those facts in ways that may be genuinely disturbing.” The most compelling presentations of history, Litwack continues, “explore different versions of reality, they deepen sensibilities, affect the comfortable, the complacent, and the indifferent, and make a difference in how people conceptualize, think about, feel (and even act upon) the past.” Just as the exhibit on “The Nazi Olympics” at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum speaks against the narrow conception of the past advanced by the spokesmen for the veterans’ groups and others who would dismiss context and consequence from our understanding of history, it engages Litwack’s expansive notion of history and memory. Ultimately, it is difficult to conceive of anyone emerging from the exhibit without a greatly “deepened sensibility” about the relationship between sport and politics, between the Berlin Games and the Holocaust.

Notes


4. The script for the exhibition, written by Susan Bachrach, is both expansive and sophisticated. The list of academic advisors includes George Eisen, James Gilbert,

5. See also, in this regard, the special issue on “The Modern Olympic Games: New Interpretations and Perspectives,” J. Thomas Jable and David K. Wiggins, eds., in Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport 67 (June 1996) 119-192.


8. Quotes are from the exhibition.


12. Quote from the exhibition.

13. Reflecting the influence of the academic advisors for the project, the exhibit treats “The Handshaking Myth” briefly and effectively. It documents popular perceptions at the time, then addresses the Olympic protocols that even Hitler had to deal with. For more on the subject, see Baker, Jesse Owens.

15. *Der Angriff* quote from the exhibition; Dean Cromwell and Al Wesson, *Championship Techniques in Truck and Field* (New York, 1941), 6. Glickman tells his story on one of the exhibit’s videotaped interviews; see also Marty Glickman, *Fastest Kid on the Block* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1996).

