The 1936 Berlin Olympics: From a Spark to a Flame

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The Olympic Games are not merely an event to which every four years the foremost athletes of the world are invited in order to thrill the thousands of spectators with their brilliant performances. They are far more a means of using sport as a binding link between the peoples of the world. The XIth Olympic Games have served this end nobly. Berlin was the meeting place of all peoples, and from there a unity was diffused without which neither peace nor happiness can ever be realized.

-Count Baillet-Latour

In a world dim and dismal after the shock of the Great War, a spark began in Western Europe. The small spark started as one of hope and peace, lighting the Olympic torch in the original host city of Olympia. Soon after arriving in the new host city of Berlin, however, it became apparent that this was not a flame of peace. Throughout the games the fire grew, fueled by conflicts of anger and hate. Eventually, with lack of compromise, the fire could no longer be contained and grew into the conflagration that came to be known as the Second World War.

The Spark

The VI Olympic games were supposed to be held in Berlin in 1916, but were cancelled due to the breakout of the First World War. In 1931, the IOC (International Olympic Committee) met to decide where the XI Olympics should be held. Barcellona was the intended choice. Unfortunately, the Spanish Civil War had recently broken out, preventing Spain from having the


honor of hosting. The committee turned to Berlin. The city already had stadiums from when they had been accepted to host fifteen years prior. After their defeat in the war, many people thought that this would be an exceptional way to reintroduce Germany to the public eye. Little did they know that only two short years later, a new figure would take the mantle of the German government. Thus throwing the world into a hectic flame that would turn the lives of millions of people upside down.

This man, fueled by a fire of anger and hate, rose to power under the pretense of being a friend to the nation. By the time anyone noticed the charade, it was too late. He had already seized control of the country and held influence over many people therein. The New York Times stated, upon Hitler being voted in, “Chancellor Hitler, who four years ago was not even a German citizen, [has] dictatorial powers unequaled in any other country, and probably unequaled in history since the days of Genghis Khan. He has more power than Joseph Stalin in Russia, who has a party machine to reckon with; more power than Premier Mussolini of Italy who shares his prerogative with the titular ruler; more than any American President ever dreamed of.” Most people in the world chose to turn a blind eye to Germany and their political views. Once the IOC chose to have Berlin host the next games, the world was forced to look directly into Hitler and his beliefs.

3 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, The Xith.


Sports and Politics

Adolf Hitler was one of the biggest advocates of the Olympic games. “The Games, he asserted, would contribute substantially towards furthering understanding among the nations of the world and would promote the development of sport among the German youth, this being in his opinion of vast importance to the welfare of the nation.” Most German athletes also shared these beliefs. They had national pride, just as the Americans, French, or the Italians did. They were there to represent their country and their beliefs, not Hitler’s hidden ideology.

The main conflicts came when countries chose whether or not they would compete. One major country missing, one that was not even invited to participate, was the Soviet Union. They had their own sports competition known as the Workers’ Olympics. They were not the only ones that chose not to participate and hold their own Olympics. There were also plans to hold a “People’s Olympiad” in Barcelona that would serve as an Anti-Olympics of sorts. There were about 6,000 competitors from 49 countries that registered to compete in both competitive and non-competitive events. Despite these plans, the eruption of the Spanish civil war caused the flame to flicker out before it could begin. For the U.S., however, tensions about the games were

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6 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, The XIth, 47.


8 Arnd Kruger and W.J. Murray, The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2003), vii-viii.

very high. The head of the AOC (American Olympic Committee), Avery Brundage, strongly suggested that the Americans participate in the games. Whereas Judge Jeremiah T. Mahoney, like 57% of the United States population, wanted nothing to do with the Olympics due to Hitler’s anti-semitic and anti-black beliefs and policies. In a book by Harvey Frommer about Olympic controversies he states, “Brundage claimed that the boycott plan was a Jewish-communist conspiracy even though a Gallup poll revealed that 57 percent of the American people favored a boycott.”

Despite the rumors and calls for a boycott, the American team competed at the games. Other countries that considered resisting Hitler’s flames of hate and staying out of the fire all together included: Great Britain, France, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and the Netherlands. All of them ended up in the heat of the conflict in the end regardless.

The Games

The Berlin games were the first for many things. They were the first games to be televised, as well as the debut of basketball, field handball, and canoeing. They were also the first games that had a torch relay from the original host city of Olympia, Greece. The course was 3,422 kilometers and took as many runners to complete it. Each person ran one kilometer before handing the torch to the next runner. (See Appendix A) The run was modeled after the original

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relay run in Athens. The American Holocaust Museum stated, “It perfectly suited Nazi propagandists, who used torchlit parades and rallies to attract Germans, especially youth, to the Nazi movement.” Finally, on August 1, the torch arrived in Berlin to start off the 1936 summer Olympics.

With the flame lit, the games had officially begun. They got off to a gloomy start, a very stark contrast to the last Olympiad, held in sunny Los Angeles. For the first day, and most days thereafter, it was overcast and rainy. Despite the weather, the first day consisted of track and field events, including trials and finals for the 10,000 meter, shot-put, high jump, and javelin throw for women. The shot put was won by Hans Woelke and was the first gold medal ever won by a German athlete. The second was won not long after by Tilly Fleischer in the javelin. Accordingly, the chancellor congratulated both of them publicly, and they were accepted by a roaring crowd. After the first day, Germany, the chancellor especially, was feeling very confident. One German newspaper stated that, “the proud swastika banner [was] the first Olympic victory flag on the Reich sports field to be hoisted. The cordial thanks of the Führer was the visible expression of admiration which the whole stadium gave them, and the pure joy which the Germans felt about this happy event.”

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16 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, The XIth.

17 Olympic.org.

18 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, The XIth.

The ‘pure joy’ which was felt by the Germans in those first hours was soon squandered when the Americans took to the field. On Sunday, Jesse Owens made his inaugural Olympic run in the 100 meter dash, making it to the quarter finals. Technically, he created a new Olympic record at 10.2 seconds, but, as the Baltimore News Post reported, it was “tossed out” on the account of ‘wind assistance.’ At the end of the day, instead of staying to congratulate the rest of the athletes just as he had the Germans, Hitler left, stating that “it looked as if it was going to rain.” The New York Times stated that, “…So delighted was Chancellor Hitler by the gallant fight that Long had made that he congratulated him privately just before he himself left the stadium. In fact, his eagerness to receive the youthful German was so great that the Fuehrer condescended to wait until his emissaries had pried Long loose from Owens, with whom he was affectionately walking along the track arm and arm.” He physically separated his ‘perfect race’ from the ‘impure’. He wanted nothing to do with Owens or anyone of color or different religion, and he would go to great lengths in order to avoid them all together.

Monday held more of the same, with Owens blazing past his American teammate Metcalfe. After the race, again, Hitler was nowhere to be seen. Even when the German Karl Hein won gold in the hammer throw, Hitler congratulated him in privacy rather than out in the open. When it was suggested to Hitler that it might be a good idea to accept Owens in public, the


dictator shouted his reply, “Do you truly believe that I will allow myself to be photographed shaking hands with a Negro?”

It was Tuesday, August 3, however, that held the most excitement and it came to be known as ‘Black Tuesday’ by Nazi journalists. This was the day that the Americans really showed their prowess. Owens and Robinson took the gold and silver in the 200 meter with Robinson equalling the previous Olympic record and Owens lowering it by .1 seconds. It was the long jump that gave the most anxiety. When competing, each contestant gets three jumps. When it was Owens’ turn, he was shown a red card on his first two jumps. In order to qualify, Owens would need to jump 23 feet 5.5 inches. Taking the advice of his German rival Lutz Long, Owens allowed himself two feet before jumping. Miraculously, he made the qualifications by 1/16 of an inch. That afternoon, Owens equalled his previous time in the 200 meters, but again it was not officially recorded because he was “assisted by a stiff breeze.” After the spectacular run, Owens again took to the long jump. On his last attempt, Owens jumped 26 feet 5 ¼ inches, whereas Lutz Long was shown a red card allowing Owens to take another gold. Finally, to add insult to Hitler’s injury, in the 800 meters the relatively unknown African-American, Johnny Woodruff, overtook the favored Italian, Mario Lanzi, winning the American team another gold.


27 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, *The XIth*.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.
The rest of the week was a slap in the face to Hitler. By now, Owens had become the darling of the crowd, regardless of what country they were from or their political standings. Owens took his third gold of the week in the 200 meter dash. There was, however, a surprising victory for Germany in the javelin which was quickly forgotten when the 400 meters was taken by another African American, Archie Williams. Following the events Wednesday, Joseph Goebbels stated, “We Germans won one gold medal, and the Americans three, two of them by a Negro. That’s a scandal. White people should be ashamed. But what does that matter over there in that country without culture.” Saturday saw Finland take the 3,000 meters and America take all the medals in the decathlon.

The week turned out very different from what Hitler was planning. Although Germany had managed to take the gold in boxing, cycling, gymnastics, handball, canoeing, and the equestrian events, there were many other places where Germany struggled despite Hitler’s plans. For example, Hungarian Jews, Miklos Sarkany and Karoly Karpati took gold in Water Polo, and Endre Kabos took gold in freestyle wrestling. Then, the American rowing team, who had been the underdogs, took the gold in their event. Many other competitors were able to edge out the Germans and destroy Hitler’s ‘perfect’ teams.

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32 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, *The XIth*.
34 Girardi, *Olympic Games*, 44.
The Flame

For the two weeks of the Olympiad, Hitler had managed to put on a mask and place a curtain in front of his whole regime. He was hospitable and peaceful. After two weeks of the façade, the mask was torn away. Only two days after the Olympic flame was put out, the head of the Olympic village, Captain Wolfgang Fuerstner, killed himself due to being dismissed from the German military. His only crime was that his grandfather was a Jew. Fuerstner was one of Hitler’s radical followers. He was an avid supporter of Hitler’s beliefs and he was exiled and persecuted because of the beliefs of a family member.

One of the most ironic things about the ending of the Olympics is that Hitler had planned to have a massive building erected in Berlin, big enough for 400,000 people. He also planned to have the original city of Olympia rebuilt. He had envisioned this as being the stage for many more Olympics for ‘pure’ people. This stadium would be his grand flame, burning for eternity. Instead, his flames were snuffed out and he was cut down by the Allies. His plan for the 1936 Olympics had gone horribly wrong. Instead of having people falling at his feet, wanting to be a part of his grand scheme, he was cut down and humiliated by the Jewish and African-American athletes.

These games set a mark for all future games. For many more Olympics to come, there would be boycotts and bans. There would be games held under flames of peace, and those that


would be held under the blazes of tumult and uncertainty. There were games, such as the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, where South Africa was invited to compete after a long ban, and the first time since the 1964 Olympiad that Germany competed under one flag. The games have a way of uniting people when politics are driving everyone apart. They are a huge influence on the world, athletic or otherwise, the 1936 games especially. We look back and see this as the first time the world saw Hitler, the first time that sports and politics clashed in such a violent way, tearing the world apart at the seams. In the present day, we can see this as the beginning of the end for Hitler. He stood by the Olympics. Stating quite the opposite of what the world was thinking, he said, “Sporting and chivalrous competition awakens the best human qualities. It does not sever, but on the contrary, unites the opponents in mutual understanding and reciprocal respect. It also helps to strengthen the bonds of peace between the nations. May the Olympic Flame therefore never be extinguished.” This lack of compromise, Hitler’s unyielding faith that these games would be everything he hoped and dreamed they would be, ended up failing him. It gave the exact amount of friction to set of the wildfire that was the second world war. With no compromise, the fire grew and ended up consuming the world and taking Hitler down with it. Our society could not be where it is today without these Olympics. This fire melted the world together so that it could be molded into the place it is today.

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38 Olympic.org.


40 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, The XIth, 6.
Appendix A

Route of the Torch Relay\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{41} Olympic.org.
This is a promotional poster used at the Berlin Olympics. Many just like these were hung all over the world. Including all over Berlin in place of Anti-semitic posters.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{42}\) Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, *The XIth*. 
Appendix C

The iconic image of Jesse Owens after his first gold medal win. Showing that there were very
different beliefs throughout the games as evidenced through all the different salutes seen
in this single photograph.43

43 Organization Committee for the Xith Olympiad Berlin 1936, The XIth.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:


New York Times article all about the opening ceremonies of the games. It has a few pictures but is mainly just information. It highlights all the major things that happened during the opening ceremonies and how every country entered and what signs or salutes were given and what the American side thought of it. I used this for quotes and also for general information about the opening ceremonies.


This is an article from New York about Hitler and his rise to the title of chancellor. It gives lots of facts and shows the main feeling of Americans about the new German leader. I used it for basic information and opinion.


This is an article that came from when Hitler was first put in as chancellor. It gave mean facts and viewpoints of Americans during this time. It gives a lot of basic information and was good when I was looking into how the world felt about Hitler before the games.


This is an article from the U.S. about the opening ceremonies of the games. It gives highlights of what happened in the opening ceremonies and how everyone entered and how they looked or saluted and how everyone reacted. I used it for a few picture reference and for basics.

A newspaper article from the 50th anniversary of the 1936 games. It included points of view of the games from different athletes that competed at the games, including Germans, Americans, French, and more. It was helpful for looking back and seeing how the games affected people.


This is an article from New York about the winnings of Jesse Owens from his debut qualifying runs all the way to all four of his gold medals. It highlighted all his times and how the crowd accepted him when he won. I used it when writing about him and the events that he participated in.


This is the Olympics official website. It has a lot of information about each and every one of the games since the first modern games in 1920, all the way up to the most recent one in 2018, and more information about all the upcoming games. It was really helpful for basic information as well as some more in depth descriptions of some of the events.


The official report of the 1936 games. It has every detail of the Olympic games in it, from wind speeds and weather conditions, to the exact times that were planned out to the second of the opening ceremonies. It was very helpful for everything I needed. It also had a timeline that stretched all the way back to 1931 when Berlin was originally chosen to host, so it was also really helpful for pre-games information. It also had tons of pictures and even music- like the Olympic hymn. It was all around just very, very helpful. I also got my two appendix pictures from here.

This is the second volume (and final) volume of the Official Olympic report given by the International Olympic Committee. Whereas the first volume only covered the beginning of the field events, this has every single other event, and the closing ceremonies. I used it for rules and information on all contestants and medal placings, as well as for general information about the events. These two books combined were my most helpful source and a really great find.


This is an autobiography written primarily by Jesse Owens, but was edited and compiled by Paul Neimark. Unlike Owens’ other autobiography, *Blackthink*, this one is much more personal and includes many letters between Jesse and other officials. It was very helpful to me to look at Jesse Owen’s perspective and I would highly recommend it even as just a casual reading book.


This is a newspaper from Berlin, Germany from the first day of the games that I translated. I used it for quotes and for information on how the Germans felt about the games. It was really cool to get an actual press release from Germany to see how they felt about it, unfortunately, I was not able to access anymore newspapers from the week from this particular source.


This is an article from the Baltimore News-Post from the opening day of the Olympics, highlighting the fact that Jesse Owens’ record was “Tossed Out.” With hints that they disagreed.
Secondary Sources:


This is a book that’s all about Adolf Hitler and his life. While aimed mostly towards children, this was a very helpful source into Hitler and had a nice section all about the Olympics. It was also nice that, because it was aimed towards a younger generation, it was somewhat easier to understand than some of the other more historically accurate books and articles I read while researching.


This was a video from January 2018. The clip I used (1:42-3:28) was mainly about the Pyeongchang Olympics this past winter, but had a lot about the effects of other Olympics on the world today. Which was helpful for my last section and the looking back aspect of it all.


Book about all the Olympic controversies throughout the history of the Olympics. It was really helpful to look at all the other things that had caused controversy in the Olympics in the past. And to see just what kind of effect the Olympics have on the whole world. I used this for quotes and information for my last section.


A book with general descriptions of all the games throughout the years. It had the winners of most of the events and the highlights for all the games from the first modern games all the way until the 1990s. I used this a lot for preliminary research and for quotes in my paper.


A book with in depth descriptions of all the games throughout the years and the conflicts within them. It focused mainly on the political, as opposed to the actual athletics, and how people reacted to every Olympics. I used this for quotes and for general descriptions.

This is an article all about every single Jewish athlete that competed in the Berlin Olympics, and their backgrounds. This was super helpful when it came to the Jews point of view. It was also helpful when I was researching Wolfgang Fuerstner, because it had a section on him as well. It also helped lead me to other people that were important in these games and their roles as well as more sources.


This is a book all about the History of the games. As the name implies. But not only that, it also has sections all about the most controversial games and games that were boycotted and why they were and how the games are important today and what makes them important. What makes them the grand event that they are today. It was really helpful for basic information, especially that on the topic of boycotts.


This was an article about the day Jesse Owen won his fourth gold medal in the space of two days. It also talked a bit about Jesse Owens’ life and his road to gold and was really good for basic information on him and what he did.


This is a biography of Captain Wolfgang Fuerstner (in German) all about his life from the very beginning to his military days all the way to his unfortunate untimely demise in 1936. This was really helpful for all information about the Captain and also gave some helpful insights into the games and how they were run, especially the Olympic village.


This is a book that was originally in German, but was published in English (I used the English version) all about every aspect of the Berlin games and what people thought of it and how it came to be, and just every little thing about it. I used it for quotes and for matters of opinion.

This is a book that's a basic narrative of the games. It was very helpful in that it gave a different perspective on the games, while still providing lots of helpful information about the people in it and all the events that happened.


This is a website about early television. It helped me understand the televising of the games including who did it and how. As well as the lives of those who did it and all the accomplishments they had other than this in their life.


This is a story about Jesse Owens’ coming to the Olympics as well as his time there and his time thereafter. It was a really good source for finding out what the Olympics were like for Owens and him alone. His struggles and personal triumphs that weren’t necessarily seen by the public.


This was an article from the University of New York on the people’s olympiad- the one that was supposed to be held in Barcelona but never happened. I used it for information on that and also the state of Barcelona during this time.


This is a news article from London about how Jesse Owens was snubbed not only by Hitler and the Germans, but by his own home country of the U.S. and how he got no presidential welcome or recognition and how they thought he should’ve gotten some sort of recognition based on the amazing athletic prowess he showed at the games.

This is the biography of Adolf Hitler and his life from 1889-1939. Stopping right before the true breakout of the war. I mainly used one chapter that was all about the games. It was really helpful because it included some key quotes and information I didn’t find anywhere else.


This website was great for all kinds of information on the games. I learned a lot about the torch run from here as well as the Jewish athletes that participated. It was also helpful for seeing how Hitler treated people during this time and what he did in order to put on his façade at the games. I used many pages from this website and it was very helpful.