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Antifascist Athletes? A Reappraisal of the 1936 Berlin Olympics

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Abstract

In *Olympia*, Leni Riefenstahl offered representations of idealized Aryan athletes and their democratic counterparts, including Jesse Owens. Her evocative images shaped historical memory and the historiography of the Berlin Games as either a German propaganda victory or a moment of athletic antifascist resistance. The notion of the Berlin Games populated with 'democratic' and 'fascist' athletes is largely ahistorical. Riefenstahl's fascist/antifascist dyad prompted scholars to ask questions about appropriate athletic behaviors, but it also required them to elide contrary histories, including Owens' own experiences of racial segregation in the United States. A more holistic view of the Games, that encompasses both the antifascist resistance to it and the ultimate decision of most athletes to attend, confounds any analysis that slips sportsmen and women into neat heuristic categories of fascist and antifascist and opens the door to the possibility of personal politics outside of the dyad of fascism/antifascism.

Keywords

Germany – antifascism – Berlin Olympics – sport – National Socialism

On 8 August 1936, *The Chicago Defender* published an article entitled, 'Owens "Takes" Olympics,' in which they trumpeted Jesse Owen's Berlin Games achievements. 'Owens is the god of the sports fans here. He has effectively demonstrated his superiority.' The article featured a full-length photo of the runner, smiling broadly. The caption read: 'Ohio State's brilliant athlete is without a

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doubt the most outstanding athlete ever to represent any country. . . . He has captured everyone in Germany but Hitler who has very conveniently avoided congratulating Owens.¹ Other African American newspapers, including the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal* published similar pieces that lauded Owens' victories as an attack on the Nazi theory of racial supremacy.²

A second series of articles covered Hitler's reaction to Owens' victory. Press accounts claimed that Hitler 'snubbed' Owens by refusing to shake his hand. The *Pittsburgh Courier* offered the most trenchant critique in an article entitled 'Adolf Hitler - Just Poor White Trash'. 'Hitler is an individual envious of talent, suspicious of high character, devoid of chivalry, bereft of culture, a cowering effeminate, who proved incapable of being a gentleman at the Olympic Games where prejudice and politics are traditionally taboo.'³ Similar articles from other African American newspapers, including *The Chicago Defender*, appeared across the country, and shaped interwar Americans' perspectives on the Games. Owens and the other American Olympians became the men that stood up to fascism.

Manichean reporting of Owens' victories provides a key vignette in work on the Berlin Games, mobilized to provide a heroic foil to the Olympics' Nazification. As Christopher Young observes, 'since Richard Mandell's first full treatment . . . Berlin 1936 has become a familiar shorthand for the evil of a deceitful regime and the perils of exposing sport to politics.'⁴ Scholars interested in the Nazi Games have produced two historiographic interventions since the 1970s. The first school argues that the Berlin Games were a stunning success for the Nazis and represented a global failure to oppose fascism. In 2006 alone, on the seventieth anniversary of the Berlin Games, three works came out that centered on the idea of Olympic Nazification.⁵ David Clay Large's *Nazi Games* shares this view.⁶ He notes that following Hitler's ascension

1 'Owens "Takes" Olympics,' *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 8, 1936.

2 For more information on the African-American presses response to the Berlin Games, see, David K. Wiggans, 'The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin: The Response of America's Black Press,' *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 54, no. 3 (1983): 278–292.

3 'Adolf Hitler – Just Poor White Trash,' *Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA), August 22, 1936.

4 Christopher Young, "'In Praise of Jesse Owens': Technical Beauty at the Berlin Olympics 1936,' *Sport in History* 28, no. 1 (2008): 84. See also, Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); and John Hoberman, 'Towards a Theory of Olympic Internationalism,' *The Journal of Sport History* 22 (1995): 1–37.

5 Christopher Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics: The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 2006); Guy Walters, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream* (London: John Murray, 2006); and Anton Rippon, *Hitler's Olympics: The Story of the 1936 Olympic Games* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Military, 2006).

6 David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2007).

to power numerous National Olympic Committees threatened to boycott the Games. The International Olympic Committee also contemplated moving the Games to a different location. In the end, the boycott movement collapsed. The German Olympic Committee successfully papered over the most pernicious racial prejudice of the regime and the Games received rave reviews from the international press. Germany won more medals at the Games than any other nation and Hitler used the legitimacy he gained from hosting to solidify his domestic support and to provide diplomatic cover to his near contemporaneous reoccupation of the Rhineland.⁷ As a response to the Berlin Games 'as nadir of Olympic history', other scholars focused on athletic resistance to fascism, including the triumphs of African-American and Jewish athletes, the international boycott movement, and the working-class sports movements.⁸

These historiographic approaches paint vivid but incomplete pictures of the Berlin Games. Each obliges scholars to align their historical subjects with the Games' Nazification or the antifascist resistance. In Christopher Hilton's *Hitler's Olympics: The 1936 Berlin Games*, Hilton sets out the Berlin Games as 'the most controversial sporting event in history,' and then throughout his engaging work, he works backwards to consider how people reacted to it.⁹ A similar teleological perspective influences popular histories and Hollywood dramas.¹⁰ The 2016 feature film *Race*, depicts Owens as a resister, and it is only one of the most recent popular histories, films, and memoirs that characterize athletes as being in Berlin primarily to stand up to the Nazis.¹¹

Of course, history was more complicated, and those historiographical approaches can only offer partial explanations of the sporting experiences in Germany. How does the Nazification of the Games help to explain the

7 See, Arnd Krüger and William Murray, *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

8 Young, 'In Praise of Jesse Owens,' 84. For a longer discussion of antifascist responses to the Berlin Games, see especially, Bruce Kidd, 'Canadian opposition to the 1936 Olympics in Germany,' *Sport in Society* 16, no. 4 (2013): 425–438; Mario Kessler, 'Only Nazi Games? Berlin 1936: The Olympic Games between Sports and Politics,' *Socialism and Democracy* 25, no. 2 (2011): 125–143; and Xavier Pujadas and Carles Santacana, 'The Popular Olympic Games, Barcelona 1936: Olympians and Antifascists,' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 27, no. 2 (1992): 139–148.

9 Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics*, 3.

10 Most recently, the forthcoming, Deborah Riley Draper and Travis Thrasher, *The Black Auxiliary* (New York: Atria Books, 2020), based on *Olympic Pride-American Prejudice*, directed by Deborah Riley Draper (2016; USA: Coffee Bluff Pictures, 2016), streaming video; and the popular: Daniel James Brown, *Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics* (New York: Viking Press, 2013).

11 *Race*, directed by Stephen Hopkins (2016; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2016), DVD.

so-called Hitler snub, which has subsequently developed its own scholarship.¹² It is unclear whether Hitler rejected Owens. What is clear is that after the Second World War, Owens said that Hitler never insulted him, and either gestured to him from the stands on a different day or even shook his hand. The African American middle distance runner, John Woodruff, backed up Owens' account in a 1987 interview in which he said, 'I do recall seeing Jesse while still on the track waving and exchanging salutes with Hitler in his box.'¹³ If Hitler had snubbed Owens, and indeed, he very well might have done, it is hard to say that Owens felt snubbed. He later wrote that Franklin D. Roosevelt was the one that insulted him. On 15 October 1936, Owens told a rally of African American republicans that, 'it was our president that snubbed me. The president didn't even send a telegram.' Owens was also upset that Roosevelt did not invite him to the White House to celebrate his victories.¹⁴

The need to create athletic fascists and antifascists further presents a teleological conundrum for scholars. It presupposes that athletes had or should have had strong opinions about their participation in the Games based on their being able to foresee the horrors of the war and the Holocaust before they occurred. It therefore it makes sportsmen and women into naïfs, heroes, nihilists, and martyrs and ignores the limited number of choices athletes had to pursue their careers. The antifascist/fascist framework does not explain the Jewish tourists who went to the Berlin Olympics, French politicians who funded participation at the Berlin Games and the Barcelona People's Olympiad, and the African American athletes who competed because they compared the Nazis treatment of the Jews to the treatment of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Instead it demands that scholars concentrate on sportsmen and women whose perspectives seemed prophetic, rather than focusing on the vast majority of sportsmen and women who went to Berlin to participate in the Olympics without too much consideration of the politics of the 1930s.

A fuller account of the Games must include the viewpoint of the athletes themselves who often did not characterize their activities as political at all. In this article, I attempt to unpack the origins of the teleological view of the Berlin Games and pinpoint some avenues forward for a rewriting of the Games from the perspective of sportsmen and women. In the first section, I show how scholars interested in the global workers sports movement and cultural theorists following Susan Sontag's analysis of fascist bodies constructed special

12 See, Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 211.

13 Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics*, 131–132.

14 'Text of Jesse Owens Address,' *Afro-American* (Baltimore), October 10, 1936.

categories of antifascist and fascist athletes endowed with political meaning. In the second part, I briefly detail the international boycott movement, stressing its origins inside of religious organizations and from athletic administrators rather than among sportsmen and women. In the third section, I show diverse athletic reactions to the boycott movement, most notably among African Americans. The final segment argues that most of the sportsmen who went to the Berlin Games ignored the political complications of their participation. On the boat over to Berlin, American athletes celebrated, some to excess, because they were excited to be participating in the Olympics. The pageantry impressed spectators from around the world and once the Games started, most of the international press reported on the Games in a completely typical manner. A more holistic view of the Games confounds any analysis that slips athletes into neat heuristic categories of fascist and antifascist and opens the door to the possibility of personal politics outside of that dyad.

Athletics, Aesthetics, and Fascism

Scholarly analyses of the interwar activities of athletes, the sporting press, and the international boycott movement rely on complimentary tropes of fascist and antifascist athletes. While this dyad certainly had its human embodiments, its prominence in the previous literature followed more directly from critical readings of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* as it did from any considered investigation of elite athletes.¹⁵ In 1975, Susan Sontag wrote 'Fascinating Fascism', in which she argues that Riefenstahl's cinematography and photography reflected a fascist aesthetic that connected and privileged muscularity, will, beauty, and power. As Sontag writes, 'National Socialism . . . stands for an ideal, and one that is also persistent today, under other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect'.¹⁶ Sontag's investigation of fascism's ideological aestheticization opened the door to further examinations of the way authoritarian states used the tools of biopolitics to control and shape their citizens bodies.

15 See especially, Brigitte Peucker, 'The Fascist Choreography: Riefenstahl's Tableau,' *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (2004): 279–297; Michael Mackenzie, 'From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia",' *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003): 302–336; Hans Barkausen, 'Footnote to the History of Riefenstahl's "Olympia",' *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1974): 8–12.

16 Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism,' *The New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/>, accessed October 21, 2020.

The literature on physical education in Germany and Italy borrowed from Sontag's work on fascist aestheticization to explore the ways fascist states used sports to transform their citizens into state tools, masculinize men and feminize women, promote regime legitimacy, and prepare their population for war.¹⁷ It also suggested that a contrary athletic opposition to 'fascist athletic movement' emerged in Europe's democracies and the United States. From these studies, two distinct 'types of athlete' materialized – the fascist athlete and the antifascist athlete. Thanks to Riefenstahl, these images have become an almost ubiquitous feature of the historic memory of the Berlin Games. Geraldine Biddle-Perry contends that Riefenstahl helped to create the fascist and antifascist athletic through her production of images of the Berlin Games. 'These two contrasting pictures,' she says, 'have come to dominate Olympic historical imagination . . . (and) other bodies . . . are less easy to recall.'¹⁸ She begins her own article with two images from the Berlin Games. The first 'is that of the idealized Aryan body of interwar fascism – muscular, tall, tanned, and blonde – posed and performed in massed synchronicity.'¹⁹ By contrast, the antifascist athlete was 'a single individual sprinting for the line – muscular, tall, brown-skinned – head back, eyes focused on the prize: a gold medal, a laurel wreath crown, and the raising of the Star-Spangled Banner.'

Most critical readings ignore the reality of the thousands of committed antifascist athletes who gathered in Barcelona in one of the most quixotic challenge to the Hitler's Games. In the summer of 1936, following the rise of Spain's Popular Front government, several thousand left-wing sportsmen and women organized a counter Olympics called the Barcelona People's Olympiad set to run a week before to the Berlin Games. Unlike the Berlin Olympics, the People's

17 Felice Fabrizio opened the field of totalitarian sports with his *Sport e fascismo: La politica sportiva del regime, 1924–1936* (Rimini, Firenze: Guaraldi, 1976) in which he examined the athletics politics of Mussolini. Following Fabrizio's foray scholarly interest in totalitarian regimes and sport exploded. In 1977, James Riordan authored a study of sports in the Soviet Union. Victoria de Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992) addressed how the Fascist regime reproduced female bodies and created cultures of consent for fascist rule through physical cultural programs. J.A. Mangan's *Superman Supreme: Fascist Body as Political Icon – Global Fascism* (London: Cass, 1999) looked at how Nazis bodies represented their power internally and internationally. All of these scholars considered the ways in which interwar totalitarian governments mobilized athletics; harnessed their citizens' biopolitical power in new ways; remade the bodies and behaviors of men and women; inculcated authoritarian values such as obedience, discipline, and order; and provided domestic and international legitimacy through mass spectacle.

18 Geraldine Biddle-Perry, 'Fair Play and Fascism: The development of British Olympic team uniforms, 1908–1948,' *Sport in History* 32 (2012): 231–232.

19 Ibid.

Olympiad was a ‘festival to reaffirm Olympic values’.²⁰ It would have included elite athletes, middling competitors, and complete novices. Competitors did not need to compete for a nation-state. Athletes signed up as political exiles, including athletes from Italy and Germany, and under the flags of regions including the Basque region, Alsace-Lorraine, and the Jews of Palestine. In addition, the Barcelona Games featured a variety of non-traditional sports including Basque Pelota, table tennis, and chess.²¹ Unfortunately for the attendees, the Spanish Civil War, which started on July 19, forestalled the beginning of the Olympiad. Many of the athletes who signed up to compete found their entry to Barcelona barred or ended up in Spain with nobody to compete against them. Some athletes that arrived early remained to fight with Spanish communists.

The Barcelona Olympiad was always framed in explicitly antifascist ways, and it attracted considerable attention from working-class sporting organizations in Europe and North America. Between March and June 1936, the Catalan Committee for People’s Sport reached out to a wide range of athletic associations around the world, hoping to attract both worker’s sportsmen and women and so-called bourgeois athletes.²² Their call received the most attention from a French left-wing French Popular Front organization opposed to the Berlin Games called the *Comité international pour le respect d’esprit Olympique* [CIREO; International Committee for the Respect of the Olympic Spirit]. The CIREO was founded in response to the failure of international boycott efforts in the United States. After hearing about the proposed People’s Olympiad, the committee quickly organized a series of events including a two-day conference and a popular sports day hosted by French Sports Minister Léo Lagrange.²³ Their events raised funds for the Olympiad, adding to the Prime Minister Leon Blum’s 500,000 franc (later expanded to 1,000,000 franc) allocation to support of French athletes attendance in Barcelona.²⁴ The left-wing press applauded

20 Pujadas and Santacana, ‘The Popular Olympic Games, Barcelona 1936,’ 143.

21 ‘Programa Esportiu de l’Olimpiada Popular: Barcelona, del 22 al 26 de juliol 1936,’ Archives of the Trades Union Congress, document number 292/808.91/4/17, Warwick Digital Collections, <https://cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/scw/id/2312>, accessed October 21, 2020.

22 Pujadas and Santacana, ‘The popular Olympic Games, Barcelona 1936,’ 141–142.

23 For more information on the *Comité international pour le respect d’esprit Olympique*, see James Stout, *The Popular Front and the Barcelona 1936 Popular Olympics: Playing as if the World Was Watching* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2020); and Ray Physick, ‘The Olimpiada Popular: Barcelona 1936, Sport and Politics in an Age of War, Dictatorship and Revolution,’ *Sport in History* 31, no. 1 (2016): 51–75. Kessler, ‘Only Nazi Games? Berlin 1936.’

24 ‘Press service. English edition, no. 6,’ June 1936, Archives of the Trade Unions Congress, document number 292/808.91/4/9, Warwick Digital Collections, <https://cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/scw/id/2274/rec/6>, accessed October 21, 2020.

Blum and Lagrange. Editors in the Communist paper *L'Humanité* described CIREO's sports day as a ringing success with 'beautiful performances' from the athletes.²⁵

The response was muted in other countries and the Barcelona Games' tight timeframe left most athletes with little time to make their plans to travel. With little time to prepare, the American Federation of Labor helped support a small contingent of eleven athletes who went to the Games excited to meet with 'leading Laborites' from around the world.²⁶ The Canadians sent only six competitors.²⁷ There were fundamental difference between sportsmen in Barcelona and those who went to Berlin. Drawing too close a comparison between the two groups obscures rather than reveals. A small number of the competitors in Barcelona were elite Jewish athletes who refused to compete in Nazi-Berlin, such as the Canadian boxers Sammy Luftsprung and Norman 'Baby' Yack, who went to the Barcelona Games because 'The German government is treating our brothers and sisters worse than dogs'.²⁸ The vast majority were workers rather than top-levels sportsmen: over 1500 came from France alone, and the organizers were prepared for thousands more from Spain, most affiliated explicitly with left-wing federations such as the *Fédération sportive et gymnique du travail*.

The athletes in Barcelona were mostly second-rate, particularly since the organizers explicitly created categories for non-elite competition, likely influenced by articles in *L'Humanité* or their working-class sports paper *Sport* that urged athletes to go to Barcelona to 'obtain the respect for the rules of the Olympics, violated by the Hitlerian . . . [and] to assure the safeguarding of sport, of liberty, of the equality in sports'.²⁹ In their explicit politicization of the competition, the People's Olympiad had more in common with the Spartakiad, an international sporting competition organized by the Soviet Union and the Red Sport International; or the Maccabiah Games, a Jewish Olympiad devised by the Maccabi World Congress. These competitions were secondary to the Olympic movement – intentionally so because they abjured explicit competition – whereas the modern Olympic Games mostly attracted the top athletes from around the world. While the Barcelona People's Olympiad represented a

25 'Devant trente mille spectateurs...,' *L'Humanité* (Paris), July 6, 1936.

26 'Letter; Delegation to the Barcelona People's Olympiad (list of members),' July 1, 1936, Archives of the Trades Union Congress, document number 292/808.91/4/2, <https://cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/scw/id/2258>, accessed October 21, 2020.

27 Kidd, 'Canadian opposition to the 1936 Olympics in Germany,' 433.

28 Ibid.

29 'Sauvons l'idée olympique,' *Sport* (Paris), October 30, 1935.

real countervailing athletic movement, it attracted the interest and inspired very few Olympians otherwise not engaged with the workers' sport movement.

An Athletic Antifascist Movement?

If the Barcelona People's Olympiad mostly reflected workers sport's rejection of the Nazi Games, there was an equally prominent antifascist movement among sports stakeholders in bourgeois sporting organizations. In fact, in many ways, the Barcelona People's Olympiad emerged because of the failure of the earlier American led international boycott movement. Beginning as early as 1933, influential stakeholders inside of sports bureaucracies and religious organizations in the United States, responding to Nazi Germany's unjust treatment of Jews, pushed for the American Olympic Association to boycott the Games. In their efforts to pressure the International Olympic Committee to move the Games, they battled against recalcitrant sports administrators in the United States and in Switzerland who privileged apolitical sport. The boycott debate raged inside of sporting organizations and in parliaments on both sides of the Atlantic; however, despite the righteousness of their cause, boycott advocate's concerns were not widely shared among the elite athletes.

In July 1933, the Denaturalization Law rescinded German citizenship for hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews, and the President of the U.S. Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, issued a public report that assured the American public that the IOC would never hold the Games in Berlin if the Germans interfered with 'the fundamental Olympic theory of equality of all races.'³⁰ The IOC reacted ambivalently to the Germany's new racial laws, but with alacrity to the possibility of an Olympics without the Americans. The President of the International Olympic Committee, Henri de Baillet-Latour, showed little private sympathy for Jews. 'I am personally not fond of Jews and of the Jewish influence,' he wrote to Brundage. 'I know that they (the Jews) shout before there is reason to do so.'³¹ Despite his personal prejudices, Baillet-Latour wielded the threatened American boycott in 1933

³⁰ Avery Brundage Collection at the University of Illinois, Avery Brundage to J.A. Miller, Apr. 15 1933. Also cited in Carolyn Marvin, 'Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games,' *Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 1 (1982): 81–105.

³¹ Avery Brundage Collection at the University of Illinois, Henri Baillet-Latour to Avery Brundage, November 3 1933.

to win promises from the German delegation to permit German and foreign Jews to compete at the Games.³²

The American Olympic Association remained divided over the merits of participation in the Berlin Games. Many officials supported a boycott, but others privately shared Hitler's suspicions about Jewish influence and wanted to limit their investigation of the Berlin Games to questions of prejudice in sport rather than in society. Brundage acknowledged that, 'the very foundation of the modern Olympic revival will be undermined if individual countries are allowed to restrict participation by reason of class, creed, or race', but he tempered his criticism of the Nazi regime's domestic politics. Brundage also considered the Jewish issue, which he called 'the Berlin Problem', a sideshow to the serious business of athletic competition. He viewed the boycott movement as a political ploy hatched by Jews 'clever enough to realize the propaganda value of sport.'³³ He worried that a strong opposition to the Berlin Games would rouse American antisemites.³⁴ His skepticism was widely shared by other athletic organizers. Evan Hunter, the secretary of the British Olympic Committee, wrote Brundage, saying, 'My own view is that we are pandering too much to the Jews.'³⁵

In May 1934, the IOC issued a pro forma report that announced that the organization was satisfied with German preparations for the Games, but Brundage still faced significant opposition. Gus Kirby of the Amateur Athletic Union, who proposed the non-certification of American athletes unless the Germans pledged to recruit and train Jewish athletes. To quell domestic critics, Brundage visited Nazi Germany as an official guest of the Games organizers, visiting numerous sporting facilities and clubs. He made only cursory examinations of the discrimination against Jews and met with only one German-Jewish athlete. The day after he returned to the US, he announced that the German Olympic Committee was living up to their promises.

32 'The German Olympic Committee has delegated the mandate, which had been entrusted to it, to a special Organizing Committee as follows: Dr Lewald, President; Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Dr. Ritter von Halt; Herr von Tschammer, President of the German Olympic Committee; Herr Sahm, Mayor of Berlin; Herr Diem, Secretary of the German Olympic Committee. 2. All the laws regulating the Olympic Games shall be observed. 3. As a principal, German Jews shall not be excluded from German teams at the Games.' Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics*, 15.

33 Avery Brundage Collection at the University of Illinois, 'Brundage to J. Sigfrid Edstrom,' August 29, 1935.

34 Avery Brundage Collection at the University of Illinois, 'Brundage to Kirby,' November 11, 1935.

35 Avery Brundage Collection at the University of Illinois, 'Evan Hunter to Brundage,' November 23, 1934.

Brundage's report flew in the face of an increasing number of first hand testimonies that made it clear that the Germans were still mistreating Jewish athletes.³⁶ As Hitler's racial agenda became clearer, a popular boycott campaign, called the 'Fair Play' movement, emerged across the United States and Western Europe. This movement attempted to influence the two main American Olympic organizations: the American Olympic Association and the Amateur Athletic Union. At the AOA, Brundage opposed the boycott movement, calling it a conspiracy, but many American and European sports leaders endeavored to rescind Germany's right to organize the Games or to force the Germans into accepting real inclusionary social policies.

The 'Fair Play' movement began after forty-six American religious, sports, civic, and political leaders formed the Committee on Fair Play in Sports. The Committee co-chairs were George Gordon Battle, a leading democratic lawyer from New York City, who fought against antisemitism in public life; and Henry Smith Leiper, a Presbyterian missionary and an officer in the World Council of Churches. Both Battle and Leiper were Protestants, but they wanted to ensure that Jewish athletes had the ability to participate in Olympic qualification and in the Games. Battle and Leiper saw that German Jewish athletes faced considerable challenges to competition, including substandard materials and facilities and official prohibition on activities. They not only had a better understanding of what was happening in Germany than Brundage, but they also viewed German's persecution of Jews as a threat to the humanistic ideal of Olympism and wanted to boycott Germany for their mistreatment of Jews in broader society rather than their mistreatment in sporting contexts.

Leiper's perspective also developed during numerous visits to Nazi Germany where he reported on anti-Christian and antisemitic discrimination. In August 1935, while visiting the recently closed American Church in Berlin, he wrote a letter that illustrated his worries about German society's Nazification. He was shocked to discover that so many 'Germans of the best sort are keen supporters of the Party.' A woman who worked at the Deutsches Frauenwerk, 'a genuine idealist', has swallowed the whole plot, 'and with complete gullibility began to think of every Jew as a menace.'³⁷ Germany was a terrorized country. His friend Julius Richter had been shattered. Fighting 'against the abuses of Hitlerism' transformed him into a 'disappointed and broken man.'³⁸ A pastor

36 Presbyterian Historical Society, Leiper Family Papers, RG 490, Box 9, Folder 28, Letter from Henry Smith Leiper to 'Dear Homelanders', August 30, 1935.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid

he visited hid his telephones under clothes before speaking to him in hushed tones, afraid of who might be listening.

Leiper's letters joined a flood of communications that awakened the world to the German mistreatment of their Jewish minority. German Jews wrote to their families overseas. Foreign press reported on the treatment of religious minorities. Anyone who read the German press, particularly the popular right-wing tabloid *Der Stürmer*, could find editorials that openly vilified Jews. As awareness of the German's growing prejudice grew, outrage intensified. In New York City, a crowd in Madison Square Garden hosted a mock trial of Hitler, convicting him of 'compelling the German people to turn back from civilization.'³⁹ The Committee on Fair Play in Sport's work formed a part of the larger anti-Nazi public discourse.

Their efforts appeared in newspapers, large and small; their advocates spoke on the radio; and they organized rallies around the world. Leiper played a prominent role. In a radio address on WAAF, in New York, on November 12, 1935, he staked out his, and the Committee's, principle objections to the Berlin Games, namely the mistreatment of Jewish athletes, but also and more broadly the rising climate of racial and religious intolerance, the widespread use of propaganda by the fascist government and its allies, and the politicization of sports in Germany.⁴⁰ For Leiper, the Berlin Games were bigger than the athletic contests; the Olympics had transcended the arena of sports and entered the moral realm. He understood that the Nazis would not fairly integrate German Jews into the sports system, saying, 'it is not possible to avoid discrimination in sport against a people who are slated for social, economic, and political extermination.'⁴¹ He equally saw how the Games had larger political, social, or cultural significance. The Nazis were propagandizing the Games. The government influenced the selection of athletes. His larger question was about how the rest of the world should react to the Berlin Games. He asks rhetorically:

Will the American teams be deluded by fair promises and the dissembling of obvious facts by those who are more interested in a single Olympic competition than in the vital welfare of the human race? That will be for them to say. It is a hard decision. I do not wonder that they hesitate, although many have already announced their personal determination to

39 Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics*, 20–21.

40 Presbyterian Historical Society, Leiper Family Papers, RG 490, Box 6, Folder 14, 'The Olympic Games in Berlin: A Question of Fair Play,' radio address by Henry Smith Leiper, November 12, 1935.

41 *Ibid.*

stay away from the Berlin Games. It has been said that they should not be asked to be martyrs to religious and personal prejudice. They are asked to embrace their opportunity to register a dramatic vote for those qualities in life and sport which Americanism, not to mention the Christian religion and the traditions of civilized culture, regards as paramount. If they so vote it will not be a meaningless plebiscite . . . but an exercise of highest privilege – his franchise in the moral universe where he can cast his vote for eternal principles of right and justice or for compromises, dictated by expediency and the natural desires for temporary enjoyment of a questionable privilege bought at the expense of the inalienable rights of certain of his fellow men.⁴²

The radio copy does not indicate how the public responded to Leiper's remarks. It is hard to imagine that his words did not influence many hearts and minds.

The Committee also targeted smaller, but nonetheless influential constituencies, and in doing so hoped to spread their message to key sports stakeholders. An unattributed response from the Committee appeared in the *Harvard Crimson* on November 26, 1935. The author challenged a previous article written by Harvard's Athletic Director William J. Bingham, who defended American participation in Berlin. They noted Bingham's statement that 'Germany has nothing whatsoever to do with the management of the Olympic Games.'⁴³ They thoroughly demolish this argument by quoting one of the key sports philosophers in Nazi Germany, Bruno Malitz. In *Die Leibesübungen in der nationalsozialistischen Idee*, Malitz outlines the German's opposition to international competition, noting that he saw no value in letting 'Frenchmen, Belgians, Polaks, and Jew-Niggers' compete in Germany.⁴⁴ 'We Nazis see no value whatsoever in having Negroes travel to Germany and meet our "finest" in competition.' Nevertheless, even Malitz notes, 'You will ask us now, "Don't you want any Olympic Games in a Nazi state. We answer yes, as a matter of fact, we consider them due to international propaganda reasons, as necessary.' Malitz goes on to clarify that 'the only difference [between the Berlin Games and other Olympics] will be that no private clubs or associations will select the team in the name of Germany.... The state will name the teams.'⁴⁵ For the author of the *Harvard Crimson* piece, these comments align with what they

42 Ibid.

43 'Committee on Fair Play in Sports Issues Rebuttal to Bingham's Position,' *The Harvard Crimson*, November 26, 1935.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

see happening in Nazi Germany as a damning indictment of the state of Fair Play ahead of the Olympics: Racism. Discriminatory athletic organizations. Government propaganda. State interference in competition. He finishes with a dire warning. 'We are afraid that should our athletes set foot on Nazi land they will be contaminated by the doctrines which have set books on fire and inspired racial and religious riots. We don't want them to come home to sow the principles of hatred'.⁴⁶

On 8 December 1935, the two most influential American sport officials, Avery Brundage and Jeremiah Mahoney, the head of the American Athletic Union, marshalled their forces to vote on the question of American participation in Berlin. Mahoney carried the day with the district governing bodies (i.e. those closest to the level of athletic participation) but the affiliated bodies, except for the Jewish Welfare Board, voted with Brundage. The boycott failed and leading member of the press, even those journalists previously affiliated with the boycott movement, shifted to back American participation.⁴⁷ Back room debate and the insider politics brought about the boycott's failure, reflecting the elite ownership of sports in the United States. Patrician athletic organizers led the boycott movement and their patrician counterparts defeated it. Their concerns did not reflect the conversations of athletes in colleges, in amateur associations, and in professional leagues who had complex feelings about the boycott. Many athletes reported only a cursory understanding of the boycott movement. Most expressed ambivalence to competing in Nazi Germany, unsure whether playing there meant endorsement of the German political system, especially in the case of African Americans who already competed in a racist regime. In a problematic mail poll conducted by Brundage of 139 college athletes of Olympic caliber, only one supported the boycott.⁴⁸

Three days after the vote, at Brundage's direction, the American Olympic Association issued a twenty-page pamphlet entitled *Fair Play for American Athletes*. In it they argued, 'The Olympic Games were revived in order to encourage the development and extension of international amity and good will in a world filled with intolerance, persecution, hatred, and war. The great success of the Games is due to the precautions taken to guard them against entanglement in political . . . controversies. To invoke them in the present Jew-Nazi altercation would completely invert [their] object'.⁴⁹ A combination of opinion pieces, lists of facts, and news articles, each pamphlet section offers a new and occasionally

46 Ibid.

47 Wiggans, 'The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin,' 282.

48 Marvin, 'Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games,' 94.

49 American Olympic Committee, *Fair Play for American Athletes* (N.p.: The Committee, 1935).

contradictory explanation for why the United States should participate in the Games. How could the American athletes boycott a German Games when they were willing to compete in and against other countries with questionable human rights policies? 'Russia has abolished all forms of religious worship . . . War has broken out between Italy and Ethiopia . . . The British have failed to end the caste system in India.'⁵⁰ They even argued that George Washington would have warned against meddling in the internal affairs of other nations. The pamphlet finishes with a list of the American Olympic Association members, whose aims were 'patriotic, educational, and altruistic.'⁵¹

As the Games approached, even as opposition inside of American sporting organizations diminished, the debate continued in Europe. On July 13, Oliver Locker Lampson, asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, to confirm the good treatment of minorities in Germany and requested that the government ban British travel to Berlin if the persecution of those minorities revived.⁵² A little more than a week later, Geoffrey Mander asked for assurances that the 'persecution of the Jews would not immediately recommence after the Games.'⁵³ Eden scoffed but many shared Mander's justifiable concerns and boycott movements influenced governments around the world. The Czechoslovakians publicly declared that they were not going to send a team but in 1936, their Olympic Committee changed its mind and sent a team. The Swedish government faced domestic pressure from a prominent local boycott movement but also ultimately sent a team. Even the ostensibly pro-Nazi government of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil equivocated before sending two teams.⁵⁴

The British parliamentary debates in 1936 highlight how the boycott movement expanded as early concerns with German treatment of Jews were joined by European governments' worries about whether the militaristic fascist regime deserved to host an international competition based on goodwill and peace between nations. On 7 March 1936, the German military reoccupied the Rhineland, but many prominent boycott advocates, including Leiper, justified this rearmament because they believed that Germany had been badly mistreated at the Versailles Conference.⁵⁵ By contrast, British parliamentarians were using the Berlin Games as an excuse to debate armed deterrence and

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² House of Commons Debate, 13 July 1936, vol. 314, col. 1640.

⁵³ House of Commons Debate, 22 July 1936, vol. 315.

⁵⁴ Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics*, 29.

⁵⁵ Presbyterian Historical Society, Leiper Family Papers, RG 490, Box 6, Folder 14, 'The Olympic Games in Berlin: A Question of Fair Play,' radio address by Henry Smith Leiper, November 12, 1935.

appeasement. Oliver Locker-Lampson wondered whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer was aware that British athletes and tourists going to Berlin 'will assist German finance to the extent of several million pound . . . and that such currency is now being used to subsidize German armaments.'⁵⁶ In May 1936, the prominent Labour parliamentarian Hugh Dalton brought up the Games in the context of German expansionism. He said:

we cannot put Europe, particularly Central Europe, out of our minds, and there have been rumours of impending possible acts of violence towards Austria or Czechoslovakia which are persistent and plausible enough to disturb us. We are told by some that peace is safe, at least until after the Olympic Games, and I suppose that is something to be thankful for, but meanwhile German re-armament is proceeding rapidly, remorselessly, menacingly.⁵⁷

On 22 July 1936, Brigadier General Howard Clifton Brown pointed out that the stadiums built for the Games were going to be 'permanently used for military or air purposes'.⁵⁸ These British critics were advocates of British rearmament in face of the German threat. Their opponents – namely William Morrison, 1st Viscount of Dunrossil – were supporters of appeasement. Their arguments confounded the political divisions of the decade because they split the Labour Party into pacifist and interventionist wings and illuminated divisions between British Liberals and Conservatives.

An Antifascist Athlete?

Boycott advocates also differed over whether participation in the Games signaled broader support for the German regime. If the Germans planned on transforming the Olympics into a propaganda exercise, did sending athletes convey some support for that exercise? In the British Parliament, MP Geoffrey Mander asked for assurances that the Germans did not intend to use the Games 'for the purposes of political propaganda and as implying recognition and support for Nazi Germany.'⁵⁹ Many popular sports dailies around the world lamented the Berlin Games as a propaganda coup for Hitler. In an article entitled 'Fair Play', dated 1 December 1935, the popular, French left-wing sporting journal *Sport*

⁵⁶ House of Commons Debate, 23 March 1936, vol. 310, col. 887.

⁵⁷ House of Commons Debate, 6 May 1936, vol. 311, col. 1714.

⁵⁸ House of Commons Debate, 22 July 1936, vol. 315, col. 417.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, col. 416.

argued forcefully against the Berlin Olympics, telling their readers that ‘the goal of Hitler’s government is to make the Olympic Games into a grandiose demonstration in favor of fascism The Olympic Games must not serve as a pretext for the political manifestations of a country where fraternity and liberty have been massacred and where only the barbarism of the regime remains.’⁶⁰ However, the boycott movement was a contested political campaign even at the time. The existence of antifascist discourse inside of the halls of parliament and in the press does not necessarily indicate its ubiquity in locker rooms.

The presence of the international boycott movement raises questions about what it means to be an antifascist or fascist athlete but contained in those problems are a host of rather complicated disputes. How much did the boycott damage the Nazi regime? Did the athletes in Berlin a priori give support to the fascist regime or could their presence undermine it? As Owens’ life shows, the experience of athletes confounds easy categorization as fascist or antifascist. Owens is the archetypal antifascist athlete, but his antifascist credentials are hard to establish. His antifascist bona fides only become visible when other people mobilized his achievements to serve their own antifascist agendas. Owens was not alone in evincing an unsatisfactory apoliticism – it was probably the predominant opinion among sportsmen and women, and it was the official position of the International Olympic Committee. The opinion of ordinary athletes remains difficult to ascertain despite voluminous coverage of the Olympic Games in the sporting press.

A series of oral interviews, collected by the LA 84 Foundation, conducted in 1988, illustrate American participant’s range of responses to the Berlin Olympics. Most reactions reflected a normative view of the Games as a place of international comity and friendship. The javeliner Malcolm Metcalf recalled that the Olympics were more than sport: ‘the fraternization and the friendships you make I think that is the most important aspect of it as far as I’m concerned.’⁶¹ Joanna de Tuscan Harding, an American fencer, reminisced that we ‘were all friends regardless of their political inclinations or the inclinations of their country. I felt no political or financial motivation; just people to people, peer group to peer group, you know, on their own level of understanding—which is wonderful.’⁶²

60 ‘Fair Play,’ *Sport*, 11 December 1935.

61 LA 84 Foundation Olympian Oral History Project Archive, Malcolm Metcalf, interviewed by George Hodak (February 1988), <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll11/id/220/rec/43>, accessed October 21, 2020.

62 LA 84 Foundation Olympian Oral History Project Archive, Joanna de Tuscan Harding, interviewed by George Hodak (April 1988), <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll11/id/208/rec/28>, accessed October 21, 2020.

Indeed, adventure and a healthy competitive spirit drove most of the athletes who left for the Games excited to participate. If they were aware of the international boycott movement, their excitement overwhelmed any trepidation they felt towards the competition and even afterwards many retained strong positive feelings towards Germany and the Germans. Simone Schaller Kirin was an American hurdler who remembered the boycott debate. She recalled: 'There was controversy in 1936 as to whether they would even send a team over because there was so much talk of war in Germany and overseas. We really didn't know . . . and it was quite controversial at the time'.⁶³ If they were aware of the boycott movement, and not all were, ambivalence to it was probably the most common response. Gordon B. Adam, an American rower, responded that 'We, as athletes, or at least on my part, didn't think much about the political aspects.'⁶⁴

Only a few of the athletes seemed to think deeply about whether their participation amounted to support for Nazism. The few athletes that addressed this issue explicitly arrived at it after community pressure, and none of the athletes interviewed experienced any explicitly negative interactions with German athletes or fans during the competition. The American basketballer Frank Lubin remembered that 'Everybody was warning us about going to Nazi Germany,' he said, 'but we didn't think anything about that. Everything was so beautifully arranged. We could see nothing except the flags'.⁶⁵ The anti-semitism, so troubling to boycott advocates, with its very real consequences for German sportsmen, barely surfaced in these interviews. Of course, the German government attempted to keep its more pernicious policies invisible. All the same, a few athletes, including Lubin, remember seeing overt signs of anti-Jewish sentiment. Lubin saw anti-Jewish signs in stores after the Games.⁶⁶

63 LA 84 Foundation Olympian Oral History Project Archive, Simon Schaller Kirin, interviewed by George Hodak (August 1988), <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll11/id/215/rec/34>, accessed October 21, 2020.

64 LA 84 Foundation Olympian Oral History Project Archive, Gordon B. Adam, interviewed by George Hodak (May 1988), <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll11/id/34/rec/2>, accessed October 21, 2020.

65 LA 84 Foundation Olympian Oral History Project Archive, Frank Lubin, interviewed by George Hodak (May 1988), <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll11/id/217>, accessed October 21, 2020.

66 LA 84 Foundation Olympian Oral History Project Archive, Frank Lubin, interviewed by George Hodak (May 1988), <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll11/id/217>, accessed October 21, 2020.

Sportsmen and women around the world responded in similar ways to the Games. Canadian sprinters Tom Ritchie and Bill Christie, who attended the People's Olympiad in Barcelona, would have 'gone to Berlin if given half the chance' and in fact tried to join the Canadian team headed to Berlin, hurrying to Paris to meet them before their train left.⁶⁷ While the decision to travel to Berlin was easy for many, even for those with qualms, the prestige of the Olympics generally outweighed any political concerns. In fact, elite athletes' testimonials highlight that for many athletes, even those aware of the boycott movement, neither participation in the Berlin Games nor boycott were obvious solutions. Jewish participation in the Berlin Games presents particularly thorny questions. How should we think about Helene Mayer, the German-Jewish fencer, who competed for Nazi Germany and even gave a Hitler salute on the medal podium? She later resettled in the United States and defended her participation saying it was necessary to save her family from persecution.⁶⁸ The existence of many Jewish athletes at the Games suggests the multiplicity of possibilities. As Marty Glickman later said, at the opening of an exhibit about the Games at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, he did not take Hitler seriously before the Games: 'I thought of Adolf Hitler as here today, gone tomorrow.'⁶⁹ He also did not feel much pressure to boycott the Games. 'Not one organization, not my rabbi, not my Jewish friends, not one member of any organization . . . nobody said, Marty, "don't go," including my folks.'⁷⁰

The decision to compete in the Berlin Games involved a balancing of factors including personal politics, community pressure, and the desire to compete. Prominent African American leaders encouraged black athletes to join the international boycott movement, equating resistance to Hitler with opposition to racism worldwide. The Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, Walter Francis White, wrote a personal letter to Owens, asking him to back the boycott movement. 'The issue of participation in the 1936 Olympics, if held in Germany under the present regime, transcends all other issues. Participation of American athletes, and especially those of our own race which has suffered more than any other from American race hatred, would, I firmly believe, do irreparable harm.'⁷¹

67 Kidd, 'Canadian opposition to the 1936 Olympics in Germany,' 433.

68 Franklin Foer and Marc Tracy, *Jewish Jocks: An Unorthodox Hall of Fame* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012), 59.

69 'The Silence Heard Round the World,' *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1996.

70 Ibid.

71 Library of Congress (082.00.00), NAACP Collection, 'NAACP Secretary Walter White to Jesse Owens concerning the 1936 Olympic games,' December 4, 1935.

However, contrary to the image offered by many postwar popular histories, African American athletes experienced private ambivalence, even when they evinced a more public opposition to Germany. Owens expressed no interest in the politics of Nazi Germany. John Woodruff, gold medalist in the 800 meter, claimed he had not heard ‘anything about a boycott or an attempt of a boycott until after we sailed.’⁷² If they had heard of the boycott movement, many African American athletes wondered what the difference was between interwar German antisemitic policies and Jim Crow.⁷³ In the run-up to the Olympics, black athletes faced discrimination from their own Olympic Committee at a trial in College Park, Maryland, when four runners were prohibited from competing with whites. Instead, the Olympic trials organizers gave them special passes onto the next round of competition. The black press howled for American Olympic officials to do more but since the runners were not disadvantaged Olympic officials did nothing. African American athletes were also as susceptible as whites to Nazi antisemitic propaganda. As David Wiggins argues in ‘The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin: The Response of America’s Black Press,’ for many black athletes, ‘merely identifying with the sufferings Jews had experienced was not enough to warrant a boycott of something as important as the Olympics, particularly when the Jews had made no protest about lynching and other barbarities inflicted on black Americans.’⁷⁴ Most black athletes did not have the option to not compete in a racist regime – they competed under discriminatory policies in the United States and saw little difference in doing so in Germany.

Antifascist Alternatives?

The boycott movement ultimately failed to convince the Olympic committees of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Each sent sportsmen and women to Germany. Nor did the boycott movement win over large

72 ‘The Silence Heard Round the World,’ *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1996.

73 A sizeable literature points to the influence of American politics on the Nazi’s antisemitic laws. See especially James Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Edward Westermann, *Hitler’s Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars: Comparing Genocide and Conquest* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016); Carroll Kakel, *The American West and the Nazi East: A Comparative and Interpretive Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

74 Wiggins, ‘The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin,’ 282.

numbers of elite athletes who competed despite the movement's best efforts to convince them to stay home. At the same time, boycott advocates inability to win over any major National Olympic Committee did not necessarily mean its failure. The threat of the boycott spurred Germany's top sportsmen into action and the Nazis' *Reichsportsführer* [Reich's Sports Leader] Hans von Tschammer und Osten strongly urged Hitler to rescind restrictions on German Jewish participation. In fact, the 'Fair Play' movement achieved other notable successes. The German regime also felt compelled to hide away temporarily the outward signs of their antisemitism. Ubiquitous 'Jews not welcome here' signs disappeared out of shop windows. Although these changes were at best temporary and mostly superficial, they represented one of the few occasions when the Nazi regime felt obliged to change their racial agenda in the face of international criticism.

The fragmentation of the European sporting world into rival politicized Olympics – with socialist athletes in Spain and their conservative counterparts in Berlin – could have created the very categories of fascist/antifascist athlete later envisioned by Riefenstahl and others, but the failure of the Barcelona People's Olympiad meant the world's most prominent athletes travelled to Germany. Once the Games began in earnest, the Nazis political efforts frequently disappeared, replaced by the drama of the events. In 'France: Liberty, Equality, and the Pursuit of Fraternity,' William Murray illustrated a French press largely untroubled by the German politicization of the Games, with writers from the left (*Marianne*), center (*Le Jour*) and right (*Figaro*) 'urging concern but no action.'⁷⁵ The reaction of the extremely influential sports daily *L'Auto*, run by the conservative Henri Desgranges, typifies the press' response and probably represented the views of the greatest number of French sportsmen. The paper's editors were originally quite skeptical of French participation in Berlin – editor-in-chief Jacques Goddet was strongly opposed – but the paper's editorials became increasingly supportive as the spring edged closer to the summer. Five days before the Games, the paper published an article that celebrated the air of festivity that reigned over Berlin. They told their readers that, 'The walk around the main arteries of the city was a feast for the eyes. The Olympic path, which stretches from the Imperial Palace to the Olympic Stadium, is very successful. I do not know how many draperies flutter in the

75 William Murray, 'France: Liberty, Equality, and the Pursuit of Fraternity,' in *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s*, ed. Arnd Krüger and William Murray (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 95.

wind. The effect is very moving and at night all the drapes and the garlands are illuminated. It is really a magnificent thing.⁷⁶

Despite the prominence of the boycott movement and the workers movement in the historiography of interwar sports, there is little evidence that elite athletes viewed participation as akin to sponsorship of the Nazi regime. A few Jewish athletes took stands against the Berlin Games, including the Austrian national record holding swimmer Ruth Langer, who said ‘We do not boycott Olympia, but Berlin.’⁷⁷ Many other Austrian Jewish swimmers, the Dutch boxer Ben Bril, the American athlete Lillian Copeland, and the American swimmer Janice Lipson, joined Langer in principled opposition to the Berlin Games. Most world record holding runners, swimmers, and jumpers from the major democracies, including Jewish athletes like French swimmer Alfred Nakache, went to the Games to represent their countries. A few Jewish athletes competed in both the second Maccabiad of 1935 and in the Berlin Games, including the Austrian sprinter Alfred König, and the Polish swimmer Ilja Szrajbman.

For many athletes, the chance to participate in the Games was cause for celebration after a lifetime of practice and sacrifice. On the way over to Germany, the American Olympic team celebrated almost every night. One American Olympian, Eleanor Holm, partied so much that Brundage sent her home. The 23-year-old Holm remembered a chaperone telling her that it ‘was time to go to bed. God, it was about 9 o’clock, and who wanted to go down in that basement to sleep anyway? So, I said to her: “Oh, is it really bedtime? Did you make the Olympic team or did I?” I had had a few glasses of Champagne. So, she went to Brundage and complained that I was setting a bad example for the team.’⁷⁸ A team doctor later claimed Holm was suffering from alcohol poisoning. Brundage ejected her from the team even after two hundred other American Olympians signed a petition to keep her.

In Berlin, the best evidence shows that most sportsmen and women subsumed their political desires into the overriding Olympics’ apoliticism. There were undoubtedly people who viewed the Games politically, but most avoided outward political demonstrations because of their own discomfort or because of their national federations’ rules. Hilton’s description of the parade of nations illustrates the equanimity of the athletes, who responded to Hitler’s dais with a range of respectful gestures, and the cheers of the crowd. When

76 ‘A cinq jours des Jeux Olympiques déjà Berlin a pris un air de fête,’ *L’Auto* July 27, 1936.

77 ‘Ruth Langer Lawrence, 77, Who Boycotted the ‘36 Olympics,’ *New York Times*, June 6, 1999.

78 ‘Eleanor Holm Whalen, 30’s Swimming Champion, Dies,’ *New York Times*, February 2, 2004; ‘Eleanor Holm Jarrett Dropped from Olympic Team for Breaking Training,’ *New York Times*, July 24, 1936.

the French athletes arrived in the stadium, under the direction of the French Olympic Committee, they raised their right arm and gave the Olympic salute, a salute with a straight right arm raised at an angle that shared similarities with the Nazi salute. The German crowd went wild – the applause for the French team second only to the applause given to the home team. The American team famously refused to dip their flag, much to the chagrin of the crowd, but the US team has always done so and did not keep their flag raised only or specifically in Nazi Germany.

There is little evidence of negative interactions between athletes from fascist and non-fascist states. On the soccer field, the Americans complained about the rough treatment they faced from the Italians. The Italian midfielder Achille Picinni received a second yellow and the referee ordered him off the field, but he refused. ‘The player wouldn’t go, the Italians jostled the referee and, intimidated he let the game continue . . . Three times the referee ordered Picinni off and three times he stayed. “A half dozen Italian players swarmed over the referee, pinning his hands to his sides and clamping hands over his mouth.” Italy won 1-0.’⁷⁹ The Americans protested but the result stood. This confrontation does not fit neatly into the fascist/antifascist dyad because, while the aggressive athletes were Italian, the referee was German.

Athletes’ interactions with their rivals highlighted the friendliness of competition, even among international stars. The most famous Olympic friendship was Luz Long and Jesse Owens’, which blossomed at the Berlin Games and continued until Long was killed during the Second World War. The aptly named German long jumper Luz Long’s story is well known – he offered a dejected Owens advice about how to avoid disqualification, encouraging him to jump from an imaginary line a few inches before the line. Owens and Long traded jumps in the long jump finals with Owens winning the gold and Long winning the silver. Of their interaction, Owens remembered ‘this wasn’t two enemies talking . . . but two competitors trying to beat each other in fair play . . . Long gave me the toughest fight of my life . . . When I broke the world record, he was the first to congratulate me. It took a lot of courage for the German to do such a thing with Hitler in the stands. We became fast friends.’⁸⁰ Although they never saw each other after Berlin, their friendship survived after the Games as an epistolary one. Their shared interest in racing and their fairness as athletes overcame the difference of their races and the strict racial ideology of the German state that Long served. No two athletes perhaps better represented the avatars of fascism and antifascism but in Long’s last letter to Owens, Long

79 Hilton, *Hitler’s Olympics*, 133–134.

80 ‘From the Sidelines with Sheep Jackson,’ *Call and Post*, January 25, 1964.

asked the American to tell his son Karl ‘what times were like when we were not separated by war. I am saying—tell him how things can be between men on this earth.’⁸¹

Although many journalists in Germany knew about Hitler’s poor treatment of German Jews, the press reports from the democratic powers largely applauded the Germans for their organizational efforts following the Games. The Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* Berlin Bureau Chief Frederick T. Birchall wrote glowing coverage of the Olympics. His correspondence describes the opening ceremony as ‘These Olympic Games have had an opening notable even beyond expectations, high as these were. They seem likely to accomplish what the rulers of Germany have frankly desired from them, that is, to give the world a new viewpoint from which to regard the Third Reich: It is promising that this viewpoint will be taken from an Olympic hill of peace.’⁸² Birchall also had positive comments about the earlier German Winter Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. He may have been speaking a little more tongue in cheek when he said that foreign visitors to Germany would return home ‘averring that Germany is the most peace-loving, unmilitaristic, hospitable, and tolerant country in Europe.’ They would think that ‘all the foreign correspondents stationed here are liars.’⁸³

Similar reports issued from newspapers in France, the UK, and all-around Europe, which acknowledged Germany’s accomplishments. In the conservative *Le Matin*, on August 18, 1936, a front-page editorial claimed the Germans rediscovered the Olympic spirit abandoned by the democracies that placed too much emphasis on decadent pleasure. ‘Without a doubt,’ it read, ‘the Germans observed the Olympic spirit If Olympus has been lost, Berlin has found it.’⁸⁴ The author also lauded the way the Germans competed. The British were hypocrites – they claimed to be amateurs but practiced the most shameful professionalism. Unlike the Americans and the Japanese, the Germans did not need to call upon blacks or Koreans [a reference to Sohn Kee-Chung, the Korean marathoner who won the gold medal for the Japanese in Berlin], but ‘they shaped themselves at schools for physical education.’⁸⁵ Their efforts were

81 Jesse Owens and Paul G. Neimark, *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

82 Frederick T. Birchall, ‘100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him,’ *The New York Times*, August 1, 1936.

83 Frederick T. Birchall, ‘Crowded Program at the Games Keeps Garmisch Visitors on Jump: Olympic Throngs, Apparently Tireless, Rush to Scenes of Varied Activities and then Dance at Night: Goering Watches Women Figure Skaters Open their Competition,’ *The New York Times*, February 12, 1936.

84 ‘La vie sportive: À la recherche d’Olympie perdue,’ *Le Matin*, Augst 18, 1936.

85 Ibid.

rewarded with medals and a crowd of thousands in a stadium saluting the flag and singing the national anthem. 'It would be nice to see one hundred thousand Frenchmen and women acclaiming thirty-three French Olympic champions. It would be comforting to hear one hundred thousand voices singing the *Marseillaise*.'⁸⁶

Conclusion

In August 1936, athletes from all over the world travelled to Germany to take part in the Berlin Olympic Games. Almost four thousand athletes competed in dozens of events, including traditional favorites such as track and field, soccer, and swimming and newer sports such as basketball and handball. The Germans even hosted competitions in the unofficial, demonstration sports of baseball and hang-gliding. Competitors came from forty-nine countries – some nations sending athletes for the first time, including Afghanistan and Liechtenstein. Collectively these athletes won 290 medals and broke numerous world records. Hundreds of thousands of tourists from around the globe, but mostly from Europe attended the Games, partaking in the delights of Nazi-era Berlin, in spite of the foreboding political climate and the overt hostility of numerous foreign sporting publications and associations. Even many Jewish fans attended the Games, including a sixteen-year-old sports fanatic and German Jew named Fred Hertz from Coesfeld.⁸⁷ The final medal tally saw the Germans atop the podium with thirty-three gold medals.

Leni Riefenstahl's iconic images of the Berlin Games have enshrined Hitler's Olympics in our memories. *Olympia* and *Olympia II* highlighted the thrill of victory, the pageantry of the first Olympic torch, and the militarism of massed bodies at the opening and closing ceremonies. The images of the Games, so vividly depicted in film, influenced the historical memory of the time, helped to create a fascist/antifascist dyad, prominent in the literature on interwar sports. At the same time, it is easy to confuse athletic competition with ideological opposition. The Olympics are fundamentally an expression of intrinsic national characteristics.⁸⁸ German athletes became representatives of their nation. Their largely American, English, and French adversaries might have appeared to be a democratic front aligned against them, but these athletic rivalries were national

86 Ibid.

87 Fred Hertz, *Vierhundertsechsvierzig Jahre und zehn Tage* (Vreden: Achterland, 2002), 85.

88 Barbara Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 188.

in character than political or ideological. The creation of the fascist/antifascist dyad also relied on a teleological set of assumptions. It raised implicit questions about which athletes and sporting organizations responded appropriately to fascism before the Second World War. It also suggested a lack of agency among athletes who were without the means to define their experiences inside or outside of the dominant political narratives of the age.

As Christopher Young argues, in 'In Praise of Jesse Owens,' 'the balance of opinion on the politics of the games, although still hotly debated is now shifting towards an understanding of them as a fertile mix of National Socialist involvement with the relative autonomy of the sporting event, of capillary control with a simultaneous light touch.'⁸⁹ The Nazis clearly politicized the Games. A vibrant antifascist athletic movement existed, most clearly represented in the People's Olympiad and the boycott movement. These rival political activities, however, did not necessarily represent the lived experience of many athletes.

The notion of an athletic antifascist movement outside of the workers sports movement was largely a creation of sports administrators, working with interested groups in the United States and Western Europe, rather than an organic creation of the athletes they represented. Their strongest proponents of athletic antifascism were men like Henry Smith Leiper, whose motivations were religious and who saw the Nazification of sport as a function of their regime's totalitarian mindset. They had adversaries like Avery Brundage who imagined an Olympic movement that was ideally completely divorced from politics. Most of the sportsmen and women in Berlin were neither supporters of fascism nor indifferent to the plight of their fellow athletes. They were more interested in their own athletic performances. Most athletes were probably like John Woodruff and Marty Glickman who had little knowledge of the boycott movement before they arrived in Berlin and the press asked them about it. Their efforts at the Games did not indicate their disinterest but did suggest that they had a different way of viewing the Olympics. Their more compelling personal histories offer an opportunity for scholars to write about sports politics as a cultural form resistance to politicization and thus move beyond the limited dichotomies presented by the fascist/antifascist dyad.

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⁸⁹ Young, "In Praise of Jesse Owens," 84.