

MODERN HISTORY

Research Project:

Case Study - Leni Riefenstahl

Assess the importance of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 and Leni Riefenstahl's film "Olympia" for Nazi propagandist purposes, both nationally and internationally.

The Olympic Games are the world's largest exhibition of athletic skill and competitive spirit; however, they are also extravagant displays of nationalism and political agenda. One of the most outstanding examples of this was the 1936 Summer Olympics hosted in Berlin, Germany. The Berlin Olympics held both national and international significance as it gave Hitler an opportunity to showcase the 'New Germany'¹, which he himself had 'raised from the ashes of the Weimar Republic'². It became a means of establishing the supremacy of the German athlete to the world, and a way of affirming that Germany was once again a member of good standing in the global community. An overall 'victory for the German cause'³ as stated by Hitler's Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels. However, Hitler and Goebbels were not the only instrumental figures responsible for advertising the Berlin Olympics in a positive light to the world. Leni Riefenstahl's 'Olympia' gained the majority of its footage from the Berlin Olympics and she is often accused of facilitating what was a 'triumph of propaganda' for an evil regime.

On 13th May 1931, it was officially announced by the International Olympic Committee that Berlin was the city selected to host the 1936 Summer Olympics. The decision had already been finalised by the time Hitler came to power in 1933 and he was originally apprehensive about the prospect of hosting such an event. He found the idea of competing with 'inferior non-Aryans' as insulting, but Goebbels convinced his Fuehrer that the festivities could be masterfully exploited to advance the Nazi cause, both inside and outside of the Reich. So preparations went ahead with a nationwide "clean up"⁴, the construction of a grandiose Olympic stadium, and the removal of every sign, flag or poster insinuating racial or religious persecution; all in order to pull off a 'monumental feat of deception'⁵.

Indeed, it was not only rubbish which was swept off the streets of Berlin, but people too. Two weeks before the Games, hundreds of Sinti and Roma were arrested and sent to a special 'Gypsy Camp' established in the Berlin suburb of Marzahn. Prostitutes, bar hostesses and dancing girls were banned from the centre of Berlin and forcibly examined for venereal disease, and more than 1000 beggars were arrested and incarcerated in June alone⁶. All examples of racially prejudiced material were removed from the capital, with police ordering "anti-Jewish boards and slogans which have criminal tendencies, are to be removed by all means at our disposal."⁷ This evidence of Nazi racial policy was instead replaced by colourful posters of athletic imagery linking Nazi Germany with Ancient Greece, and magazine spreads of chiselled, blue-eyed, blonde Aryans heroically representing the Reich. The smokescreen of blinding propaganda executed by the Nazis was complete and tremendously effective in conveying a peace-loving and harmonious Germany to the world.

¹ Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics*, Harper & Row Publishers Inc., New York, 1986, 9.

² Ibid, 9.

³ 'The Goebbels Model-2008 Summer Olympics in China', 2007

<<http://boycott2008games.blogspot.com/2007/08/goebbels-model-2008-summer-olympics-in.html>>

⁴ Jewish Virtual Library, 'The Nazi Olympics', 2009

<<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/olympics.html>>

⁵ Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics*, Harper & Row Publishers Inc., New York, 1986, 11.

⁶ Ibid, 165.

⁷ '1936 Olympic Games in Nazi Germany', 2000

<<http://www.jewishmag.com/36mag/olympic/olympic.htm>>

Between 1st and 16th August 1936, 51 nations competed in what was deemed an exceptionally successful XIth Olympiad. From the entry of the Fuehrer into the huge 'Olympiastadion' of 100,000 cheering spectators, to the tallying of Germany's 89-strong medal haul, the event was hailed as a 'major breakthrough'⁸ for the once broken and exiled nation. For the German people, the success of the Games also supported the Nazi concepts of the 'master race' and a 'cult of the body'. These philosophies were based on Hitler's idea that "...it was the Aryan alone who founded a superior type of humanity"⁹. The German team won 33 gold medals-more than any other country-which reinforced such principles of invincibility in Nazi ideology.

Although the Berlin Olympics gave Germany much to celebrate, it encountered just as much controversy on the world stage and disappointment in the eyes of Reich leaders. Before the Games had even begun, massive protests among sports, newspaper, educational, church, labour and political associations pressured for a boycott of the event. Mainly from the United States, Canada, Great Britain and France, the protesters argued that the 1936 Olympiad had been bestowed on the Weimar Republic, a democratic state, whereas the nation that would actually host the Olympics was a totalitarian Nazi regime. 10,000 people protested in Madison Square Garden, New York and 75,000 members of the German-American League for Culture asked for the removal of the Games from Berlin. The American Athletic Union received more than 100,000 individual objections and although most countries eventually decided to compete, many individual athletes maintained a boycott of the event.

Another humiliation for Germany's Olympics came in the form of an African American athlete called Jesse Owens. One of 18 black American competitors in Berlin, Owen achieved immense success by winning 4 gold medals and the hearts of the German crowds; all the while representing a complete contradiction of Nazi racial policy and expectation. Goebbels even wrote in his diary saying that "This [Owen's success] is a scandal. White humanity should be ashamed of itself"¹⁰. Martha Dodd, the daughter of the US ambassador to Germany claimed that in reaction to Owen's win "Hitler twisted in his seat, looked down, and frowned angrily."¹¹

Ultimately, the Summer Olympics of 1936 were considered a triumph for Germany, both nationally amongst the German people, and internationally by the global community. Owens may have challenged Hitler's ideology in front of the world- and the world had a good laugh at the dictator's expense- but Hitler laughed last. Germany had not just won the athletic games; it had also won the political games.

In addition to presenting Germany as a leader in athletic ability, the 1936 Olympics also brought Germany to the forefront of cinematic brilliance with the production of 'Olympia'. While the film's director, Leni Riefenstahl, claimed that it was commissioned by the International Olympic Committee and funded by a firm called Tobis Films¹², it is widely contended that Olympia was really commissioned by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda and financed by the party in order to bolster German dominance and superiority. In reality, what Olympia did was *record* a triumph of propaganda, not *create* it.

Aside from capturing the militaristic nature of Germany at the time, especially in the opening ceremony, Riefenstahl pioneered new heights in visual sports reporting and invented groundbreaking motion picture techniques. These included the use of unusual camera angles and extreme close ups to show the endurance of the athletes, railway tracks to shoot the reactions of the crowd and the intense atmosphere of competition, ditches dug into the ground to film athletes majestically leaping against the sky, and underwater cameras to show the full progression of divers

⁸ Guy Walters, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream*, John Murray Publishers, London, 2006, 221.

⁹Mason, K.J., *Republic to Reich: A history of Germany 1918-1939*, McGraw-Hill Australia Pty Ltd, 2007, 71.

¹⁰ Guy Walters, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream*, John Murray Publishers, London, 2006, 221.

¹¹ Ibid, 221.

¹² 'Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936', 2007

<<http://tags.library.upenn.edu/tag/history+olympia>>

off the board and into the pool. Far more than a mere documentary, Olympia glorifies the human body, with Riefenstahl evidently paying no attention to the colour or race of the athletes. "When she saw a beautiful body, she filmed it, whether it was black, brown, white or yellow".¹³ This is a fact further reiterated in the words of historian Richard D. Mandell, who said "As the camera angle rises, the viewer is transported with aesthetic emotion...the artist in control has shown massed human motion abstracted, epitomised".¹⁴ Regardless of whether Olympia was intended to be a spectacular work of Nazi propaganda, Riefenstahl's mere association with Hitler and his party will always shadow what was an astonishing accomplishment in the history of film and cinematic technique on a national and international scale.

In staging the eleventh modern Olympiad in Berlin on a colossal scale, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party exploited a unique opportunity to the full. The fact that they managed to pull off the event with relative ease was by all means a triumph of bluff and propaganda, for the world walked away from Germany's impressive new stadium and welcome, smiling faces believing the dictatorship to be "a nation happy and prosperous beyond belief".¹⁵ The importance of the 1936 Berlin Olympics was paramount for Nazi propaganda purposes, both nationally and internationally, however, the contribution of Leni Riefenstahl's 'Olympia' to this propaganda frenzy is less convincing. The master of propaganda, Goebbels himself, was furious with the film's lack of racial bias, and even forbade the German press from so much as mentioning Riefenstahl for 18 months¹⁶. So it can hardly be concluded that Olympia was a celebrated success of the Nazi party, although it was, and still is, for its cinematic genius and artistic expression.

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¹³ Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics*, Harper & Row Publishers Inc., New York, 1986, 241.

¹⁴ Ibid, 242.

¹⁵ Guy Walters, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream*, John Murray Publishers, London, 2006, 296.

¹⁶ Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics*, Harper & Row Publishers Inc., New York, 1986, 242.