

# ODE TO PEACE OR PRELUDE TO WAR?

## The Opening Ceremonies of the 1936 Berlin Olympics as Political Theater

*When Nazi leadership ultimately embraced the notion of hosting the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, the decision entailed an undertaking to which an inherently militaristic society would seem ill-suited: orchestrating an opening ceremony, a celebration grounded in the principles of peace and harmony, that could withstand the scrutiny of a leery global audience. Through a dynamic approach that steeped the ceremony's routine proceedings in rich symbolic gestures, the Nazis' audition on the international stage generally succeeded in establishing an outwardly benign atmosphere. However, a thorough appraisal reveals that the regime could not bring itself to fully suppress its martial disposition, which consequentially colored a number of the day's events.*

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In light of their status as the most successful Olympics up to that point in time, the 1936 Berlin Summer Games came very close to not taking place at all. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the Games to the German capital over Barcelona in a close 1931 contest. Soon thereafter, the ailing Weimar Republic suffered its final collapse, giving way to rule by the National Socialist Party. The Nazi party's history was laced with contempt for the Olympic movement, stemming mainly from the Olympic ideals of world peace and international understanding, and speculation abounded that the Nazis would call the Games off of their own accord. At the same time, international figures concerned with the fascists' radical policies opened a dialogue that explored selecting a new host city or, if that effort failed, boycotting.

However, Adolf Hitler and his associates soon perceived the tremendous utility afforded by a staged gathering of athletes and spectators from all corners of the globe. Indeed, the modern Olympics are conspicuous examples of what sociologist Maurice Roche and others in his field refer to as "mega-events," occasions that "are large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance," and which "are typically organised by variable combinations of national governmental and international non-governmental organisations and thus can be said to be important elements in 'official' versions of public culture."<sup>1</sup> One of the ways in which the Berlin Olympics built upon its 1932 Los Angeles predecessor was the scope of media coverage: the Games drew an unprecedented 3,000 or so journalists from television, radio, and print media, a fact that gave the Nazis' mega-event a truly global reach.<sup>2</sup>

While the organizers went to great lengths to regulate various aspects of the Olympic proceedings so as to leave foreign and domestic observers alike with a favorable impression of Nazi Germany, one episode above all afforded them extensive latitude to disseminate an image of their own making:



Henri de Baillet-Latour, Adolf Hitler, and Theodor Lewald at the Summer Olympic Games (1936)  
*Source: German Federal Archives*

the opening ceremony. As opposed to the athletic competitions, where the results were uncertain, the formal welcome and launch of the Games was meticulously planned and rehearsed in advance. The Nazis were especially well-suited to this component because they "carried the use of rituals, theatrical practices, and certain symbols to an extreme" in a manner that would leave an indelible impact on Germany.<sup>3</sup> An analysis that approaches this aspect of a mega-event as a heavily premeditated piece of political theater can yield considerable insight into the face the authorities wanted to present to the public. In the case of the 1936 opening ceremonies, the Nazis went to great lengths to establish an atmosphere of peace and friendship, even though, under the surface, the regime's militarism still simmered.<sup>4</sup>

### MIXED SIGNALS: GREAT WAR COMMEMORATION GIVES WAY TO PARTY-RALLY ATMOSPHERE

The big day, August 1, began with services at the Berlin Cathedral and Saint Hedwig's Church for the IOC's Protestant and Catholic officials, respectively. Later, Belgian aristocrat



Jesse Owens, Olympic Track & Field Athlete (1936)  
Source: Library of Congress

Henri de Baillet-Latour, IOC President, laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a monument at the former Prussian guardhouse of *Neue Wache* dedicated to the soldiers who had died in World War I.<sup>5</sup> The gesture—no doubt designed to symbolize reconciliation between the former adversaries—carried all the more meaning because this day marked the twenty-second anniversary of Europe’s descent into war. Reich and Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach and Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels then made speeches before the IOC guests and some 30,000 Hitler Youth members on the steps of the Old Museum, where Reich Air Minister Hermann Goering was also on hand. After a torch runner lit flames at the museum and the Royal Palace, on the opposite side of the *Lustgarten*, Hitler informed Baillet-Latour and the rest of the IOC that he had elected to resume excavation at the site of the ancient Greek Olympics, which had briefly been undertaken by Germans in the 1870s; the Fuehrer framed this gift as an enduring testament to the Berlin Olympic Games.<sup>6</sup> Thus far, the morning’s itinerary seemed in line with Foreign Minister Baron Constantin von Neurath’s keynote address from the previous evening, in which he had praised “peaceful and comradely competition for the laurel of victory, cooperation, mutual assistance and friendship.”<sup>7</sup>

Following a lunch at the Royal Palace, the entourage traveled the *Via Triumphalis* by car to reach the *Olympiastadion*, the colossal track and field stadium that would host the remainder of the day’s celebrations. Beyond the National Socialist Motor Corps and members of the SS, the SA, and the Berlin policemen that lined the route, eager onlookers were lined up “five to forty deep” along the ten-mile stretch to the stadium, some of those further back fashioning periscopes of a sort in an effort to get a glimpse of the action.<sup>8</sup> *Los Angeles Times* reporter Grantland Rice was fatefully left reflecting upon how the trip, “with mile upon mile, wave upon wave of a uniformed pageant, looked more like two World Wars than the Olympic Games,” a sentiment that contrasted sharply with the Olympic ideal of peace that had been carefully fostered through the morning’s activities.<sup>9</sup>

In an article previewing the Olympics, columnist John Kieran stressed, “Officially, Chancellor Hitler has no more to do with the Berlin games of 1936 than Herbert Hoover, then President, had to do with the Los Angeles games of 1932. Which was little or nothing, as Olympic officials noted at the time with some slight disapproval.”<sup>10</sup> However, if there had been any doubt up until then, the voyage to the stadium is where Hitler clearly emerged as the star of the proceedings. Even as the IOC made its way into the stadium, the broadcast emitted by metal speakers every thousand feet along the route reinforced Hitler’s prestige to the captive audience, hundreds of thousands strong: “We await the Fuehrer every moment. Never would this great field have been erected except for the Fuehrer. It was created by his will.”<sup>11</sup> When the announcer finally proclaimed Hitler’s entrance, as denoted by a trumpet fanfare and the raising of the *Führerstandarte*—a red swastika on a purple field—he was drowned out by a chorus of boisterous “heils” from the stadium spectators, who leapt to their feet. After a relatively tranquil start to the day, the cavalcade to the stadium showcased the militaristic zeal of Nazi public life. While the party likely did not want this militarism to come across as strongly as perceived by Grantland Rice, they surely hoped foreign authorities would take note of the people’s devotion to the regime. At the same time, the spectacle was also for the benefit of the host population; by immersing the mass energy of a party rally in the international competition of the Olympics, the Nazis strove to augment the German people’s unity and national pride, embodied first and foremost by the Fuehrer.

Hitler paused to receive a flower bouquet from five-year-old Gudrun Diem, the blond daughter of the German Olympic Committee’s (GOC) general secretary, as his entourage made its way across the arena, a moment that numerous journalists noted.<sup>12</sup> Aside from the obvious significance of the girl’s Aryan features, this staged interaction ingratiated the Fuehrer with international and domestic observers alike by depicting him as a benevolent father figure. Shortly thereafter, Hitler and company took their place in the Honor Loge and the orchestra began to play the national anthem, “Deutsch-

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landlied,” while the flags of the participating countries were slowly hoisted in anticipation of their teams’ march into the stadium.

### THE ACT OF SEEING AND BEING SEEN: OLYMPIA AND THE PARADE OF NATIONS

Apart from the various newspaper articles that chronicled the opening of the 1936 Olympics, another source stands to provide noteworthy insight into the official opening of the games: *Olympia*, the now-iconic Olympic film directed by Leni Riefenstahl and commissioned at Hitler’s request.<sup>13</sup> Comprised of two installments—“Festival of Nations” and “Festival of Beauty”—the critically acclaimed documentary furnishes a unique perspective on the Berlin Olympics, as it sought to capture the essence of the Games as envisioned by their Nazi organizers. While it thus cannot be taken as an objective account, it merits close consideration for its conscious outlook on the proceedings as acts of political theatre. Several details substantiate the importance of the opening ceremonies in the Nazis’ eyes. In the agreement struck with Riefenstahl, the first clause identifies the instances designated for filming, referring explicitly to many opening-day events.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Riefenstahl deliberately placed the body of “Festival of Nations” between footage depicting the ceremonial launch of the Games and the evening festival play that brought the opening day to a conclusion, a framework which bears out the ceremony’s significance.<sup>15</sup>

For a number of reasons, the procession of competing nations through the *Olympiastadion* constituted a source of

considerable anticipation in the lead-up to the Games and a source of considerable media coverage afterwards. The members of each team were expected to address the Fuehrer’s box as they marched through the stadium. In the words of English journalist Frederick Birchall, “the crowd carefully noted each salute as indicating the degree of sympathy for the Nazi regime betokened by it,” and this, in turn, “had a manifest influence upon the volume of applause received.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the manners of salutation were the product of extensive debate from the various nations’ Olympic committees, and it did not help matters that the traditional Olympic salute and the Nazi salute were quite similar, the former being with the arm extended up high and slightly to the side, and the latter being with the arm extended directly to the front. Teams from a range of nations that included Afghanistan, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Italy, and—perhaps most surprisingly—France garnered warm applause for giving the Nazi salute (or at least what the assembled spectators took for the Nazi salute, although some delegations claimed to have given the Olympic salute).<sup>17</sup> Conversely, the British decided well in advance that they would simply cast “eyes right.”<sup>18</sup> The Americans followed suit, also doffing their caps and placing them over their hearts. However, the Americans suffered additional criticism as the only team not to lower their flag to the Fuehrer, an incident that apparently made him feel personally insulted.<sup>19</sup> *Olympia* corroborates the various press accounts of the entry procession, as well as the political gravity of the various styles of acknowledging Hitler; the footage during this sequence cuts between the marching athletes, the stoic but attentive Fuehrer, and the animated crowd.

The sequence of this footage is interesting, in part, because it represents one of the few facets of the opening ceremony that was outside direct Nazi control. In addition, the spectators were not wrong in judging the respect each nation conferred on the regime according to the manner of its salute. According to the thinking of historian Andreas Daum, who assessed John F. Kennedy’s famous 1963 visit to Berlin from the standpoint of political theater, the parade into the Olympic stadium exemplified “the mutual process of seeing and being seen as a political statement,” a process in which “[a]ctors are to be seen as observers as well as the objects of observation.”<sup>20</sup> Despite his minor “official” role in the ceremony, press reports and Riefenstahl’s footage establish that Hitler-as-observer was clearly a focal point. The march served as something of a barometer enabling the foreign audience, the German masses, and Hitler himself to ascertain the Nazi regime’s international prestige—one where greater capitulation to the Fuehrer assured immediate gratification in the form of a warm reception from the spectators (if also, perhaps, some minor degree of admonishment in the international press). While the British and American performances undoubtedly disappointed Hitler, the fact that “nearly half of the delegations, numbering 24, gave varying forms of the Nazi salute with right arms extended upraised” amounted to a good overall showing for the German authorities.<sup>21</sup>



Das Olympiastadion Berlin (1936)  
Source: German Federal Archives

### MARTIAL INSINUATIONS: OLYMPIC TORCHBEARERS AND STRAUSS' HYMN

After the crowd erupted at the entry of the German host team, who followed on the heels of the Americans, the orchestra struck up the national anthem and the Nazi Party's anthem, the "Horst Wessel Lied," in succession. GOC President Theodor Lewald proceeded to give a lengthy speech that contained several revealing lines. Lewald prepared the audience for the imminent arrival of the final torchbearer, explaining that the Olympic flame the runner would light in the stadium would create "a real and spiritual bond of fire between our German fatherland and the sacred places of Greece founded nearly 4,000 years ago by Nordic immigrants."<sup>22</sup> Lewald also enjoined that only so long as sport embodied "discipline and devotion to a higher ideal, dare it to be the object of such a festival."<sup>23</sup> Hitler then stepped up to the microphone and uttered the customary line allotted him, "I proclaim open the Olympic games of Berlin, celebrating the Eleventh Olympiad of the modern era," at which point an Olympic flag was hoisted at centerfield, accompanied by the booms of a twenty-one-gun salute and the release of thousands of carrier pigeons. Native composer Richard Strauss took the stage to conduct the musicians in a new Olympic hymn of his own composition. At the song's conclusion, the anticipated torchbearer appeared at the steps of the stadium's East Gate, descending the infield to light the brazier beneath Marathon Gate.<sup>24</sup> This sequence of events, which unfolded in a manner of minutes, was rich in symbolic meaning.

the Hitler Youth functioned to ready the German people for war. Riefenstahl's *Olympia* fosters the same connection: the opening clips show a Greek statue of a discus thrower "come to life," and the footage then captures two other men practicing the shot put and the javelin. Sporting only loincloths, their training mimics the practice of the Greek athletes, who competed in the nude. Shortly thereafter, the film shows an identically-clad man light a torch from the mountain's fire and begin the trek that would carry it to Berlin. Soaring through the clouds, the viewer then gains a crow's eye view as the landscape gives way, and bold text announces the cities and countries through which the flame moved before arriving at Berlin.<sup>27</sup> While the actual relay did not unfold exactly as *Olympia* suggests, the film clearly captures the Nazi vision.<sup>28</sup> Regardless, it proved to be a public relations boon for its creators. At virtually every stop on its twelve-day journey, the relay was the subject of welcoming ceremonies, drawing crowds of enthusiastic administrators and locals, and the enterprise also captured the German imagination, being "minutely followed" by radio and newspaper outlets.<sup>29</sup> When the relay reached German soil, the Nazi touch immediately asserted itself: from there on, one runner recalled that on top of being trim and fit, "[e]very one of us had to be a Super-Aryan. Only blue-eyed blonds were acceptable."<sup>30</sup> A wild success by any measure, in the Nazi mind, the torch relay symbolized, above all, their inheritance of ancient Greece's legacy of martial athletic competition and, more broadly, the society's legacy as an enduring center of contemporary civilization—a model for Hitler's "thousand-year Reich."

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Although modern audiences are quite familiar with the concept of the Olympic torchbearers, the Nazis introduced this tradition at the Berlin Games. After kindling the Olympic flame in a solemn ceremony at the site of the ancient games in Greece, more than 3,000 runners proceeded to relay it over a 2,000-mile route crossing six countries.<sup>25</sup> This meticulously planned rite resonated deeply with the Nazi leadership in the manner briefly disclosed by Lewald's above statement, in what Birchall dubbed "the one lone discordant racial note heard throughout the proceedings."<sup>26</sup> The Nazis saw themselves as heirs to the ancient Greeks, who contested the games not in the name of international peace and understanding, but as a testament to the athletic prowess pivotal to survival on the battlefield (their "higher ideal," in the terminology used by Lewald), in much the same way that the Nazis' mass rallies, military reviews, and civic organizations like

While the twenty-one-gun salute and pigeon release were not especially remarkable given the occasion, Strauss's Olympic hymn merits closer inspection. After convincing the IOC not to recycle the 1932 Los Angeles hymn, the GOC secured Strauss's services and sponsored a national competition for lyrics. However, the Propaganda Ministry deemed that Robert Lubahn's winning piece did not espouse a true "National Socialist spirit"; consequently, they extracted his reluctant approval to tweak the lyrics, changing "Peace be the Games' slogan" to "Honor be the Games' slogan" and "Rule of law shall be the highest" to "Loyalty to oath shall be the highest."<sup>31</sup> While these minor adjustments, unsurprisingly, appear to have flown under the radar at the song's big premiere, where only a select few were aware of the changes at all, they nonetheless conveyed the militaristic Nazis' esteem for honor and loyalty to oath over peace and rule of law, respectively.



Filming of *Olympia*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1936)  
Source: German Federal Archive

On the surface, however, the ceremonies concluded with the same peaceful note that had generally characterized the day's events. Spiridon Louis, who had led the Greek delegation into the stadium, had achieved instant stardom in his home country by winning the marathon at the first modern-era Olympics, held in Athens, Greece, in 1896. Now, the elderly shepherd was escorted to the dais, where he presented a sprig of olive from the hallowed grove of Mount Olympus to the Fuehrer, declaring, "I present to you this olive branch as a symbol of love and peace. We hope that the nations will ever meet solely in such peaceful competition."<sup>32</sup> A grateful Hit-

ler accepted the token in yet another act that lent credence to the Nazis' claim on the Olympics. Once again, the interaction had been carefully arranged by the GOC, who had invited Louis to Berlin and covered all his expenses. Once German weightlifter Rudolph Ismayr, a medalist at the 1932 games, took the Olympic oath on behalf of all the athletes, a swastika flag clutched between his hands, the traditional ceremonies were concluded, and the athletes filed out.<sup>33</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In the denouement to his comprehensive article on the first official day of Olympic activity, Frederick Birchall wrote, "[The Games] 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."<sup>34</sup> While the games did provide a new perspective on the host country's regime for their sixteen-day duration, Birchall's "Olympic hill of peace" would fade soon and quickly. Just over three years later, the world would again be at war—one of Nazi Germany's making. Knowing this, it is all too easy to examine accounts of the 1936 opening ceremonies and see the harbingers of World War II leaping off the page. For contemporary observers, the Third Reich's peace overtures as outlined in this paper might well have come across as heartfelt; the regime's innate militarism, however, always lurked beneath the surface. 🏛️

## Endnotes

- [1] Maurice Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 113, 115. This was “the first time a major sport event was shown to the public by means of closed-circuit TV transmitted to over twenty viewing rooms around the city and seen by over 150,000 people over the course of the event.” The proceedings were also “broadcast around the world to what was estimated to be the biggest ever international radio audience.”
- [3] Andreas W. Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.
- [4] While a five-act pageant brought the opening day of the games to a close, for the purpose of this paper, I only consider the events leading up to and including the formal opening ceremonies.
- [5] David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 191.
- [6] Frederick T. Birchall, “11th Olympics Open Today In Gay and Crowded Berlin: Hitler Will Be Chief Host to a World-Wide Gathering, Climax of Two Years’ Preparation -- Hope for Peace Voiced,” *New York Times* (1 Aug 1936).; Birchall, “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him,” *New York Times* (2 Aug 1936).
- [7] Birchall, “11th Olympics Open Today In Gay and Crowded Berlin.”
- [8] Large, *Nazi Games*, 193.; “Fuehrer Key Man in Olympic Show: Loud-Speakers in Streets Give Running Account of His Trip to the Stadium,” *New York Times* (2 Aug 1936).
- [9] Grantland Rice, “Crowd Accords Nations Giving Nazi Salute Thundering Welcome,” *Los Angeles Times* (2 Aug 1936). Rice opened his piece by citing the day’s significance as the twenty-second anniversary of the outbreak of war in 1914, and he then proceeded to describe the 700,000-plus uniforms he passed on his way to the stadium: “brown shirts, black guards, gray-green waves of regular army men and marines—seven massed military miles rivaling the mobilization of August 1, 1914.”
- [10] John Kieran, “On Your Mark for the Olympic Games!: In the Finest Setting the Modern Series Has Ever Known the Athletes of the World Are Ready to Strive for Honors,” *New York Times* (26 Jul 1936).; Kieran goes on to note that Los Angeles, in fact, marked “the first time in modern Olympic annals that the active official head of the nation in which the games were being held did not give the signal for the grand opening.”
- [11] “Fuehrer Key Man in Olympic Show.”
- [12] Large, *Nazi Games*, 194.; In “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him,” Birchall writes that Hitler “touched her hair and evidently spoke gently to her.”
- [13] Leni Reifenstahl, *Olympia*, The Leni Riefenstahl Archival Collection (1938).
- [14] Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 266.; The agreement “refers especially to shots taken (e.g.) of the official festival in the Berlin ‘Lustgarten’ at 12 o’c; the run of the torch-bearer on this date; the drive of the Leader (Mr. Hitler) and the Olympic Committee through the triumphal-road, etc.”
- [15] *Ibid.*, 134.; “Festival of Beauty,” meanwhile, concludes with the closing ceremonies.
- [16] Birchall, “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him.”
- [17] *Ibid.*
- [18] “British Decide on Salute Will Merely Give ‘Eyes Right’ in the Olympic Parade,” *New York Times* (25 Jul 1936).
- [19] Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 76.; In fact, this action emanated not from a desire to snub Hitler, but from a tradition established at the London Olympics of 1908, when the Americans did not want to appear to defer to Britain’s King Edward VII.
- [20] Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin*, 10.
- [21] Alan Gould, “Hitler Opens Berlin Games; U.S. Stars Get Cool Greeting,” *Washington Post* (2 Aug 1936).
- [22] Birchall, “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him.”
- [23] *Ibid.*
- [24] Large, *Nazi Games*, 196–198.
- [25] “Olympic Torch Relay Starts With Ceremony: Originator Of Modern Olympiads Delivers Impressive Speech,” *The China Press*, (21 Jul 1936).
- [26] Birchall, “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him.”
- [27] Reifenstahl, *Olympia*.
- [28] In *Nazi Games*, for instance, Large describes Riefenstahl’s disappointment with most of the Greek runners, who “sweated over the hills in full folkloric costume”, where she “would have preferred that they run entirely in the nude” (6).
- [29] Large, *Nazi Games*, 6–8; Birchall, “11th Olympics Open Today In Gay and Crowded Berlin.”
- [30] Large, *Nazi Games*, 9.
- [31] *Ibid.*, 196–7.
- [32] Birchall, “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him.”
- [33] Large, *Nazi Games*, 198–9.
- [34] Birchall, “100,000 Hail Hitler; U.S. Athletes Avoid Nazi Salute to Him.”