

## Panem et Circenses



On August 1, 1936, Hitler opened the 11<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games in Berlin and for the next two weeks, the ascending Nazi dictatorship veiled its fascist spirit and belligerent intentions in the guise of friendly sports competitions, good will and peace among the nations.

Berlin had been awarded the 1936 Summer Olympics in 1931 while Germany was still an infant democracy, finding its feet in postwar Europe. Two years later, the Nazi Party came to power as Adolf Hitler took the seat of chancellor, turning his country away from democracy and on the path towards dictatorial rule. For that reason, initiatives to instigate a boycott against the Olympics being held in Berlin were taken both in the USA as in several European countries, but such efforts eventually came to naught.



Photo: Olympic Stadium during construction and in 1936. All in all it looks pretty much the same today.

Hitler himself had initially been somewhat lukewarm to the idea of hosting the Games, but persuaded by Joseph Göbbels, ever the propaganda genius, who immediately realized the enormous potential inherent, he now

exploited the event to the full, bedazzling foreign spectators and journalists alike with a carefully crafted representation of a peaceful, modern and tolerant Third Reich.

The Regime spared no expense in these efforts. Elaborate preparations were undertaken to mesmerize the thousands of foreign athletes and guests, including building a huge sports complex<sup>1</sup> on the western outskirts of the city and a large and modern 'Olympic Village' to cater for the many competitors from around the world.

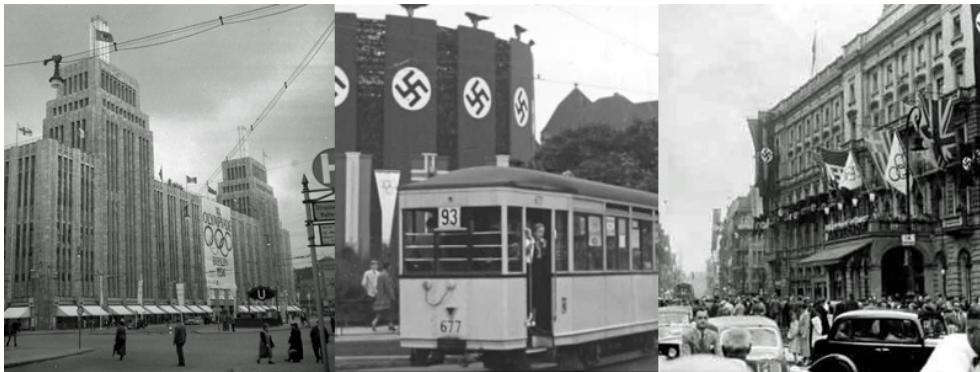


Photo: Three decorated venues no longer in existence; Karstadt on Hermannplatz, Adolf Hitler Platz [Theodor-Heuss-Platz] and the Kaiserhof Hotel on the former Wilhelmplatz.

Olympic flags and Swastikas in tandem festooned the streets of Berlin and every important monument. A quiet roundup and incarceration of 'undesirable elements', i.e. the Roma, was performed in the weeks before the opening and authorities were instructed to treat foreign visitors to the capital with all conceivable courtesy and tolerance, i.e. exempt them from any consequences if violating the regimes harsh anti-homosexuality laws.



Examples of harassment; Since the passing of the Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935, Germans were encouraged not to do business with Jews, and Jewish shops were desecrated by the S.A. The sign, found many places in Berlin said; "Jews are not wanted here"

Outwardly, the face of German capital was thus temporarily transformed. Persecution and ill treatment of the city's Jews relented; public pushing around and humiliation was put on hold, just as Charlie Chaplin later would describe it in his 1940 masterpiece, *The Great Dictator*. Derogatory signs that forbid Jews to sit on park benches or enter shops or restaurants were removed and restrictions lifted.<sup>2</sup>



Photo: Helene Mayer giving the Hitler salute. She later explained she was kowtowing to the dictator in the hope of protecting her family, still in Germany.

Jewish athletes were initially meant to be banned from the Games, a decision that caused indignation throughout the world, predominantly in the USA [traditionally the country with the largest delegation] and sparked discussions whether to boycott the gamers or not. Debate raged between pros and cons, the latter side arguing that the best way to combat Nazi racial ideology would be to beat them in the arena. Eventually, when the American team and others threatened a no-show, the regime quickly picked a few ‘token Jews’ to partake, i.e. fencer Helene Mayer, who would go on to win Olympic silver and Gretel Bergmann,<sup>3</sup> the high-jumper, who would later immigrate to the USA.



Photo: Hindenburg [LZ129] over the Olympic Stadium. Just ten months later this juggernaut of the skies would crash in the accident at Lakehurst, New Jersey, killing thirteen passengers and 22 crew.

The opening ceremony on August 1 was one of Göbbels’ early masterpieces, initiated by a fly-over by ‘Hindenburg’, the famous Zeppelin

and a showpiece of German technology, towing a gigantic Olympic Flag. The 100.000+ strong audience watched in awe.

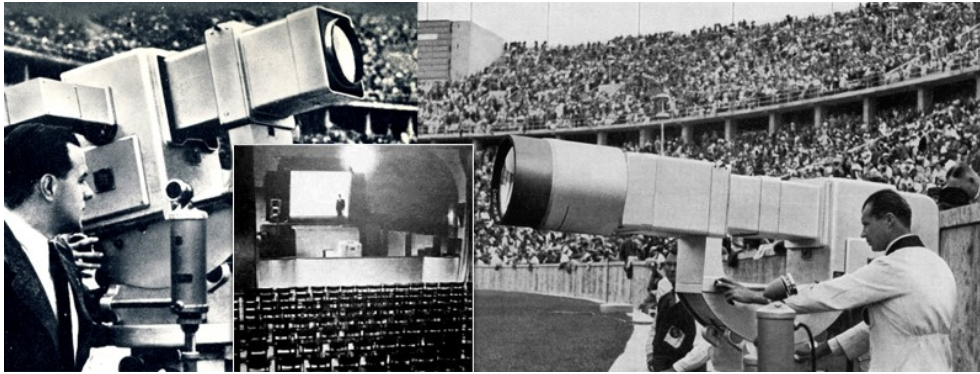


Photo: TV cameras of the day. Inserted a public viewing hall where the images were projected on large screens.

To document the spectacle for posterity and to enable the millions of Germans, unable to attend the event in person, and - not least - to demonstrate German technical superiority,<sup>4</sup> the Games were televised; a cutting edge technology in those days. Practically no Germans owned a TV set, and over the air transmissions were still in the future, but ‘viewing halls’ were set up throughout Berlin (and Leipzig) where closed circuit TV displayed the events. Live radio broadcasts reached 40+ countries worldwide.



Photo: Leni Riefenstahl at work. Postwar she was scrutinized by American authorities and held in house arrest for a period, but no formal charges were ever raised. Eventually she was categorized as a ‘Mitläufer’; a fellow traveler at her denazification process. Albeit undoubtedly a talented film maker, she was never able to pick up her former career.

Further, renowned filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, who had won Hitler’s favor with her propaganda ‘masterpiece’, ‘Kraft des Willens’ [Triumph of the Will] documenting the 1935 Nuremberg Party Rally, was commissioned to repeat the success at the Games. In the process, Riefenstahl conceived and applied many groundbreaking filming techniques that have become industry standards today. More than 300 kilometers of raw film was shot<sup>5</sup> and the final result, ‘Olympia’, launched in 1938, albeit its strong leaning towards Nazi ideology, to this day still appears on the Time Magazine’s list; ‘All-Time 100 Movies’.

It can be viewed on You Tube [English subtitles]:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HV8055dbfc>

## The opening

The stadium had been packed to the brim with excited spectators from the early morning. A fanfare heralded the arrival of Adolf Hitler and his entourage. The proverbial little girl presented Hitler with a bouquet of flowers, 'in gratitude of the German youth'. The national anthem was played, followed by 'Horst Wessel Lied' and the Olympic Hymn; the conductor being no less than Richard Strauss, the renowned composer.



Photo: Arrival of Hitler and entourage along with other bigwigs of the Nazi court. Hitler opening the Games.

**ROCHUS MISCH**, who would later become a member of the SS and follow Hitler into the Führerbunker in 1945 as his telephone operator, was there as a young boy. He describes the scenes of near-hysteria as people gathered around the limo, trying to touch their beloved Führer, and how the SS-guards in their swank, black uniforms struggle to keep the jubilating crowd at bay. That, Misch said, was the moment where he decided to become one of those black knights.



Photo: Torch-bearer en route and at the cauldron. Not really sure about that last photo, because the stadium seems to be all but deserted. A rehearsal, perhaps?

Forging a mythical link to ancient Greece and thus supporting the Nazi claim to be heirs to a superior Aryan culture from antiquity, the spectacle left nothing to chance. The ritual with a torch carried by relay from Greece by runners, which prevailed to this day, was i.e. instituted in Berlin.

The torch-bearer now entered the Olympic Stadium and climbed the stairs to light the cauldron. The Olympic Bell sounded and the parade of nations commenced; 4000 athletes from 49 countries. In respect of her historic



*“The 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin marked a moment of triumph for Max Keith, who provided enormous quantities of Coca-Cola for athletes and visitors. That August in Berlin was equally satisfactory for Hitler, proud host to the nations of the world, showing off his blond Aryan athletes and his revitalized Germany.”*

Keith wasted no time in plastering the streets of Berlin with Coca Cola logos on flags and posters, side by side with the Swastika and the Olympic flags, and secure that cases of the hobble skirt bottle was available aplenty in outlets, bars and restaurants. The campaign sent the brand skyrocketing and continued to do so after the games were long over. By 1939, forty-three German plants bottled Coca-Cola and more than 600 franchises distributed the new beverage.

Then war came, and Coca-Cola GmbH faced serious problems, but that’s another story.<sup>9</sup>

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*I’m afraid the Nazis have succeeded with their propaganda. First, the Nazis have run the games on a lavish scale never before experienced, and this has appealed to the athletes. Second, the Nazis have put up a very good front for the general visitors, especially the big businessmen. Ralph Barnes<sup>10</sup> and I were asked in to meet some of the American ones a few years ago. They said frankly they were favorably impressed by the Nazi ‘set-up’. They had talked with Göring, and he had told them that we American correspondents were unfair to the Nazis.*

*“Did he tell you about suppression, say, of the churches?” I asked*

*“He did”, one of the men spoke up, “and he assured us there was no truth in what you fellows write about persecution of religion here.”*

*Whereupon, I’m afraid, Ralph and I unduly flared up. But I don’t think we convinced them.*

[Shirer; Berlin Diary, Entry on August 16, 1936]

**A TOTAL OF FORTY-NINE NATIONS** comprising almost 4000 athletes partook in the twenty-five sports disciplines represented at the 1936 Olympic Games. Adolf Hitler had ample reason to be content with the performance of the German team who took the lions share of medals, thus supporting the Nazi claim to Aryan racial supremacy, albeit the achievements of African-American Jesse Owens, who reaped four gold medals and became the most successful contestant of all, must have been an annoying fly in the ointment for the Führer.

As the Games ended on August 16, things in Berlin and the rest of Germany quickly returned to ‘normal’, meaning that persecution of Jews and minorities resumed and worsened, finding an interim culmination in the ‘Kristallnacht’ two years later. The Olympic Games would not be held for the following twelve years due to the ravages of the Second World War and the postwar period of recovery in Europe.

The next Summer Games were held in London in 1948.

## Battle for Berlin

Less than a decade later, as the Third Reich lay all but in ruins, the Olympic Stadium briefly served as barracks for a battalion of Hitler Youth troops,

tasked to defend and hold the bridge over the Havel River in late April 1945.

Artur Axmann, Reichsjugendführer, in his memoir describes how he, almost by chance sometime between April 20 - 23, on his daily tour from his command post at Kaiserdamm 86 [Heerstrasse today] discovered that the bridge at the western outskirts of Berlin lay undefended. He hurried to the Führerbunker, and as General Weidling, who would become Commandant of Berlin's defenses on April 24, could not spare the necessary troops from his meager forces, Axmann, on Hitler's behest, stepped in and offered the HJ troops, barracked at the Reichssportfeld [Olympic Stadium]. The battalion comprised some 5-600 youth, and they managed to secure the bridges until Weidling's surrender on May 2. ['Hitlerjugend', p. 421]



**Photo:** Artur Axmann (behind Hitler) on March 20, 1945 at the Reichs Chancellery. Hitler decorating HJ troops. Right, enthusiastic HJ boys, allegedly at the Games. To the best of my knowledge, no photos exist of the battle at the Havel Bridges.

This operation, which Hitler himself allegedly masterminded, was meant to keep a door open to General Walter Wenck's 'relief army', advancing on Berlin from its positions at the Elbe. As we know, Wenck had other ideas.<sup>11</sup> After that illusive hope evaporated, the bridge was held as a possible escape route to the west for the encircled remnants of Wehrmacht and SS of the Berlin Garrison. Albeit the boys fought bitterly for several days, the casualty figure of several thousand, purported in several historians' accounts, almost has to be historically incorrect.

Gerhardt Boldt, in his 1947 memoir, does set the number of boys that partook in the battle to some 5000 [p. 86], but in Axmann's opinion – and he was after all the commanding officer – this must be a typo, repeated in the English 2005 edition [p. 178].<sup>12</sup>

## Today

The Olympic Stadium [today Olympiastadium] is full of history and a visit is highly recommendable. With few modifications, the arena with its unmistakable neoclassic architecture stands as back then, including 'Arno-Breker-style' statues. Walk around the area, and you will see many ghosts of the past, i.e. eagles holding reeds with chiseled-out Swastikas and a few bullet holes here and there.

The stadium is today the home venue of Herta Berliner Sport-Club, founded in 1892, and can accommodate 74.500 spectators. Subway U2 towards Ruhleben will take you right to the door.



Tours of the premises are offered:

<https://olympiastadion.berlin/en/sightseeing/>



**Photo:** On the first photo in this article, the Olympic Bell is being carted over the Unter den Linden to be displayed at the Opernplatz prior to the Games. Though slightly damaged, it survived the war and is now on display at the Olympiastadium. It has a decorative bullet hole in it [there is a story about that to be told some other time] and attempts have been performed, not very successful though, to remove or blur the Swastikas.

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**SOME TWENTY KILOMETERS** further to the west is the Olympic Village; in its own right also a very interesting place. Used as a barracks by East Germany during the GDR days and evacuated after the fall of the Wall, the place was in disarray when I visited it in 2012, although a couple of the many huts where athletes were quartered had been restored. Most notably the one where triple gold medal winner Jesse Owens bunked. His room has been put

back into its original shape and the conditions under which he was lodged seem fairly comfortable for the day.



Photo: How the Olympic Village appeared in 2012, when I visited the place; rather dilapidated. Far right is the restored room of Jesse Owens.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Berlin Olympia Stadium rests on the foundation of the never completed ‘Grunewald Stadium’, planned for the 1916 Olympics which were cancelled after the outbreak of World War I. This feat of architecture, comprising a 100.000 seat arena and six gymnasiums was built 1934-36 by Werner March and stands almost unchanged to this day.

<sup>2</sup> In a move to "clean up" Berlin before the Olympics, the German Ministry of Interior authorized the chief of the Berlin Police to arrest all Gypsies prior to the Games. On July 16, 1936, some 800 Gypsies were arrested and interned under police guard in a special Gypsy camp in the Berlin suburb of Marzahn. [USHMM]

<sup>3</sup> As it went, Bergmann never got to participate in the games. Two weeks before the opening, she received a letter from the authorities that she was not qualified, despite having passed all tests. In 2014, a street in the Olympic Park Berlin was renamed ‘Gretel-Bergmann-Weg’ in her honor.

<sup>4</sup> Actually, the 180-line German TV was inferior to the British 405-line, getting into service in the fall of 1936.

<sup>5</sup> The finished film is also very long; 226 minutes and for the modern day spectator probably very ‘slow’. I.e. it takes some 23 minutes from the runner lights the torch in ancient Greece till he reaches the eternal cauldron in Berlin.

<sup>6</sup> The Olympic Salute, predating the Hitler-salute by decades, has been described like this; “right arm out slightly and pointed upward, fingers together, palm out. Kind of like you’re raising you’re hand in class.” Unfortunately, it is hard to differ from its Nazi counterpart and went out of fashion after 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Things don’t always go to plan. Allegedly, just as the birds were airborne, a cannon salute was fired. Startled by the salvo, the frightened birds let go – in a bad way! One athlete referred how he could hear the sound of a thousand droppings splashing down on the spectators straw hats (the lucky ones) and clothes. [Unconfirmed story; stems from the memoir of one Louis Zamperini]

<sup>8</sup> The success of Afro-American athlete Jesse Owens, who reaped four of USA gold medals for his country must have been a somewhat bitter pill to swallow for Hitler in this context, but contrary to news reports at the time, there is no evidence that Owens was especially snubbed by der Führer. After the first day of handshaking, Hitler, confronted with the demand that he either shook all hands or none at all [he wanted to shake German hands only] decided not to shake more hands. One, who *did* snub the black athlete, was his own president, FDR, who didn’t even send a congratulatory telegram.

<sup>9</sup> A great story to be told some other time.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Barnes was a correspondent for the New York Tribune Herald, stationed in Berlin from 1935 (before that Paris, Rome and Moscow). His uncompromising style had him expelled from Germany when he, after the Nazi onslaught on France and the Low Countries in 1940, predicted that the Nazi war machine would turn on the Soviet Union next, regardless of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Barnes would be the first Allied correspondent to be killed in action in WW2, when the plane he was a passenger in crashed in Yugoslavia on November 17, 1940.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Wenck led his ragtag 'army' south of Berlin to link up with the 9<sup>th</sup> Army under Theodor Busse, thus creating a passages to the west for the remnants of Busse's force and the thousands of refugees following in his trail. On the relief of Hitler, he is quoted to have said, that the fate of one man no longer mattered.

<sup>12</sup> I cannot vouch for either, but I believe that some five thousand corpses of adolescents scattered around the bridge would have triggered some postwar photography, and I have seen none. Further, Axmann is generally considered a reliable witness by many historians. Trevor-Roper speaks of one battalion, which in peacetime Germany was 1050 men, but all German military formations were heavily depleted in numbers towards the end of the war.