



## Lesson Plan: **1936 Berlin Olympics- Protest through participation and boycott**

**GUIDING FOCUS:** Exploring the complexity of the 1936 Olympics hosted by Germany under Adolf Hitler's rule. Lesson discusses the decisions to boycott or participate in the Games, as well as a focus on Jesse Owens' experience as an African American athlete and champion in the track and field competitions.

**LESSON GOALS EXPLORE:** forms of protest, individual & collective responsibility, action/inaction, agency, diplomacy, discrimination in the US and abroad, and Nazi propaganda

**AGE-** This lesson is best for grade levels 7-12. A glossary can be found at the end of the lesson for younger age groups.

### Lesson components:

1. Warm Up
2. Read and Respond Discussion
  - a. Introductory video
  - b. Background
  - c. Critical questions
3. Optional: Virtual OR in person site visit of the Horwitz-Wasserman Memorial Plaza
  - a. Teacher and students should download the IWalk app ([instructions](#))
4. Reflection
5. Independent research
6. Additional reading
7. Glossary

PAGES 8-10 MAY BE PRINTED FOR STUDENTS

### **1. Warm Up Activity (10min)**

Have students [watch](#) the first 3min 53sec of the video for context (remaining is about a past exhibition). Have students pair up and come up with questions. Discuss the questions with the class.

### **2. Read and Respond- Discussion (30min)**

**Background on the Olympics in Nazi Germany-** Students should read the following history and complete a selection of the Critical Questions in small groups- teacher should determine the selection of questions. Then have student groups report back to the class.

At the time of the 1936 Olympics, Germany was under the control of Adolph Hitler's Nazi regime. Nazis believed in the superiority of what they called the "Aryan race"—the white people of Germany—and the inferiority of Jewish and nonwhite peoples. The Nazis had enacted the Nuremberg Laws in September of 1935 excluding Jews and other minority groups from German citizenship and many rights including

employment and interfaith relationships. There was antisemitic and racist propaganda all over Berlin promoting Aryan superiority and 'othering' Jews and other minority groups.

When the Nazis were preparing for the Olympic Games, there was an interest in presenting the City and the Nazi regime in a positive light and so they announced an *Olympic Pause*, during which the campaign against Jews and other 'undesirables' was suspended. Berlin was made to look more welcoming and unified by having buildings fly the Olympic or Nazi flag, and hiding hateful propaganda for the two weeks of the Games. The German Olympic team even included Helene Mayer, a fencer and the daughter of a Jewish man, to try to appease international audiences and portray tolerant treatment of Jewish athletes. It was crucial for Germany to portray itself in an acceptable and respectable way, as there were international visitors and this would be the first time the Olympics would be televised. With cameras and microphones, access to the Games worldwide was unlike ever before.

Though some of the antisemitic imagery was hidden during the Olympic Games, the Nazi belief in white superiority was not at all secret, and Hitler hoped his Aryan athletes would prove the mythology by winning gold medals. Jewish German athletes were not allowed to compete and Jewish athletes from other countries were dissuaded from participating. Many nations decided to boycott the Olympic Games as a form of protest against the Nazi regime. Notably, the Soviet Union did not participate. Spain even organized a simultaneous alternative event, the People's Olympiad, which had athletes from 49 countries register. This event was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War just days before it was set to begin.

The United States was full of debate whether to participate in the Berlin Olympics or to boycott. The US Olympic Committee President Avery Brundage opposed a boycott on the grounds that the Games and sports in general, should not be political. It should be noted that Brundage had strong racist and antisemitic views that came to light over second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which [institutions](#) are grappling with today. For example, Brundage expelled African American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos from the 1968 Olympic Games after they raised their fists in solidarity with the Black Power movement during their medal ceremony. The Amateur Athletic Union, Jewish Labor Committee and American Jewish Congress all called for a boycott in protest of the Nazi regime. Many Jewish athletes decided to abstain from participating. For African Americans this was a different and very complex debate.

African Americans were experiencing significant racism and discrimination in the United States. The Jim Crow Laws enforced racism throughout the country and excluded African Americans from many places and rights all people in the US were said to enjoy. Because of this, some writers for newspapers like the *Philadelphia Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender* as well as many Black Olympians argued that competing in the Games was a form of protest. Their success would not only disprove the Nazi belief in white superiority but would challenge white supremacy at home in the US. Other journalists, such as for the *New York Amsterdam News* and prominent African American leader Walter White, the Secretary for the NAACP, did support a boycott. In a letter written but never sent, White urged Jesse Owens to boycott the Games because of the Nazi hatred towards Black people, warning:

*"...it is my firm conviction that the issue of participation in the 1936 Olympics, if held in Germany under the present regime, transcends all other issues. Participation by American athletes, and especially by those of our own race which has suffered more than any other from American race hatred, would, I firmly believe, do irreparable harm." (December 4, 1935)*

Jesse Owens did go on to participate in the Olympic Games and made history as a 4 time gold medal champion. He was one of 18 African Americans that went to Berlin on the United States Olympic team. ([source](#))

### Critical Questions

- The United States ultimately decided to participate in the Games. What do you think of this choice?
- How could participating in the Olympics be seen as approval of the Nazi leadership? How could participation be seen as protest?
- By hosting the Olympics and televising the games, what opportunities existed for the Nazis as all eyes turned to Germany?
  - o Think about...
    - Nazis trying to further the mythology of white superiority
    - Germany demonstrating its success after the devastating failure of WWI
    - Display of unity
- The United States decided to replace two Jewish runners, Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, with Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe the morning of their competition. [Listen](#) to Marty Glickman discuss this experience- what might have been the outcome if he and Stoller competed and won?
- Under these impossible set of circumstances, what do you think was the responsibility of the athletes: to compete or to protest? What are the pros and cons of each choice?
- To what extent should sports be political, if at all? Understanding that athletes are not politicians and some may not care about such matters, is it fair to have an expectation that they make their voices heard in public matters? Think about an example when you think that athletes must make their voices heard and think about an example where society should not have such expectation.
- How do we see athletes engaged in politics or political movements today?
  - o Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the National Anthem
  - o LeBron James' *More Than A Vote* organization
  - o Teams or players boycotting games as protest in 2020

**Background on Jesse Owens- Students should read the following history and complete the Critical Questions in small groups. Then have student groups report back to the class.**

Jesse Owens was born in Danville, Alabama, in 1913. His parents were sharecroppers—farmers who worked on land they rented from a white landowner. Owens' grandparents had been enslaved. Looking for more opportunity in the North, Owens' family moved to Ohio when he was nine.

Owens was a star on his high school track team, and many universities recruited him when he graduated. He chose Ohio State University. While a student at OSU, he was not allowed to live in the dorms and was ineligible for scholarships because of his race, so he worked a variety of jobs to support himself and his family while he set record after record on the track.

He was chosen to be part of the U.S. Olympic track and field team that would compete at the 1936 Games in Berlin, Germany. The Nazis hoped the Olympics would help prove their theory of racial superiority: they expected German athletes to win all the gold medals. But Jesse Owens, along with nine other African American athletes, humiliated and infuriated the Nazis by receiving medals for their

performances. Owens won four gold medals and was a celebrity of the games, for Germans and non-Germans alike. Even though he was a champion, Hitler would not shake his hand, as the host country's leader traditionally would.

Despite being an Olympic hero, Owens continued to experience racism that all African Americans then faced. He found many barriers and challenges within the sporting world. He took part in several professional events where he was paid to race. This meant that he was no longer an amateur athlete and could not compete in future Olympic Games. Once he was no longer a future Olympian, Owens lost all of his sponsorship deals. Owens was quoted in 1972 saying:

*"After I came home from the 1936 Olympics with my four medals, it became increasingly apparent that everyone was going to slap me on the back, want to shake my hand or have me up to their suite. But no one was going to offer me a job."*

Owens never lost faith in the power of sports to overcome racism and give African Americans a chance to succeed. He worked throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s to promote youth sports and helped organize the first Junior Olympics. In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower made Owens a Goodwill Ambassador- promoting exercise and American democracy around the world. Through his work with the Boys' Clubs in Chicago, Owens helped hundreds of young African American athletes achieve their goals. On his death in 1980, Owens was celebrated as a sports legend and American hero ([source](#), [source](#)).

#### **Critical Questions:**

- With the United States being segregated and under the Jim Crow Laws, what did the Olympic Games mean for Owens?
- Gretel Bergmann (aka Gretel Lambert) was a German Jewish high jumper who was excluded from the Olympic games because of her religion. What is similar about her and Jesse Owens' experiences as athletes at this time? Students can watch the first 10 minutes of this [video](#) for some general context and more specifically about exclusion of Jewish athletes.

### **3. Optional Site Visit through IWalk (1.5 hours)**

Teachers may choose to add a virtual or in person tour of the Horwitz-Wasserman Memorial Plaza to enhance student understanding of the lesson context. Below find guidance for which tour to take and some reflection questions. The reflection can be done without having completed the tour of the site. Note that a tour will add an additional 45 minutes to 1.5 hours to the lesson.

In order to complete the lesson, have students download the IWalk app (instructions found [here](#)). If the class is at the Memorial Plaza together have students walk around as they complete the tour. The lesson can also be completed virtually.

Students should complete the *History of the Holocaust OR Propaganda and Antisemitism IWalk* and explore the different elements of the Plaza including the Six Pillars, train tracks from Treblinka, and Theresienstadt tree. Students can [listen](#) to Museum Without Walls recording about the 1964 Memorial.

### **4. Reflection (20min)**

Having completed the History of the Holocaust lesson, think about the context in which the Olympics took place. How much did the rest of the world know about the Nazi's hateful ideology at the time of the Games? What do you think... did Americans and others recognize how dangerous the Nazi regime was?

Can you think of an example when you learnt of an international crisis that did not personally affect you, but you were disappointed by the public response or lack thereof? Think about the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Uyghur in China or the war in Syria.

How can we speak up when we learn about intolerance in other parts of the world? How about in our own communities and country?

Having completed the *Propaganda and Antisemitism* lesson, think about the type of media that had been around all of Berlin before and after the Olympic pause. What did this imagery teach people to think about Jews and other minority groups? How did this imagery 'other' them? During the Olympics what kind of propaganda did the Nazis use (think about the mandated flags)? What were the Nazis trying to prove to the rest of the world? And, how can we be critical of what we see on social media so we are not victims of hateful and bigoted propaganda?

#### **5. Independent Research- Teachers may choose to use these suggestions for in class assignments or homework.**

Students can host a debate about boycotting or participating in the Games. Would you go to protest in Germany or protest by staying home?

Have students make a pros and cons list about boycotting vs. participating in the games as the United States. Have them do the same exercise as Jesse Owens or as a Jewish American athlete.

Have students further research Jesse Owens and his life at home. As a young black man in the segregated United States, what were the challenges he faced before the Olympics? After the Olympics?

Have students do more research on German athlete Gretel Bergmann (aka Gretel Lambert). What was her story?

Have students read the full [letter](#) from NAACP Secretary Walter White. Think about his position and write a response.

#### **6. Additional Reading**

This [video](#) discusses Jesse Owens' impact as an African American gold medal Olympian in Germany and back in the United States. (5:34)

This [page](#) has a comprehensive overview of the Olympics under the Nazi regime.

[Video](#) about Gretel Bergmann and exclusion of Jews from the Olympics. (22:58)

[Article](#) (with an embedded video 3:39) about the Olympics and Jesse Owens

Full documentary on the Olympics with some emphasis on Jesse Owens (45:41)

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum video about an Olympics exhibit- short video offers historical context. (4:46)

## 7. Glossary

**Boycott-** To decide not to participate in something or with someone (organization, person, country) as a protest or punishment.

**NAACP-** Formerly named “The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People” but now known just as the “NAACP”, was established in 1909 to fight against the Jim Crow Laws and racial discrimination through legal action and education. The organization which is still active, is the oldest and largest Civil Rights organization in the US. Its mission is “to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons.”

**Jim Crow Laws-** A set of state and local laws that legalized racial segregation. From the end of the Civil War until 1968 the laws were meant to restrict the rights of African Americans including denying the right to vote, hold jobs, get a good education and other opportunities. The justification was everything from schools to restaurants was “separate but equal” though the Jim Crow Laws and segregation heavily repressed African Americans and favored White Americans.

**Racial Segregation-** The act of keeping people separate based on race. In the United States the Jim Crow Laws repressed the rights and access of African Americans to social settings, education and politics- it was the law that African Americans could only use the spaces and facilities meant for them and could not use the same as White Americans.

**Nuremberg Laws-** A set of laws enacted in September 1935 by the Nazi Party in Germany to restrict the rights of Jews and other minority groups, denying them citizenship, access to education, jobs, and interfaith relationships.

**Propaganda-** Images, information, and media used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.

*For any questions about this lesson plan please reach out to Operations Manager, Sophie Don at [sdon@philaholocaustmemorial.org](mailto:sdon@philaholocaustmemorial.org)*

## STUDENT READING AND QUESTIONS

### **Background on the Olympics in Nazi Germany**

At the time of the 1936 Olympics, Germany was under the control of Adolph Hitler's Nazi regime. Nazis believed in the superiority of what they called the "Aryan race"—the white people of Germany—and the inferiority of Jewish and nonwhite peoples. The Nazis had enacted the Nuremberg Laws in September of 1935 excluding Jews and other minority groups from German citizenship and many rights including employment and interfaith relationships. There was antisemitic and racist propaganda all over Berlin promoting Aryan superiority and 'othering' Jews and other minority groups.

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Though some of the antisemitic imagery was hidden during the Olympic Games, the Nazi belief in white superiority was not at all secret, and Hitler hoped his Aryan athletes would prove the mythology by winning gold medals. Jewish German athletes were not allowed to compete and Jewish athletes from other countries were dissuaded from participating. Many nations decided to boycott the Olympic Games as a form of protest against the Nazi regime. Notably, the Soviet Union did not participate. Spain even organized a simultaneous alternative event, the People's Olympiad, which had athletes from 49 countries register. This event was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War just days before it was set to begin.

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### **Reflection**

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