

Berlin Games - How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream by Guy Walters.
John Murray 2006.

70 years ago the Olympic Games was held in Berlin. That innocuous sentence may not have much impact, until the extra detail is added that the 1936 Olympics took place in the capital of Nazi Germany; that such a thing could happen seems almost impossible now, though many readers will recall that an Olympics was held in Soviet Moscow in 1980, and will take place in Communist China in 2008.

The awarding of the Games to Hitler's Reich caused an enormous controversy in the sporting world, and some fierce debates about participation or boycott: in exactly the same way as in 1980, sporting bodies and national governments debated whether to send teams or not, and in 1936 as in 1980, many sportsmen and women were outraged that any political considerations should hamper their bid for Olympic glory.

Guy Walters tells the story of the Hitler Olympics with a great eye for detail, and in a way which balances politics and personalities, and on and off-track moments. The predictable villains of the Nazi hierarchy - whose pretensions and ideas seem ever more ludicrous with the passage of time - are prominent, but so are less well known figures such as Avery Brundage, the insufferably priggish American Olympic supremo, a confirmed anti-Semite who appeared to think that nothing about the Nazis merited an American boycott, and Dr Theodor Lewald, the half Jewish German delegate on the IOC, who made huge efforts to overcome all the barriers erected in the path of Germany's holding the Games.

Walters also reveals much about the on and off track exploits of leading competitors, the unexpected heroes such as Jesse Owens, whose victories did so much to infuriate Hitler and demolish his theory of Aryan superiority, and those whose victories were assured such as the decathlete Glenn Morris. There is much fascinating and surprising material also on the Jewish team members of the German and Austrian squads, whom the Nazis were forced to include by the IOC, as well as the moral and ethical choices made by some who were half-Jews.

Overall, however, one is left with an impression of a vast and highly successful propaganda exercise by the Nazis, by which the majority of the world was suckered, in the case of a few nations against their will, and the abiding hypocrisy and double standards of the IOC.

Guy Walters is to be congratulated for an excellent and highly readable book, and for the fact that he makes no attempt whatever to hide his biases!

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