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Berlin Games

HOW THE NAZIS STOLE THE
OLYMPIC DREAM

Guy Walters

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This book is for my parents,

Martin and Angela Walters

HONOURABLE CHARLES ZARAKA: A most illuminating spectacle, Mr Chan. The nations of the world about to struggle for supremacy on the field of sports. Yet behind all this there is another struggle going on constantly—for world supremacy in a more sinister field. It is not a game for amateurs, Mr Chan. I hope you get my meaning.

CHARLIE CHAN: Could not be more clear if magnified by 200-inch telescope.

From *Charlie Chan at the Olympics* (1937)
Script by Paul Burger, Robert Ellis and Helen Logan

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Preface

THE SMALL TOWN of Dallgow-Doeberitz lies some 20 miles west of Berlin. It is a down-at-heel place and its unmanned and heavily graffitied railway station greets the visitor with an air of tired menace. A few all-day drinkers sitting in a scratchy beer garden add a sense of decay, and it quickly becomes clear that the name of Dallgow-Doeberitz will never trouble the pages of any guidebook. Unsurprisingly, there is no taxi rank at the station, and the only way to summon a taxi is to ask one of the drinkers whether he knows of a firm. In return for a Pilsener, a telephone number will be issued, and after an uneasy wait, a creaky Mercedes might well turn up. The driver's surprise at seeing that he has a tourist for a fare will be magnified when he is told of his destination: *die Olympische dorf*.

After a five-minute drive along a main road, the driver turns right on to a track that runs over some rolling scrubland. The noise of crickets fills the air, which is still warmed by a setting September sun. The cabbie then turns right again, and heads towards a stand of unkempt fir and silver birch. The occasional dilapidated rooftop can be seen through gaps in the trees. After confirming that this is really where his fare wants to go, the driver heads down the ever worsening track into what remains of a village that housed over four thousand of the world's finest athletes in the summer of 1936.

Seven decades and the Soviet army have taken their toll on what should be a preserved national monument. The 150 single-storey stone huts are being consumed by undergrowth, and those windows that are not boarded up are smashed. The large crescent-shaped Housing Building, which boasted forty kitchens, each of which specialised in a different national cuisine, resembles a derelict block of flats on the most deprived of estates. On the practice running track, its cinders tufted with weeds, a flock of sheep grazes. A row of foot-high concrete blocks gives the suggestion of a viewing platform, from where athletes could monitor their rivals' abilities and techniques.

The dereliction and the eeriness of the village make it hard to envisage it as a centre of bustling joy. Could this really be what one American athlete described as 'a sight to behold', with its 'wild animals running over the grounds...and green grass mowed like a golf course'? It is more reminiscent of a concentration camp, the buildings giving the impression that something bad happened here. Like so many other decaying structures from the Nazi period, there is the normal sense of Ozymandias, the ruins symbolic of collapsed majesty. It is not a place to be after dusk, and with the taxi's meter running, it is soon time to leave.

Unlike the village, the other relic from the Eleventh Olympiad of the Modern Era is a far more impressive and intact affair. Situated halfway between Dallgow-Doeberitz and the centre of Berlin, the mighty Olympiastadion is as awe-inspiring as Adolf Hitler intended it. Clad in pale Franconian limestone, the stadium almost glows in the sunlight, its magnificent pillared curves elegant and

limestone, the stadium almost grows in the sunlight, its magnificent pilared curves elegant and powerful.

It is only upon entering the building that its sheer scale can be appreciated. As the stadium sinks 40 feet below ground level, the outside of the building gives the lie to its capacity. In 1936, it accommodated some 100,000 spectators, although today, because of the use of seats, that number has shrunk to 76,000. Nevertheless, it is vast, and unlike so many of today's steel-and-glass structures, the limestone gives the building a more natural air.

In contrast to the Olympic village, it is easy to imagine the dramatic events that took place here seventy years ago. The VIP platform where Hitler and his acolytes watched the infuriatingly fast progress of Jesse Owens eighty feet below still stands. The brazier that contained the Olympic flame is here too, along with the names of the gold medal winners carved in stone near by. Through the gap in the stadium's west end can be seen the 247-foot bell tower on the other side of the immense May Field. The tower once contained a bell that weighed over 30,000 pounds, its toll 'summoning the youth of the world' to the Games. Its chimes would have filled the stadium, but not as effectively as the sound of 100,000 singing 'Deutschland über Alles' whenever a German took gold.

Whereas other Nazi edifices such as the rally grounds at Nuremberg are rightly abandoned, this a building still very much in use—even playing host to the 2006 World Cup final. Although some argue that a structure so closely associated with the Nazi period should not be used, it would seem churlish (and uneconomical) to abandon so handsome and vast a building. In 1936 it may well have been regarded as an architectural embodiment of the waxing power of the new German Reich, but in 2006, the seventieth anniversary of the Nazis' Olympics, it stands as a symbol that Germany has the ability to come to terms with its past. Why should it not be used? What harm does it do? The shape of the Olympic Stadium does not register as a symbol of evil in the same way as the infamous entrance to Auschwitz, with its railway lines converging to pass under its all-seeing watchtower. The stadium may well not be free from guilt, but like many associated with the Nazi regime, it does not necessarily deserve the death penalty.

What follows is the story of what happened inside that village and stadium. But the story is set elsewhere too, from the plains of the American Midwest to the hilltop villages of the Korean peninsula. And if its locations are global, then its themes are of a similar stature, because this is not just a story about sport. It is also about politics, about the titanic fight between fascism and democracy. It is about racism and those who struggled to overcome it. It is about the glory of winning medals, and the despair that sees men putting bullets through their own heads. It is about Olympism itself, and how the Games of 1936 saw an ideal marriage between it and Nazism. Above all, the story shows how it is impossible to keep sport out of politics, for the simple reason that there are those who will always use athletes as their unwitting tools. Those two weeks in Berlin show how easily the naive worthiness of the Olympics could be corrupted to suit the ambitions of repellent men. It is a lesson that still needs to be learned.

Guy Walte
Heytesbu
February 20

Author's Note

This book has a large cast of characters, and for simplicity's sake I have used the names under which athletes competed. Obviously, many of the female athletes have since changed their names. As a rule I have kept to the names used in the official Olympic Report, except in the case of Kitei Son, whom I call Son Ki-Jung for reasons the book makes apparent.

Beware: there are numerous abbreviations that use the letter 'A'. Although I have endeavoured to spell out repeatedly what each stands for—and indeed to minimise their use—it might be helpful for readers to have an easily accessible list.

AAA Amateur Athletics Association (UK)

AAU Amateur Athletic Union (US)

AOA American Olympic Association

AOC American Olympic Committee

BOA British Olympic Association

BOC British Olympic Committee

BWSA British Workers' Sports Association

IAAF International Association of Athletics Federations

IOC International Olympic Committee

GOC German Olympic Committee

NWSA National Workers' Sports Association (UK)

Prologue

‘I LOOKED DOWN that field to the finish 109 yards and 2 feet away and then began to think in terms of what it had taken for me to get there...And as I looked down at the uniform of the country that I represented and realised that after all I was just a man like any other man, I felt suddenly as if my legs could not carry even the weight of my body.’

It was coming up to 4.55 p.m. on Monday, 3 August 1936. A light rain fell on Jesse Owens as he waited for the start of the 100 metres final. The temperature was mild—some 19 to 20 degrees—and a light 6 mph wind was blowing diagonally from behind him. Owens had easily got through the heats, and now just a ten-second run stood between him and an Olympic gold medal. He looked around the stadium, spotting Adolf Hitler, the patron of the Games, waiting to see whether an Aryan would triumph over this ‘Neger’, in the same way as Germany’s Max Schmeling had defeated America’s Joe Louis earlier in the year at the Yankee Stadium in New York City.

Owens had been drawn on the inside lane. Next to him stood Strandberg of Sweden, and in lane three stood Hitler’s hope, the mighty Erich Borchmeyer. The German was the Nordic archetype, every inch of his six foot pure Aryan. In lane four stood Osendarp of Holland, with the Americans Frank Wykoff and Ralph Metcalfe—Owens’ fellow African-American—in lanes five and six. Owens knew that he could beat them all, but he also knew that the same was true of Metcalfe and Borchmeyer. He recalled his coach’s words: ‘Imagine you’re sprinting over a ground of burning fire.’

At 4.58 the men dug their feet into the cinders. Hitler strained forward in his seat in the box of honour, beating his right fist on the rail in front of him. Borchmeyer *had* to win. For a mere Negro to walk away with gold would be unthinkable.

The starter’s words rang out.

‘*Auf die platz...*’

Owens looked down the lane. He could just about make out the finishing tape.

‘*Fertig!*’

Simultaneously, the six men raised their haunches. Owens swallowed, trying to control his breathing. The pistol went off, the recoil jolting the starter’s right arm. A large cloud of white smoke filled the air around his head. Owens launched himself forward, his arms starting to pump furiously. Within 20 metres, Owens was already ahead, sprinting at his top speed of 22½mph. ‘There never was a runner who showed so little sign of effort,’ wrote one observer. ‘He seemed to float along the track like water.’ One second and 10 metres later, he had widened the gap to a whole metre, making his lead

seemingly unassailable. Ralph Metcalfe had had an appalling start and was in last place, while Borchmeyer was struggling in fourth between Strandberg and Osendarp.

After 80 metres, Owens noticed that someone was closing on him. The figure was too far away to be Borchmeyer—in fact this challenger was on the other side of the track. It was Metcalfe, who was clipping away at Owens' lead with every stride. As the two men approached the tape, it looked as if Metcalfe might overtake him. More muscular than Owens, Metcalfe displayed a running style that appeared far more powerful than Owens' graceful light-footedness. He had beaten Owens before, and it looked as though he was going to beat him again.

'Ralph and I ran neck and neck,' Owens recalled. 'And then, for some unknown reason I cannot yet fathom, I beat Ralph, who was such a magnificent runner.' The 'unknown reason' was Metcalfe's appalling start. Had Metcalfe started as quickly as Owens, then the race would have been his.

Much to the Fuehrer's chagrin, the crowd went ecstatic. They shouted 'Yess-say Oh-Vens! Yess-say Oh-Vens!', not seeming to mind that Borchmeyer had come second from last. If Nazi Germany was racist, then its prejudice was seemingly put aside for a few minutes of fanatical cheering. Owens grinned, although his natural modesty made him refrain from anything more demonstrative. He had won in a time of 10.3 seconds, although the world record was denied him because of that 6 mph tail wind. Owens didn't care: 'The greatest moment of all, of course, was when we knelt and received the Wreath of Victory and standing there facing the stands we could hear the strains of the "Star Spangled Banner" rise into the air and the Stars and Stripes was hoisted to the skies.' The flag would be hoisted three more times in Owens' honour. He was doing his best to make the Games his own, but there were others for whom they represented more than the chance of winning a few races.

Sporting Spirit

WITH ITS GRAND classical façade, the town hall in Barcelona makes a suitable setting for momentous decisions. Gathered there on the morning of Sunday, 26 April 1931, were twenty men, all of whom had breakfasted well and were ready to discuss the most important matter on the agenda of their two-day meeting—the venue for the 1936 Olympic Games. The men were members of the International Olympic Committee, and this, their twenty-eighth annual meeting, was chaired by the committee's president, the fifty-five-year-old Count Henri de Baillet-Latour. The Belgian had been a member of the IOC since 1903, just nine years after it had been created to establish the first of the modern Olympic Games in Greece in 1896. A former diplomat and a keen horseman, Baillet-Latour had successfully organised the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, a feat that had been regarded as extraordinary as he had only a year to accomplish it in a country that had been ravaged by war. Tall, with balding white hair and a large but trim moustache bristling under a long nose, Baillet-Latour commanded much respect from his fellow members of the IOC.

Also present were three men who hoped to gain much from the meeting. Their names were State Excellency Dr Theodor Lewald, Dr Karl Ritter von Halt and the Count de Vallellano. Lewald and von Halt were both German members of the IOC, and they felt confident that Berlin, after years of lobbying, would be awarded the prize. Nevertheless, Vallellano, a representative of the Spanish Olympic Committee and a powerful financier with his own palace in Madrid, was hopeful that the IOC members would award the 1936 Games to Barcelona.

Although Berlin and Barcelona were the two front-runners for the prize, there were two other potential candidates for host city—Budapest and Rome. After an introduction by Baillet-Latour, the first members to speak were two Italian members of the IOC, General Carlo Montu and Count Bonacossa. To the relief of the Germans and the Spaniard, they told the meeting that 1936 was not the right time for Rome to host the Games, but they begged the committee to consider the city at some future date. The next to speak was the Hungarian, Senator Jules de Muzsa, who instead of lobbying for his capital spoke in favour of Berlin, much to the delight of Lewald and von Halt.

Lewald then addressed the meeting. For him, that Sunday morning was the potential culmination of nearly two decades of intense effort to get the Games staged in Germany. A member of the IOC since 1924, Lewald had also been head of the German Organising Committee that had been planning the 1916 Olympics, which were awarded to Berlin at Stockholm in 1912. The Germans had set to work immediately, and had constructed a magnificent stadium outside Berlin that had been dedicated by the Kaiser in 1913. Surprisingly, the outbreak of war in 1914 did little to damage the chances of the Games being held in Germany. 'In olden times it happened that it was not possible to celebrate the

Games, but they did not for this reason cease to exist,' Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics and the then president of the IOC, declared in the spring of 1915. In April, the Germans announced that the Games would simply be delayed until the end of the war, a decision agreed by the IOC.

On the 22nd of that month, however, a grey-green cloud was observed by 8,000 French colonial soldiers entrenched north of Ypres in northern France. The cloud was in fact a truly terrifying weapon. It was chlorine gas, and its sinister, billowing appearance caused the soldiers to flee. The Germans, wary of their own gas, failed to capitalise on the French retreat and the gap in the line was quickly reinforced by Allied troops. The deployment of those first few tons of chlorine changed the nature of the war, however, and soon poison gas was used on both sides. As a result of the war losing its 'gentlemanliness', Coubertin finally felt obliged to cancel the Games.

After the war ended, Lewald was to encounter more disappointments, as Germany was forbidden from taking part in the Games of 1920 and 1924. Nevertheless, along with Dr Carl Diem, his sidekick on the German Olympic Committee, he persisted in lobbying the IOC, whose new head, Baillet-Latour, was more amenable to their approaches. Lewald's efforts paid off. In 1928, Germany once more competed in the Olympics. Her performance at Amsterdam was stunning; the country came second only to the United States in the tally of medals. With eight gold medals, seven silver and fourteen bronze, Germany had firmly re-established herself as an Olympic power. Naturally, Lewald was determined to capitalise on the German success. In May 1930, the IOC held its congress in Berlin. Setting the tone for the gathering, President Hindenburg declared that 'physical culture must be a life habit'. But the meeting was more of a showcase for Lewald than the ageing president. If Lewald could sufficiently impress the visiting Olympic dignitaries, then there was a good chance that Berlin might soon host the Games. Lewald was mercenary, even reminding the delegates that it was thanks to the work of German scholars that so much was known about classical Olympism. Rooted in antiquity, Germany was the natural home for the Games, he claimed.

Lewald drew on the same themes at the meeting that Sunday morning in April 1931. As a former under-secretary of state, the seventy-year-old Lewald was used to the sophisticated parley of the committee room. He made the case for Berlin impressively, with no need to draw on the smooth charm of his colleague, the handsome financier and war hero von Halt. Lewald said that Berlin deserved the Games, not least because it had been denied them in 1916, and also because Berlin, being in the heart of Europe, would attract far more visitors than Barcelona. The Count de Vallellano then made the case for Barcelona, and Baillet-Latour called for the votes to be cast.

There was a problem, however, a problem that should have been dealt with sooner. The attendees present did not even constitute half the membership of the IOC, which was nearly sixty strong. In the days before jet aircraft, such a poor showing was by no means uncommon, but with such an important decision at stake, it was decided to wait for the votes of absent members to be mailed or sent by telegram to the IOC headquarters in Lausanne. The votes that had already been cast were sealed. Now there was nothing the IOC could do but wait.

Lewald and his team had to kick their heels for nearly three agonising weeks. At last, on Wednesday, 13 May, the final count was held in the Swiss lakeside town. In the presence of the vice-president of the IOC, Baron Godfroy de Blonay, and the magistrate of Lausanne, Mr Paul Perret, the envelopes were opened. Eight IOC members, dissatisfied by both cities, abstained. Sixteen votes were

cast for Barcelona. Berlin received a commanding forty-three votes, which represented three-quarters of those available. It was a triumphant victory not only for Lewald but also for Germany. The vote signified that thirteen years after the war, she was ready to be readmitted to the pantheon of 'respectable' nations.

It is easy to underestimate how desperately Germany wanted to be regarded as a civilised country. Since the legal establishment of the Weimar Republic in August 1919, the grip of democracy in Germany was anything but strong. For the twelve years leading up to her being awarded the Olympics, the country suffered a succession of left-wing and right-wing putsches and economic crises. In March 1920, when the new national government was less than year old, a group of far-right paramilitaries—members of the infamous Freikorps—seized Berlin and installed Wolfgang Kapp, a right-wing journalist, as Chancellor. The legitimate government called for a general strike, and within four days the Kapp putsch had failed. It was the left's turn next, and the Ruhr soon fell under the command of a 50,000-strong 'Red Army'. This was quashed by an amalgam of the regular army and Freikorps units.

On the evening of Thursday, 8 November 1923, yet another putsch was mounted, this time by the fledgling Nazi Party. Under the command of their firebrand thirty-four-year-old leader, Adolf Hitler, and General Erich Ludendorff, the Nazis attempted to seize power in Munich by storming the Buergerbräukeller, where Gustav von Kahr, the Bavarian commissar, was addressing a crowd of 3,000. The Beer Hall Putsch was a failure. Far from being the 'national revolution' that Hitler announced when he mounted the stage, the attempted coup disintegrated into violent farce. After a night of confusion, Ludendorff decided the following morning that the Nazis should do something proactive and march—although quite where, no one knew. When the column of around two thousand neared the Defence Ministry, shots were fired, resulting in the deaths of four policemen and fourteen insurgents. Hitler was captured and subsequently sentenced to five years in Landsberg Prison, where, assisted by Rudolf Hess, he wrote *Mein Kampf*.

It was not just political turbulence which threatened the integrity of the Weimar Republic. In 1923, the government defaulted on its reparations payments, demanded by the Treaty of Versailles, and as a result the French and Belgians occupied the Ruhr in January. A series of strikes further damaged the economy, and in order to pay the striking workers their benefits the government decided to print currency. The now infamous hyper-inflation took hold, and by November of that year it required 4,200,000,000,000 marks to buy one dollar. At the beginning of the year the exchange rate had been 4.2 marks to the dollar. Nevertheless, after a revaluation, the situation was brought under control, and until 1929 Germany enjoyed a relatively stable six years.

In 1930, however, Germany was hit by the Great Depression. The political result was a resurgence of extremist parties, and in the election of September 1930 the Nazis became the second-largest party in the Reichstag, holding 107 seats, or 18.3 per cent of the vote. Hitler, who had been released from prison just over a year after the Beer Hall Putsch, ruled his party by means of the *Fuehrerprinzip*, which demanded absolute loyalty to him as leader. His style of leadership appealed not just to established Nazis, but also to the masses of farmers, veterans and members of the middle class who had voted for him. Furthermore, the party's emphasis on ritual, the wearing of uniforms and elaborate ceremony, elevated the image of the party above that of merely another manifestation of the lunatic fringe. To many Germans, the appeal of Nazism lay in its look, which suggested in an almost cultist fashion the virtues of discipline, order and strength.

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