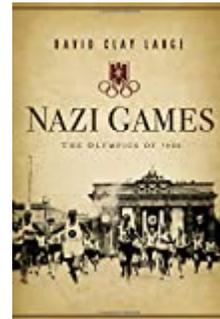




**David Clay Large.** *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. xiii + 401 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-05884-0.



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## The Games Must Go On, and So Do the Shelves of Books on Them

David Clay Large has written an engaging account of the 1936 Olympic Games that aims at a popular audience and deserves to find one. His book enters a very crowded field, however, as the title of this review indicates (although, in the interest of accuracy, Avery Brundage's famous statement "The games must go on" referred not to the Berlin Olympics, but to the 1972 Munich games). A quick search that combines the term "Nazi" or "Hitler's" with the term "Olympics" or "Games" will reveal an extensive body of scholarship, albeit one that shows limited creativity in title selection. This field shows no sign of satiation, either. Chris Mack, in fact, published a review of Christopher Hilton's *Hitler's Olympics* (2006) on H-German as well, just weeks after I had received my review copy of *Nazi Games*.

The timing of the book's publication may, nevertheless, prove fortuitous. The 1936 Olympics continue to fascinate, after all, with their combination of behind-the-scenes power struggles, overt propagandizing, mobilized political protest, and athletic drama. In addition, Berlin's hosting of the 2006 soccer World Cup directed international attention once again to the Olympic stadium, the

architectural symbol of the 1936 games. The appearance this spring of two well-publicized biographies on Leni Riefenstahl, director of the famous documentary film about those games, has doubtless stoked additional public interest in the eleventh Olympiad. Furthermore, as the world focuses its attention on the upcoming 2008 Olympics in Beijing, many see troubling parallels to, and seek possible lessons from, its predecessor just over seventy years ago. As historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom recently wrote in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed piece, "Foreign critics of today's China have adopted the Berlin Olympics of 1936 as their favorite analogy." [1]

The most important factor working in Large's favor, though, is his own skill at effortless, straightforward storytelling. Large incorporates some of his own archival research into this study, and *Nazi Games* will provide some new details, and perhaps offer up a few surprises, for scholars in the field, particularly with regard to the organization and policing of both the winter games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and the summer games in Berlin. Such archival research notwithstanding, *Nazi Games* primarily synthesizes the existing scholar-

ship on the 1936 Olympics, and the book advances no overarching argument. Instead, Large develops a few subtle themes as he weaves a neatly told, anecdote-rich account of the origins, organization, political controversies, and athletic outcomes of the competitions, as well as a brief epilogue on their legacy. In doing so, he succeeds admirably in his stated goal of providing “a comprehensive study for general readers” (p. 13).

Large casts his net widely, covering every aspect of these Olympic Games and setting them carefully in their political, economic, and athletic contexts. He divides the book into nine chapters, the first of which provides an overview of the modern Olympic movement itself. The next three chapters discuss Germany’s successful bid to host the 1936 Olympics, won in 1931; the international movement to boycott those games; and the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, which the Nazi regime approached as a dress rehearsal for the main summer event. Large then dedicates five chapters to the Berlin games themselves, including the physical preparations, the propaganda offensive, a sport-by-sport summary of the athletic results—which extends over two chapters—and, finally, a look at the filming and reception of Riefenstahl’s documentary film *Olympia* (released in 1938). The book concludes with a brief epilogue that traces the later lives of some of the leading athletes and the fate of the Olympic movement itself in Germany, including several pages devoted to the tragic kidnapping and killing of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich games.

The 1936 Olympic Games set notable precedents for the Olympic movement in general and highlighted important technologies that had just emerged in the mid-1930s, points to which Large returns throughout his study. Most famously, of course, organizers launched the tradition of the Olympic torch relay and lighting ceremony. They also promoted the games, both winter and summer, as tourist destinations to an unprecedented degree. In fact, organizers integrated many aspects of commerce into the games, an emerging Olympic trend that the Germans carried to a new level. At the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, for instance, Coca-Cola became an official sponsor; Ovaltine earned the right to call itself the “official drink” of the athletes; and the organizers licensed and marketed an “Official Pin of the Fourth Winter Games” (p. 114). This commercialism continued apace at the summer games, where early experiments in television also foreshadowed the emergence of yet another ubiquitous aspect of the modern Olympics. Organizers set up twenty-five “tele-

vision rooms” across Berlin, where the public could view broadcast coverage of the sporting events, although the grainy images and unreliable feeds undoubtedly frustrated many eager viewers.

Large writes in a brisk, clever style that will appeal to general readers and specialists alike, and he displays an infectious love of details. Readers learn, for instance, that Hitler’s famous “snub” of Jesse Owens, in which the German leader refused to congratulate the sprinter on his gold medal victories personally, reflected a blanket policy of not congratulating any winners. Hitler only declared this policy after the conclusion of the first day of competition, though, when it had become clear that he would otherwise be publicly shaking a lot of black hands. Owens, for his part, felt far more snubbed by President Roosevelt, who declined to send even a telegram, a slight that prompted Owens to campaign on behalf of Roosevelt’s Republican opponent, Alf Landon, in that fall’s presidential election (pp. 231-233). Large rarely misses an opportunity to take the reader on such anecdotal detours, which keep the tone conversational and generally entertaining, but will frustrate those readers looking for a tighter focus on the narrative thread. We learn, among other things, that future child-rearing expert Dr. Benjamin Spock won a gold medal in rowing at the 1924 Olympics; that Austrian skier Heinrich Harrer was portrayed by Brad Pitt in the film *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997); and that the sports reporter that the *Washington Post* dispatched to the Berlin games went on to write the bestselling novel, *The Poseidon Adventure* (1969).

The brisk momentum of *Nazi Games* sometimes propels Large a bit too quickly over fascinating, potentially even groundbreaking points. He notes, almost in passing, that the Gestapo granted white athletes in the Olympic village sexual access to “Aryan” women, with the understanding that the state would assist in caring for any resulting children, who would—ostensibly—possess especially good genes (pp. 182-183). Large bases this passage exclusively on the testimony of Swiss Olympian Paul Martin, as quoted in William Johnson’s book, *All that Glitters is Not Gold* (1972). If true, this tidbit suggests an interesting new aspect of the Lebensborn program, but Large does not corroborate Martin’s claim with additional sources, and he fails to pursue this point further or contextualize it within a discussion of the Nazi state’s larger racial policies.

Large also briefly raises the fascinating issue of Germany’s collective memory of the 1936 Olympics at several moments in the book, a topic that merits fuller treat-

ment. He makes the important point that “these games are among the few undertakings of the Nazi era that many Germans even today believe reflect a more ‘positive’ side of Hitler’s Germany,” and he refers to the nostalgic public commemorations that took place (in West Germany) on the games’ fiftieth anniversary in 1986 (p. 14). Sadly, Large leaves this theme undeveloped, returning only briefly to it in the epilogue, when he discusses Berlin’s ill-fated bid in 1993 to host the 2000 Olympics. Here, Large argues that many Germans, or at least many Berliners, actually harbored negative associations regarding the 1936 Games, not warmly nostalgic ones, and that they viewed the prospect of hosting another Olympic competition in the 1936 stadium as “an insult to the memory of all those who had suffered under the Nazis” (p. 339). These two contradictory statements actually indicate a highly contested public memory that warrants further study, especially in light of last year’s international soccer championship, which witnessed an unprecedented outburst of publicly expressed German patriotism, and which Germany hosted in the very same stadium to which Hitler had welcomed the world’s best athletes in 1936. Volkwin Marg, the architect in charge of reconstructing the stadium for the 2006 World Cup, saw the event as an opportunity to educate the public about the Nazi past. “You can’t overcome history by destroying it,” he told the *New York Times*. “We have to overcome our role in history by demonstrating it.” To that end, galleries that surround the stadium documented its use under the Nazi regime.[2]

Like most contemporary books aimed at a popular audience, this one reveals a frustrating aversion to endnotes, although the fault here lies with the publisher and not with the author. Some quotations, statistics, and assertions for which one might expect a citation lack one. The endnotes that are included, moreover, are not indicated in the text by a superscript. Instead, one turns—continually, hopefully—to the “Notes” section at the end of the book and scans for a snippet of the relevant passage, which, if there, precedes the citation.

I also have one small correction and one small addendum to add to Large’s carefully researched, thorough book. The correction concerns his statement that Tilly Fleischer was the first German woman ever to win a gold medal in a summer games (p. 229), a distinction that belongs to Lina Radke-Batschauer, who won the gold medal in the 800 meters at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, just

before the IOC voted to eliminate that event from the Olympic program on the grounds that it overtaxed female constitutions. The addendum concerns the fate of the champion German-Jewish high jumper Gretel Bergmann, an important figure whom Large thoughtfully discusses on several occasions. When Olympic officials pressured the Germans to include at least one (token) Jewish athlete on their national team, as a means of placating overseas leaders who might otherwise have succumbed to the call for a boycott, they initially vetted Bergmann’s name. The Nazis found Bergmann, “a full Jew,” unacceptable, and opted instead to include the half-Jewish fencer Helene Mayer. Large includes a postscript to this saga, noting that Bergmann, who emigrated to the United States in 1937, declined an invitation by the Germans to attend the 1986 anniversary commemorations in Berlin. Bergmann explained her refusal with the comment that, even after fifty years, her “disappointment and bitterness [had] only slightly abated” (p. 86). Happily, the postscript does not end here, though. Bergmann was the guest of the German Olympic Committee at the 1996 Atlanta Games, and later returned to Germany to attend ceremonies for the renaming of a sports center in Berlin and a stadium in her hometown of Laupheim after her.[3]

Amid the shelves of books devoted to the 1936 games, Large’s work merits the attention of any reader who seeks a well-written and accessible account of these Olympics. Those who teach undergraduate courses on sports history or the history of the Olympics, both of which appear more and more frequently in college catalogs, might also consider assigning this book. The students will appreciate it, and Large raises some important issues that should stimulate useful discussions.

#### Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “The Dangers of Dim Sum History,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 8, 2007), M5.

[2]. On the issue of public memory during the World Cup preparations, including the comments by Marg, see Mark Landler, “In Berlin, Every Cheer Casts an Eerie Echo,” *New York Times* (December 8, 2005), C17 and further comments on H-German at < [http://www.h-net.org/~german/resources/MfG\\_index.htm](http://www.h-net.org/~german/resources/MfG_index.htm) >.

[3]. Ira Berkow, “Long Overdue, Germany Recognizes a Champion,” *New York Times* (October 28, 2002), D11.

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<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

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