

The Nazi Olympics, International Diplomacy and Mass Control: The Origin of Sport as a Political Tool in the Cold War Era

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The evolution of industrial society steadily altered, then decisively changed the nature of spectator sports. A leisured class's play became a political elite's tool for mass manipulation. The 1936 Nazi Olympics ended one era and birthed a new. British amateurism, the ethics of good sportsmanship, and sport as the expression of the individual died upon the playing fields of the Reichssportfeld. From their remains emerged the characteristics of Cold War sport: professionalization, a ruthless desire for victory, sport as an expression of the state which subsidizes and controls it. Through the communications media the elite uses sport to spread their message to the masses. The mainspring for this transition lay in the development of industrial society:

1) Sports and Leisure

Industrialization steadily increased productivity and freed a growing number from work. With leisure the bulk of a society's population forms an audience sport can manipulate.

2) The Garrison State

Sociologist Harold D. Lasswell first coined this term in a classic 1941 essay one reviewer called "a sociological version of George Orwell's 1984".¹ Protracted conflict characterizes the development of industrial societies from the imperialistic rivalries of the late 19th century, through world wars and cold war. War requires quick, secretive decisions; democracy needs full information, open decision, and the time and freedom to decide. Geared for war, suspicious of dissent, industrial societies in conflict tend to become armies, ruled by authoritarian elites. To an elite sport offers an instrument of mass control.

From 1933 to 1936 these tendencies of industrial society intertwined to produce politicized sport. While the war cut short its immediate development, politicized sport became a permanent institution of the Cold War world. In the United States and the Soviet Union and on their battlefield in the Third World, sport has grown as a potent tool of mass manipulation.