

The Voices of Sanity: American Diplomatic Reports From Berlin in 1936

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The 1936 Olympic festival and the accompanying boycott movement long has been recognized as one of the most controversial events in sport history. It attracted serious attention by a variety of social commentators and sport historians. In the latter's conventional hierarchy of society factors, emphasis was mostly placed on Nazi policies against Jewish athletes and their repercussions on the international sport scene while the political turmoil in the highest echelons of the American government has most often been a mere appendix.

The objective of this paper is to analyze highly confidential reports of the American diplomatic personnel, stationed in Nazi Germany, relating to the subject of the Berlin Olympics. These diplomatic reports shed canny light on the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of three carrier officers of the diplomatic corp who had the opportunity to gain first hand experience of Nazi measures against Jewish athletes as well as the political motives behind the Olympic Games. All three not only perceived the underlying German motives for organizing the Games in Berlin, but all three were also unanimous in their opinion that the holding of the festival on German soil was a disaster for the free-world.

George S. Messersmith, Raymond H. Geist, and William E. Dodd were all eminent diplomats. Among them, Messersmith, the American Consul General in Berlin, was the first to alert the State Department to the political ramifications of the Olympic festival to be held in Nazi Germany. In 1933 the observant Consul advised Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State, in an unsolicited report to pressure the U.S. Olympic Committee to send a representative to Germany to witness the anti-Jewish measures adopted in German sport. He voiced his belief that "unless the American Committee USOC can definitely satisfy itself by first-hand knowledge and observation that this discrimination against Jews no longer takes place, I do not believe that it would remain a representative of American sport tradition if American athletes participate in the Olympic Games in 1936."

Even after his transfer to Vienna in 1935, the Consul General was acutely aware of the dubious moral grounds on which the USOC, and namely Avery Brundage, based its decision to participate in the Berlin Olympics. ". . . I am of the opinion that the American Olympic Committee in taking the stand which it has, has failed in its duty towards the young people of our country." In order to underline his argument, Messersmith recalled his conversation with Dr. Theodore Lewald, head of the German Organizing Committee, who confided to the American diplomat of his fears about Nazi reprisals against him and his family. Messersmith's reply was uncompromising: ". . . there were times when, in order to maintain one's self-respect and the confidence of one's friends, one must accept the consequences which come from doing right."

Raymond H. Geist, the American Consul, and William E. Dodd, the American Ambassador in Berlin, shared Messersmith's concern about holding the Games in Nazi Germany and voiced their opposition to American participation in the Games on numerous occasions. Dodd, characterized by a contemporary as a "brilliant and sensitive man," was not satisfied merely to observe the tragic chain of events unfolding prior to the Games but sent embassy staffers to investigate conditions surrounding the Olympic controversy. The Ambassador, following clandestine meetings with German-Jewish sport functionaries and personal observations, perceived the deep concern of German Jews. "It is no exaggeration," he wrote at the end of 1935, "to say that the Jewish population awaits with fear and trembling the termination of the Olympic period which has vouchsafed them a certain respite against molestation . . ." In private conversations, the hope was often conveyed to the Ambassador that America "would not participate in the Olympic Games."

Consul General Messersmith was perhaps the most candid in his opposition to American participation in the Games: "as the Jews under the Nuremberg laws are not first class German citizens, there is no longer any doubt that all persons with any strain of Jewish blood, no matter how attenuated, will not be permitted to compete for Germany." The Consul predicted, almost prophetically, that "the holding or the non-holding of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 will play an important part in determining political developments in Europe." The future chain of events exonerated the pessimistic vision of Messersmith .

In the final account, the boycott movement against the Berlin Olympics in America failed. There were numerous reasons for this failure. It is significant, however, that a voice of sanity and decency was still heard, when other branches of the American government chose to stay silent.