

GRADUATE ESSAY WINNER

A Tale of Two Diplomats: George S. Messersmith and Charles H. Sherrill on Proposed American Participation in the Berlin Olympics

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The 1936 Berlin Olympics remains one of the most intensively studied Olympiads in modern history. The mystique of the Jesse Owens controversy, Hitler's boast of 'Aryan supremacy', and the blatant program of anti-Semitism in German social and sporting life during the pre-Olympic years, have attracted the attention of numerous historians.

A number of countries considered a boycott as a means of expressing contempt for Germany's anti-Semitic policies. A significant amount of research has addressed the American reaction to Nazi discrimination against German-Jewish athletes. Discussion of the issue at the amateur sport level, as well as events preceding America's decision to participate have received the majority of scholarly attention. This paper investigated the involvement of two individuals who played roles in the diplomatic scenario surrounding the Games of the Eleventh Olympiad: Berlin Consul General George S. Messersmith and American I.O.C. representative Charles H. Sherrill.

Messersmith's personal papers located at the University of Delaware reveal the intense interest that he displayed in regard to the participation issue. He felt that the safety of American-Jewish athletes could not be guaranteed, and that a Berlin site invited racial problems during the festival. Messersmith believed that Sherrill was downplaying the gravity of the discrimination in order to convince his colleagues that the German capital was conducive to American participation. He felt that Sherrill's deliberate ignorance of the discrimination represented a grave failure, and a betrayal of the trust of the American people. In communication with his superiors in Washington (Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Undersecretary of State William Phillips, and Chief of Western European Affairs James Clement Dunn), Messersmith urged the State Department to relay an accurate picture of the discrimination to the American



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Olympic Committee (A.O.C.) members. Messersmith stressed that, contrary to I.O.C. regulations, Jewish athletes were not eligible for the German Olympic team. While Messersmith toiled in Germany (and later in Austria following a 1934 transfer) gathering information, Sherrill vociferously campaigned for the support of an American Olympic entry.

Despite Messersmith's warnings, the State Department refrained from intervention. A senior Jewish advisor, Judge Samuel I. Rosemnan, counselled President Roosevelt in December 1933 to avoid the Olympic participation debate. The government's stand indicated a cautious approach to a potentially politically damaging issue. The absence of the State Department from the debate undoubtedly assisted those who campaigned for, and eventually ensured, American participation.

Messersmith's persistence deserves admiration. His broad scope of correspondence within the State Department indicates that he felt that participation had serious ramifications. Whereas Messersmith's efforts deserve respect, the actions of Charles Sherrill cannot be placed in such favourable light. His position on the I.O.C. was a critical post in terms of the effect that it would have on the outcome of the American debate. He allowed himself to become compromised for the sake of participation. An analysis of the respective approaches adopted by Sherrill and Messersmith not only encapsulates the beliefs of many who took opposite sides, but also reveals the intensity and determination with which the participation battle was waged.