

Who Called the Shots? F.D.R.'s Involvement in the Question of Proposed American Participation in the 1936 Olympics

Stephen R. Wenn

University of Western Ontario

The Berlin Olympic festival has been considered a watershed event in the history of the involvement of politics in the modern Olympic movement. Although previous Olympic celebrations had witnessed various forms of political encroachment, the indiscretions committed by the German government during the 1933-1936 period were unprecedented. The Nazi hierarchy's control of Olympic preparations, the exploitation of the movement for propaganda purposes, and the blatant discrimination encountered by German-Jewish athletes who attempted to qualify for Germany's Olympic team, represent established facts which support the claim.

During the pre-festival years American citizens, politicians, and amateur sport leaders debated the wisdom of American participation in light of the turbulent social and political situation in Germany. Curiously, investigation of the posture adopted by the Roosevelt Administration in relation to the issue has been limited. The paper attempted to outline Roosevelt's involvement in the Olympic issue, and illustrate the impact that the President had on America's decision to participate.

Although official documents indicate that the Olympic situation reached the president's desk, his personal involvement in the public debate regarding participation was exceedingly limited. He made no public statements in support of, or in opposition to, American participation. Undoubtedly, the government decision to remain neutral with respect to America's participation in Berlin was made by Roosevelt, however, the extent to which the Olympic issue was considered separate and distinct from the more global controversy concerning discrimination encountered by German Jews appears limited. Therefore, the government's Olympic policy was dictated by its carefully nurtured neutral stance adopted in response to the Nazis' treatment of the German-Jewish citizenry. The extent to which the Olympic issue was dealt with on a daily or weekly basis was difficult to ascertain as foreign policy meetings between Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull were not recorded in transcript form.

Recent Olympic history is replete with examples of government-inspired boycotts of the quadrennial festival. For this reason it is interesting to take a retrospective look at the manner in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt avoided involving his Administration, and the spectre of American politics, in the 1936 Olympics.