

The Politics of Participation: Avery Brundage and the 1936 Olympic Boycott Debate

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Nearly two years after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expressed its renewed confidence in the Weimar Republic of Germany by deeming it fit to host the Eleventh Olympic Games, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. From the onset of his rule, Hitler orchestrated a campaign of terror against non-Aryan members of the German community. Almost immediately after the Nazis assumed power, Olympic officials began to express concern about the contradiction between the Olympic ideal of fair play and equality and the Nazi regime's overt discrimination against Jews and other non-Aryans. The question of whether or not to boycott the

Olympics became front-page news across the United States. As the debate progressed in the United States, two individuals quickly came to represent the opposing opinions concerning participation in the 1936 Games. Avery Brundage, the President of the American Olympic Committee (AOC), staunchly supported sending American athletes to Berlin, consistently touting the separation of sports and politics. Brundage was opposed by Jeremiah T. Mahoney, the head of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and a former New York State Supreme Court Justice, who argued that sending a team to Berlin represented a tacit endorsement of the Nazi regime.

This paper examines the measures taken by Avery Brundage to ensure US participation in the Berlin Olympiad. Brundage singularly and effectively controlled the debate concerning US participation in the Games. The AOC expressed its confidence in Brundage's leadership and judgment, sending him to inspect Germany's treatment of its Jewish athletes in September 1934. Following this visit, Brundage developed a fascination with Germany, and his antisemitic tendencies and rhetoric increased. Not even the passage of the overtly discriminatory Nuremberg Laws in September 1935 could dissuade Brundage from advocating participation. As the debate peaked in late 1935, Brundage authored an AOC pamphlet titled *Fair Play for American Athletes* (1935), in which he argued that the American athlete must not be "made a martyr to a cause not his own," and that Germany's policies against Jews had been blown out of proportion by the Jewish controlled media. Despite Mahoney's argument that the US must boycott the Games on moral principle, Brundage effectively blamed the boycott movement on "Jews and Communists," exploiting the increasingly antisemitic and xenophobic sentiment in the US during the mid-1930s. This paper discusses Brundage's victory in the debate concerning US participation, including his questionable administration of the final vote to participate in December 1935, and his drive to force the expulsion of members of the AOC who favored a boycott. Finally it examines Brundage's election to the IOC during the 1936 Games and his increasingly antisemitic activities prior to World War II.

Avery Brundage's unyielding dedication to the Olympic ideal of fair play and equality initially blinded him from making rational, educated decisions concerning US participation in the 1936 Olympics. Furthermore, as the debate progressed throughout 1933-1936, Brundage became increasingly antisemitic and enamoured with Germany and the Nazi regime's planning of the most lavish Olympics the world had ever known.