

Exhibit revisits issues of 1936 Olympics: Berlin games at Holocaust Museum

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The protests over China's human rights record and its treatment of Tibet as Beijing prepares to host the 2008 Olympics underline a key fact: sports and politics are supposed to remain separate, but rarely do.

An exhibit now at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum outlines another stark example of how athletes can become unwitting political ambassadors: the 1936 Berlin Olympics, used by the Nazis as international propaganda to trumpet the strength, nobility and supposed superiority of the German people.

The exhibit, touring the United States since 1998, traces Germany's efforts to regain stature after its withering defeat in World War I. Germany won the bid to host the 1936 Olympics in 1931, two years before Adolf Hitler came to power. But international debate on whether countries should boycott the games grew heated as Germany banned Jews and Gypsies from its teams and racism and anti-Semitism in the country increased.

Many know the story of African-American runner Jesse Owens, who triumphantly took home four gold medals from the Berlin games. A lesser-known fact is that Owens was a sensation in Germany even before the games and was mobbed and adored for his skill and charisma.

Also frequently glossed over is the fact that Americans' attitudes toward blacks in the 1930s were not much better than Germans'. Jim Crow laws, separate drinking fountains and the threat of lynching were very real in the United States, but largely nonexistent in Germany at the time of the games. "At least in Germany, we didn't have to sit at the back of the bus," said Mack Robinson, brother of baseball's Jackie Robinson, according to the exhibit's curator.

Despite the black athletes' success, Germany dominated the Olympics and projected strength to the world, reviving the spirits of its people.

As the games took place, just a few miles away from the Olympic stadiums in Berlin another large construction project was under way—Germany was building concentration camps. Many German athletes, including medal winners from previous Olympics, died in the camps.

“The Nazi Olympics” opened at the museum in April and runs through August 17. -
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