

LLC Syllabus

The 1936 Olympics: The Intersection of Sports, Politics, Race, Journalism, Technology, and the Arts

Fall 2025

When? Fridays, 10:00 am-noon at Shriners Center
September 19 – November 21, 2025

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Course Description The 1936 Berlin Olympics were presided over by Adolf Hitler, and served as a propaganda tool for the Nazi regime. But those 16 days in August were also a significant event in the history of sport and of the world. We will spend the first few weeks watching and analyzing Leni Riefenstahl's ground-breaking 1938 film (two two-hour films, actually) entitled *Olympia*. We'll look at American and global athletic stars—including Jesse Owens and "The Boys in the Boat." Other topics of interest include manifestations of anti-Semitism, the boycott movement in the US and elsewhere, historic Olympic firsts in 1936 (including the torch relay), the presence/absence of Jewish and black athletes, the use of brand new technology (film-making, stop motion cameras, radio/TV broadcast techniques), musicians who composed the sound track of the Olympics (including Richard Strauss), and writings of those who attended the games including Thomas Wolfe, Charles & Anne Lindbergh, and William Shirer. What was the attitude of the world at the end of the 1936 Olympics? Did holding the Olympics in Berlin in 1936 play an important role in determining subsequent political events in Europe?

Format

Each participant will be expected to watch the Riefenstahl films (in preparation for discussion during weeks 2 and 3 of class), and then later (weeks 4-9) to manage 45-50 minutes of class time on a topic chosen from the syllabus. We will address the pre-Olympic issues at the beginning and the post-Olympic issues at the end, but otherwise you are free to choose both your topic and your week. (See "Presentation Topics" on pp. 8-11 of the syllabus.)

NOTE: You may also suggest a topic of your own but it must be approved by the coordinator.

**Recommended
Summer Reading
and Viewing**

I recommend that you read one of the books on the references list at the end of this syllabus (choose from one novel and two very readable non-fiction books) to give you an introduction to the subject and the times.

I also recommend that you watch at least one of the videos listed (one feature film, two hour-long documentaries, and a series of shorter films) for some visual imagery.

This reading and viewing is not required, but it will be helpful in providing a context in which to fit your topic.

Films

There are some things to note about viewing the Riefenstahl films. First, you should watch the 2010 restored version—there is a huge difference in quality.

The best free place I found to watch the restored Part 1 is at the following site:

<https://www.docsonline.tv/olympia/>

Part 2 (restored) is best viewed here:

<https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/olympia-part-two-festival-of-beauty>

You do have to sign up for the Criterion Channel, but there is a 7-day free trial. So sign up when you want to watch the film (close to the class date) and don't forget to cancel. You will have to put in a credit card number but if you cancel by the date indicated you won't be charged. I can vouch for this!!

You can also watch part 1 there if you wish.

There may be other places to access this film—just make sure it's the restored version.

Finally, you may/may not have access to English subtitles but it doesn't really matter. This is a visual experience!!

Course Schedule

Class	Date	Topic	Assignment	Presenters/Discussion Leaders
1	Sept. 19	Introduction to class	TBD	<u>Cathy Hurst</u>
2	Sept. 26	FILM: <i>Olympia, part 1 (Festival of the Nations)</i> (about 2 hours)	Watch film, explore topics that interest you, be prepared to discuss	<u>Cathy Hurst</u>
3	Oct. 3	FILM: <i>Olympia, part 2 (Festival of Beauty)</i> (about 2 hours)	Watch film, explore topics that interest you, be prepared to discuss	<u>Cathy Hurst</u>
4	Oct. 10	TOPIC 1: Pre-Olympics TOPIC 2: Olympic Boycott Debate		<u>Marilyn & Stephen Kaplan</u> <i>Class group project – more info to follow</i>
5	Oct. 17	TOPIC 3: Politics TOPIC 4: Propaganda		<u>Joe Petterutti</u> <u>Roberta Arsac</u>
6	Oct. 24	TOPIC 5: The Arts TOPIC 6: Journalism/Press/Authors		<u>Pamela McClain</u> <u>Nanci Martin</u>

7	Oct. 31	TOPIC 7: Technology TOPIC 8: Women Athletes	<u>Ruth Guyer</u> <u>Cindy Sutton</u>
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8	Nov. 7	TOPIC 9: Jewish Athletes TOPIC 10: Boys in the Boat	<u>Stuart Einhorn</u> <u>Art Norwalk</u>
9	Nov. 14	TOPIC 11: Jesse Owens TOPIC 12: Black US Athletes	<u>David Gardner</u> <u>Jim Cowan</u>
10	Nov. 21	TOPIC 13: Untold stories TOPIC 14: Post-Olympics	<i>Class group project—more info to follow</i>

Guidelines for Presentations

Your session should be about 45-50 minutes in length (including at least 15 minutes of class questions/discussion time).

There are many different formats you may use for your session. You are welcome to do a PowerPoint presentation, or to use flip charts or handouts. Or you may wish to point the class ahead of time to an article or video that helps to illustrate your topic, and then manage a discussion of it. You may wish to send some discussion questions out to the class ahead of time. If your topic offers clearly contrasting points of view, you and a classmate may choose to use a debate format in class, or to manage a debate within the class.

Please use relevant research material from a variety of sources—not just a Wikipedia article. (Wikipedia can be a good jumping off point. But the best part of Wikipedia is the reference to original sources at the bottom of the writeup—explore those!)

Use your own words. And please try not to read your presentation. It's OK to work from notes, but be sufficiently familiar with the material that you can take a breath and make eye contact with the class!

Audiovisual support (whether it's photographs, drawings, maps, musical recordings, video, etc.) will help to tell your story.

I encourage you to consult LLC's guidelines for session leaders.

<https://www.lifelonglearningcollaborative.org/help-for-presentations-and-discussions/>

**Classroom
Technology**

The TV/computer setup in each room accepts thumb drives and provides Internet access. Individual laptops may NOT be connected to these setups. *Only the class coordinator or a trained designee* should set up the TV/computer at the beginning of class and break it down at the end of class. If you have not been trained, do not set up or change the classroom technology.

The technology is set up to accommodate PowerPoint, Apple Keynote and other Apple apps, and PDF files. Google Slides must be converted to PDFs; PowerPoint slides may be shown either as PowerPoint files or as PDF files. All PowerPoint and PDF files should be saved to a thumb drive.

For more information and help with classroom technology and with the preparation of presentations and slideshows, please explore the technology help pages on the LLC website, located under the Member Resources menu.

LLC Policies

Food: Food and drink may be consumed in the coffee room. Beverages with a lid are permitted in the classroom.

Parking: The parking lot is adjacent to the Shriners Center. You can park in any available space.

Cancellations: All information about class cancellations for any reason (including weather) will be communicated to the class by the coordinator through email.

Presentation Topics

There are two established topics, Pre-Olympics and Post-Olympics, which need to be offered on the assigned dates in the course calendar.

Other than that, you may select both your topic and your date. The reason for this is twofold. First it doesn't make a lot of difference which topic is discussed first since everything happened at essentially the same time. And, secondly, I want each of you to be able to choose the area you wish to pursue. There are more choices here than participants in the course, so everyone should find something that works! Also, you don't need to address every point in the right-hand column. That section is really designed as a series of prompts, to get you to think about all the different ways you could approach the topic. If you have an idea for a presentation that doesn't fit any of these categories, or that crosses categories, let's discuss.

Topic	Questions to Explore
Pre-Olympics	General situation in Germany and in America (economy, effects of the Depression, etc.) 1932-1936. What were US attitudes towards Germany in this period and vice versa? When and why was Germany selected to host? What did they have to do to prepare? Berlin had an interesting history under the Weimar Republic that changed when Hitler came to power (see <i>Cabaret</i>). Were remnants of this permissiveness still there in 1936? What "dressing up" of Berlin for the Olympics happened? (Jews, Gypsies, night clubs, etc.)
The arts	There was a simultaneous culture event which went on in Berlin during the Olympics—you could look at that. You could look at literature/writers present at the Olympics or inspired by the Olympics. Richard Strauss wrote the Olympic Hymn. Arno Breker won a silver medal at the 1936 Olympic arts competition. Both he and Josef Thorak created sculptures for the Olympic stadium. Were there artists who captured this Olympics on canvas?

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<p>Propaganda</p>	<p>We now see what a propaganda effort the 1936 Olympics were. Was this intentional on Germany's part? What was the reaction of the rest of the world? Provide examples of propaganda, especially imagery. Was it subtle or blatant? Was it public and private? Was the presence of so many military officers on the German equestrian team a type of propaganda?</p>
<p>Jewish athletes</p>	<p>Participation (or lack thereof) especially on German and US teams. Who got on the team and who didn't? Who were the affected individuals and what were their stories? What was the role of Jewish sports clubs after 1933? How had Germany approached this issue prior to the Olympics? What was US reaction, or reaction of individual athletes (especially American Jewish athletes?)</p>
<p>US Black athletes</p>	<p>Who were they and how were they treated—both in the US before the Olympics and in Germany during the Olympics? What happened to them after the Olympics? Did their 1936 Olympic achievements translate into better lives for those athletes in the US? You can examine as a group or focus on one or more individuals. (Jackie Robinson's brother and Ralph Metcalfe, later a US congressman, were two of the 18 Black American athletes in the 1936 games.)</p>
<p>US women athletes</p>	<p>There were a number of American women in this Olympics with interesting stories—explore one or more of these: Helen Stephens, Betty Robinson, Louise Stokes, Tidy Pickett, the 4x100 relay team (who was on and who was off?), Eleanor Holm (who ended up not competing after she was suspended by Avery</p>

	Brundage), or another American female athlete of your own choosing. Were there race issues and/or gender challenges?
Jesse Owens	Jesse deserves his own story—his background, the symbolism of his appearance, his competitors. What happened in Berlin? What happened after he came home?
US male athletes (excluding Jesse Owens)	Pick one or more to focus on: Ralph Metcalfe, Archie Williams, Glenn Morris, Sam Balter, Foy Draper, Frank Lubin, Louis Zamperini, William Pecora, Joseph Levis, or another American male athlete of your own choosing.
Rhode Island's role in the games	Several trial events took place in RI in 1936 (Brown University and Rocky Point); several Rhode Islanders were in the games.
Should the US have boycotted the games in 1936?	It was a complex and difficult decision, and Avery Brundage (USOC) and Charles Sherrill (American on IOC) had important roles. What were the pros and cons and how was the decision made? Was it the right one?
Politics	The Olympics have become very political over the years. How were political personalities and issues particularly relevant in 1936? Focus on Germany and US, their leaders and other important political figures.
Journalism/Press Coverage/American authors	The 1936 Olympics was a global media event. It was heavily covered by print and radio/TV journalists from all around the world. Who were these journalists? How did they do their jobs? Were there controversies? Did they present a slanted view? Did journalists from different countries

	contradict each other? A number of American authors attended the Olympics and wrote about it: Thomas Wolfe, Charles Lindbergh, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, William Shirer, Dorothy Thompson, others?
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<p>Olympics Facilities and Events (Torch Relay, Opening, Closing, etc.)</p>	<p>A number of Olympic firsts (in terms of the structure of the Olympics and its events) happened in 1936, such as the Olympic Torch Relay (which is almost worth a presentation by itself). Where were events held? What was involved in building the facilities, including the Olympic Village? Any key personalities? Are any of the facilities still there? What were the opening and closing ceremonies like?</p>
<p>Boys in the Boat</p>	<p>You may be familiar with either the book or the movie or both about the US 8-man rowing team that won the gold medal in 1936, against all odds. There is also a PBS documentary called <i>The Boys of '36</i>. Tell the story! Compare/contrast the book, Hollywood film, and documentary.</p>
<p>Technology</p>	<p>Radio and TV coverage of the 1936 Olympics was state of the art. A stop motion camera system was used in events for the first time. The Olympics were broadcast on a 58-second delay in 20 public TV salons in Germany. Riefenstahl introduced a number of new techniques in her filmmaking. How else did new technology play a role?</p>
<p>Post-Olympics</p>	<p>What was it like in 1936 for the returning athletes to the US? Did holding the Olympics in Berlin in 1936 play an important part in determining subsequent political events in Europe? Acceleration of persecution of Jews and expansionist policies in Germany. Next Olympics not held until 1948. Were there significant differences between 1936 and 1948 Olympics as a result? Olympic athletes who died in WW2.</p>

References

NOTE: These are the books and articles I read, and the videos I watched, as I thought about the topics in this course. I am not trying to provide an exhaustive list of research materials! You will need to dig deeper on your own topic, and there is a wealth of material available online.

Books

Brown, Daniel James, *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, 2013.

Nonfiction account of the team and the inspiration for the movie. Excellent book; recommended highly for specifics on the rowing team's history and crew members, and overall context for the Olympics.

Carlson, Lewis H. and Fogarty, John J., *Tales of Gold: An Oral History of the Summer Olympic Games Told by America's Gold Medal Winners*, 1987.

Interviews with six Gold Medal winners from the 1936 Olympics. If you're looking at Helen Stephens, Archie Williams, Marshall Wayne, Forrest "Spec" Towns, John Woodruff, or Francis Johnson, this would be a good place to start. (I bought this book used, quite inexpensively.)

Hilmes, Oliver, *Berlin 1936: Sixteen Days in August*, 2016. (Translated from the German by Jefferson Chase.)

A fascinating and very readable book (well translated) that takes you through the Olympics day by day. I thought about using this as a text for our course, but the structure of the book didn't really work in the thematic context I envisioned for the course. The book has an excellent index, so would work well as part of your research on most of the topics in the syllabus. And good to read for all around background and a great feel for what it must have been like to be in Berlin at the time.

Hooper, Elise, *Fast Girls: A Novel of the 1936 Olympics Team*, 2020.

Tells the story of Betty Robinson, Louise Stokes, and Helen Stephens. Fast read, fictional, only OK writing, but does provide a lot of context for these three women runners (and other people associated with the Olympics) and is a great starting point if you're looking for a quick summer read.

Articles and Websites

Holocaust Encyclopedia. This page has a 12-minute audio essay (with transcript) about the 1936 Olympics, as well as a number of useful links with a focus on Nazi propaganda and the idea of a boycott.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-olympics-berlin-1936>

NPR, “Black U.S. Olympians Won in Nazi Germany Only to be Overlooked at Home,” 2016. (Transcript and audio.)

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetorch/2016/08/13/489773389/black-u-s-olympians-won-in-nazi-germany-only-to-be-overlooked-at-home>

Time Magazine. “What Happened When Hitler Hosted the Olympics 80 Years Ago,” 2016.

<https://time.com/4432857/hitler-hosted-olympics-1936/>

Wikipedia, “List of Olympians Killed in World War 2.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Olympians_killed_in_World_War_II

Video/Audio

Boys in the Boat, 2023 film. Available on a number of streaming platforms.

“Jesse Owens Returns to Berlin Olympics, 1936,” part of Bud Greenspan's PBS series “Olympiad,” 1976.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soOm36ZzCwI>

NOTE: There is no evidence that the story Owens tells in the film about Luz Long helping him on his 3rd jump is true. This story appears to have been made up by Owens (based on the hug Long gave him after he won the broad jump and a photo of the two together). People wanted to hear about him and Long and Owens appears to have embellished this story more and more over the years—all to be taken with a grain of salt.

“Hitler’s Olympics,” a nine-part audio series on Malcolm Gladwell’s *Revisionist History* podcast, 2024. You can listen free with ads, or subscribe for a fee.

<https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/revisionist-history/introducing-hitlers-olympics>

Especially good info on journalist Dorothy Thompson, Charles Sherrill, Avery Brundage, German Jewish athlete Margaret (Gretel) Bergmann-Lambert, and Jesse Owens. Episode 9 has very helpful arguments pro/con the idea of boycotting.

The Boys of '36. An American Experience documentary film on PBS, 2017.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/boys36/>

The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936. Five short videos with a focus on Jewish and black athletes, 2009.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDBA0F04ABD665A99>