

Black Americans and the Nazi Olympics

Grade Level: Appropriate for grades 7-12

Subject: Multidisciplinary

Time Required: Approximately one hour, with optional extensions.

Prerequisite: This is a *thematic lesson* that requires students to have a *foundational understanding* of the persecution of Jews and others from 1933-1936 in order to contextualize and grasp this lesson. Foundational USHMM lessons that introduce key concepts and information to students can be found [here](#).

Note: Appropriate for in-class or remote instruction.

Overview: Although different in many ways, antisemitism in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and anti-Black racism in Jim Crow-era America deeply affected communities in these countries. While individual experiences and context are unique and it is important to avoid comparisons of suffering, looking at these two places in the same historical period raises critical questions about the impact of antisemitism and racism in the past and present.

Essential Question:

- How did life in Jim Crow America inform debates about whether athletes should participate in the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany?

Educational Outcomes:

By examining the 1936 Berlin Olympics students are introduced to:

- Jim Crow and the role of institutionalized racism in the United States
- Nazi racial ideology and policy
- The 1936 Olympics and the boycott debate

Instructional Sequence

1. **Teachers first read the following articles** and then choose the ones that are the appropriate fit for their students.
 - a. [What was Jim Crow?](#) from the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia
(NOTE: article references offensive and derogatory racial slurs)

- b. [Jim Crow and segregation](#) from the Library of Congress
 - c. [Dealing and responding to Jim Crow](#) from NMAAHC
 - d. [Jim Crow Laws](#) from History.com
2. Students listen to [David Pilgram's interview about the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia](#)
3. Discuss or have students provide written responses to the following questions:
 - a. What does Jim Crow mean?
 - b. What is the origin of the term?
 - c. What was the goal of Jim Crow laws?
 - d. Has the era of Jim Crow ended?
4. Students read the following articles from [The Nazi Olympic Series](#) in the Holocaust Encyclopedia:
 - a. [African American voices](#)
 - b. [The Movement to Boycott the Berlin Olympics](#)
 - c. [Boycott the Olympics](#)
5. Discuss or have students provide written responses to the questions:
 - a. What were the key issues for each side in the debate about whether the U.S. would boycott the Nazi Olympics in 1936?
 - b. What pressures and motivations affected organizers and athletes?
 - c. Are international boycotts intended to change behavior, attitudes, or policy?
 - d. Was Jim Crow discrimination in the U.S. part of the Nazi Olympic boycott conversation?
6. Students watch [The Nazi Olympics: African American Athletes](#)
7. Discuss or have students provide written responses to the following questions:
 - a. What were some of the perspectives in the Black American community about a potential boycott?
 - b. What did Black American athletes achieve in the Olympic competition?
 - c. What were the lives of Black American Olympic athletes like in America after the games?
8. Students read [Nazi Racism: an overview](#) and watch [The Nazi Olympics: Jewish Athletes](#)

9. Discuss or have students provide written responses to the following question:
 - a. How does Nazi racism affect German Jewish athletes in the 1936 Olympics?
 - b. What was similar between the experiences of German Jewish athletes and Black American athletes? What was different?

Conclusion/Assignment:

In the video, [The Nazi Olympics: African American Athletes](#) Dr. Clayborn Carson discusses Jack Johnson, a Black world champion boxer who was attacked for not conforming to the role assigned to Black Americans. Dr. Carson states: “[Jack Johnson was] a lesson for subsequent generations of Black athletes: you can have power in a society to a certain degree but you have to be very careful how you exercise it.”

Find other historical examples of Black American athletes who have had their voices questioned or challenged for using their platforms. Althea Gibson, John Carlos, Tommie Smith, Jackie Robinson, Colin Kaepernick, Serena Williams, and Muhammed Ali are examples of Black American athletes to research.

Evaluation and Assessment:

In addition to the concluding assignment responses to questions can be assessed.

Additional Resources:

[The Nazi Olympics: USHMM online exhibition](#)

[Nazi Racism: An Overview](#)

[African American soldiers during World War II](#)

[The Nazi Olympics: African American Responses](#)