LESSON: Black Americans and the Nazi Olympics

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

● What is Jim Crow?
● How did life in Jim Crow America inform debates about whether athletes should participate in the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany?
● Did Olympic achievement of Black American athletes in the Nazi Olympics translate into better lives for those athletes in the United States?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students understand:

● An introduction to Jim Crow and institutionalized racism in the United States
● An overview of Nazi racial ideology and policy
● The 1936 Olympics and the boycott debate
● The impact of the boycott debate and the Nazi Olympics on some Black American athletes
● The personal experiences of some Black American Olympic athletes in the United States

RATIONALE

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.
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TEACHER PREPARATION

● Read
  ○ What was Jim Crow? from the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia (NOTE: article references offensive and derogatory racial slurs)
  ○ Jim Crow and Segregation from the Library of Congress
  ○ Dealing and responding to Jim Crow from NMAAHC
  ○ Jim Crow Laws from History.com

● Read Holocaust Encyclopedia articles
  ○ The Nazi Olympic Series and Nazi Racism: an overview

● Preview and print articles for students if necessary

MODIFICATIONS

Word Cloud generator, Padlet, Google Slides, or non-technology dependent means to visually record student responses are suggested, however, the lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications for recording student responses for in-class or remote learning.

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

● Transcripts available for video and audio clips
● Offer audio version or text-to-speech options for research articles
● Articles are available in 12 languages, including Spanish

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

1. Ask students: are athletes role models in a society? What athletes do you consider to be a role model? Why?

2. Next, show students this 4 minute video clip (stop at 3:55) that provides an introduction to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

3. After watching, refer to this quote from the clip:

   Popular history remembers Jesse Owens' four gold medals, an Olympic first, as a triumph over the myth of Aryan supremacy.

Tell students that while Black American athletes were lauded and praised at home for the impact they had on discrediting Nazi racial theory, they will investigate how participating in the Nazi Olympics personally impacted the Black athletes.

4. Teachers first read the following articles and then choose the ones that are the appropriate fit for their students. Students can read all of the articles individually, or work in groups and use a think/pair/share strategy.
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5. After reading the articles, students listen to David Pilgram's interview about the Jim Crow Museum of Racist memorabilia. Transcript available here.

6. After reading and listening, discuss the following questions:

ASK STUDENTS

● What does Jim Crow mean?
● What is the origin of the term?
● What was the goal of Jim Crow laws?
● Has the era of Jim Crow ended?

A word cloud or padlet can be used to show responses.

7. Working individually or in groups, students read the following articles from The Nazi Olympic Series in the Holocaust Encyclopedia:
○ African American voices
○ The Movement to Boycott the Berlin Olympics
○ Boycott the Olympics

6. After reading, discuss the following questions:

ASK STUDENTS

● What were the key issues for each side in the debate about whether the U.S. would boycott the Nazi Olympics in 1936?
● What pressures and motivations affected organizers and athletes?
● Are international boycotts intended to change behavior, attitudes, or policy?
● Was Jim Crow discrimination in the U.S. part of the Nazi Olympic boycott conversation?

A word cloud or padlet can be used to show responses.
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8. Next, students watch [The Nazi Olympics: African American Athletes](#). Transcript available [here](#).

9. After watching, discuss the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASK STUDENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>● How does Nazi racism affect German Jewish athletes in the 1936 Olympics?</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What was similar between the experiences of German Jewish athletes and Black American athletes? What was different?</td>
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</tbody>
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A [word cloud](#) or padlet can be used to show responses.

CONCLUSION/ASSESSMENT
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.”

ASSESSMENT
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.

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](#)