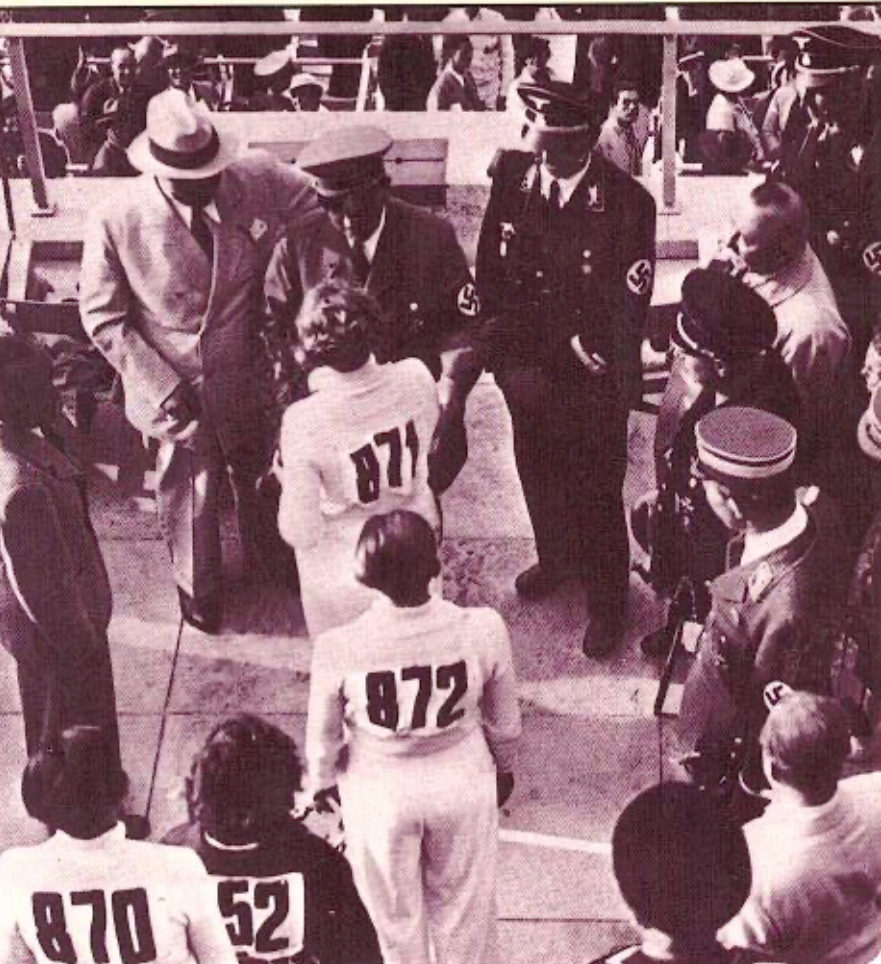


Beyond Sports



Sport in Nazi Germany



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'Strength through Joy'

Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) became convinced that a military defeat was due not so much to the incompetence of the troops but more to the weakening of character, and decided, the day after the battle of Jena, to put new vigor into the hearts of the German people. Some of Jahn's major principles were: to develop physical strength by cultivating the primitive qualities of the German race, and to make everyone enjoy exertion by presenting sports on the *turnplätze*. These ideas were to remain subdued until the theoreticians of National Socialism (Nazism) began to take a dramatic interest in them in the 1930s.

Indeed, as early as 1936 a new law was passed to organize the entire educational program for young Germans. Needless to say, this law greatly favored physical exercise, which would supposedly enable the State to count on having strong and vigorous young people.

The physical training which everyone had to undergo constituted an integral part of the school curriculum, and was even the subject of a sports examination at the end of the year. The 'Hitler

Youth', for its part, intended to give all young Germans the means to develop their endurance and to boost their fighting spirit. Moreover, even though it is true that once over the school-leaving age everyone could practise his or her chosen sport, it must be said that this freedom was only an illusion. For instance, getting a job often depended on being a member of a sports club sponsored by the organization 'Strength through Joy'. In order to maintain competitiveness between all the sportsmen, the Nazi leaders finally thought of awarding the badge of the German Reich to any sportsman who reached a specified standard in five disciplines: running, jumping, swimming, endurance and strength. Competitors aged from 18 to 32 received a bronze badge, those from 32 to 40 a silver, and the older ones (over 40) were decorated with a gold badge.

The notorious 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, which took place in an aggressive German context, that of an open show of strength, showed not only that the scheme produced results, but also the limits of these dangerous ideas. Tragic events were about to happen.