International Olympic Committee promotes Olympics with Nazi propaganda

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On July 23, the public relations department of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) posted a video on its Twitter Olympics channel featuring clips from the propaganda film *Olympia*, made by Leni Riefenstahl for the 1936 Olympic games held in Germany three years after the takeover of power by Hitler and the Nazis.

The Nazi dictatorship had already commenced with its vicious persecution of leftists and Jews and the Games in Berlin provided an ideal opportunity for the regime to win support from an international audience. The significance of the 1936 Games and the role played by film director Leni Riefenstahl in promoting National Socialist ideology are dealt with in the article "Leni Riefenstahl—propagandist for the Third Reich."

The IOC video, with the hashtag #Strongertogether, showed the cheering crowd at the 1936 Games, the entry of teams into the arena and the traditional torch relay which commences the games. The text accompanying the video read: "Berlin experienced the first torch relay before the Olympic flame was lit. We can't wait for the next one."

The IOC initially defended its publication of the video but following a storm of critical tweets was forced to take it down a day later. A tweet from the Auschwitz Museum read: "For two weeks the Nazi dictatorship hid its racist, militaristic character. It exploited the games to impress viewers with the portrait of a peaceful, tolerant Germany. Later, Germany accelerated its expansionism and its persecution of Jews and other 'enemies of the state'."

Another tweet read: "This shows a total lack of respect for all those German Jews oppressed at that time!" The Games took place just one year after the regime had passed its anti-Semitic and racist Nuremberg laws.

Another tweet criticised the use of the film sequences. "It is always controversial to use footage from a Nazi propaganda film (Riefenstahl's 'Olympia') to express #Strongertogether. How many Jewish athletes were allowed to start for Germany at the time?"

The inclusion of clips from Riefenstahl's two-part Olympia film makes clear that attempts to revise German history and sanitise the crimes of the Nazis are not limited to the spheres of politics and academia. It is also taking place within the world of sport. This development, however, does not come out of the blue.

A closer look at the history of the IOC reveals that for long periods of time leading positions within the organisation were occupied by former Nazis or sympathisers of the Nazi regime.

Following World War II, a number of top Nazi sports functionaries were able to return to leading positions in West Germany's sports administration. Three of the most prominent ones were Carl Diem, Guido von Mengden and Karl Ritter von Halt. All three men occupied positions of power within the Nazi sports administration.

Carl Diem was the secretary general of the organising committee for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games and collaborated with Riefenstahl in presenting the Games as a propaganda coup for the Nazis. After the war, Diem was appointed a member of Germany's National Olympic Committee and made a consultant to the German interior minister.

Under the Hitler regime, Guido von Mengden was a member of the German Olympic Committee and editor of the National Socialist sports magazine, which was sent to every soldier at the front. After WWII, von Mengden took over as secretary general of the German sports federation and played a leading role in promoting the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

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Karl Ritter von Halt joined the NSDAP (Nazi Party) in 1932 and rapidly advanced his career in sport to become the president of the German Track and Field Association. After the war he was held in custody by the Soviets and declared to be a war criminal. Nevertheless, he was able to return to the IOC and became president of the German Olympic Committee and honorary president of the German Field and Track Association.

Leading politicians also played a role in this process. The IOC was only able to show clips from Riefenstahl's film because it had acquired rights to the film from the social democratic chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schröder. Schröder secretly sold off the partly state-owned film to the IOC in 2002 as part of his government's bid to host the Olympic Games in Leipzig.

The transition of prominent supporters of National Socialism to leading posts in sporting organisations after WWII was not limited to Germany. One of the most passionate defenders of Germany's right to hold the games in 1936 was the American sports official Avery Brundage.

Brundage fiercely opposed efforts to boycott the Berlin Games and was elected to the IOC that year. In October 1936 he gave a speech to the German-American Bund at Madison Square Garden and declared: "Five years ago they [Germans] were discouraged and demoralised—today they are united—sixty million people believing in themselves and in their country."

The millionaire construction mogul was a leading member of the right-wing America First organisation and was elected president of the IOC in 1952, serving in that role until 1972, when the summer Olympics was once again held in Germany.

Since the departure of Brundage, the IOC, located in the city of Lausanne in the allegedly politically "neutral" country of Switzerland, has remained a hotbed of right-wing extremism. From 1980 to 2001 the organisation was headed by Juan Antonio Samaranch, former sports minister in the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco in Spain.

For the first time since the war, the IOC is currently headed by a German, Thomas Bach, a member of the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party. Bach, who against all IOC rules holds a German diplomatic passport, has been at the centre of a series of corruption scandals since taking over as president in 2013. As IOC president, Bach is ultimately responsible for using the Riefenstahl video.

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