

# LESSON: Black Americans and the Nazi Olympics

**GRADE LEVEL:** Adaptable for grades 7–12

**SUBJECT:** Multidisciplinary

**TIME REQUIRED:** Approximately 60 minutes (extensions available)

**This thematic lesson requires students to have a *foundational understanding* of the persecution of Jews and others from 1933–1936 to contextualize and grasp this lesson. Foundational USHMM lessons introducing key concepts and information to students can be found [here](#).**

## 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.

## 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 the 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

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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

## LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

**The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve the educational outcomes.** Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use modifications and accommodations specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e., read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom, such as Padlet.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the lefthand side of the article.
- Transcripts are provided for video and audio files.

This lesson is available as an [online, asynchronous experience for students](#), which can be accessed through a web browser or LMS files. The online lessons are accessible to all students for in-person and virtual learning, and they provide specific support for students using screen readers.

## INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

1. Ask students: are athletes role models in society? What athletes do you consider to be role models? Why?
2. Set a purpose for watching the following video: Let’s watch this short clip and see what athletes in 1936 were doing. Next, show students this 4-minute [video clip](#) (stop at 3:55) introducing the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.
3. After watching, refer to this quote from the clip:

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*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 their impact on discrediting Nazi racial theory, they will investigate how participating in the Nazi Olympics personally impacted the Black athletes.

4. **Teachers should 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 or Jigsaw strategy.
  - [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
5. After reading the articles, students listen to [David Pilgram's interview about the Jim Crow Museum](#), which houses racist memorabilia. The transcript is 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](#) can be used to show responses.

7. Set a purpose for reading: As you read, think about why the athletes should or should not boycott the Olympics and what you think you would do in the same situation.

Working individually or in groups, students read the following articles from [The Nazi Olympic Series](#) in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* or Museum online exhibition:

- [African American Voices and "Jim Crow" America](#)
- [The Movement to Boycott the Berlin Olympics of 1936](#)
- [Online Exhibition: Boycott the Olympics?](#)

6. After reading, discuss the following questions:

## ASK STUDENTS

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- 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](#) can be used to show responses.

**Teacher note:** Teachers can provide these questions before reading to guide students while reading.

8. Set a purpose: as you watch this clip, notice similarities and differences. Students watch The Nazi Olympics: African American Athletes, [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#). Transcript available [here](#), beginning on page four.
9. After watching, discuss the following questions:

## ASK STUDENTS

- How does Nazi racism affect German Jewish athletes in the 1936 Olympics?
- What was similar between the experiences of German Jewish athletes and Black American athletes? What was different?

A [word cloud](#) or padlet can be used to show responses.

## CONCLUSION/ASSESSMENT

In the video, The Nazi Olympics: African American Athletes, [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), 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.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- USHMM Online Exhibition: [The Nazi Olympics](#)
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* article "[Nazi Racism: An Overview](#)"
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* media essay [African American soldiers during World War II](#)
- USHMM Online Exhibition: [The Nazi Olympics: African American Responses](#)