



1936 Olympic Games

The Olympic Committee handed the 1936 Olympic Games to Berlin before the Nazis came to power. The IV. Olympic Winter Games, held in Bavarian Garmisch-Partenkirchen and the XI. Summer Games, held in Berlin (the Olympic sailing competitions were held at the coast of the Baltic Sea) were the perfect opportunity for Hitler to demonstrate to the world, how efficient the Nazi Germany was and to prove to the world the reality of the "Master Race". There were 49 countries competing at the Berlin Olympic Games and each country brought their media and the plan was to show off to the world the superiority of German athletes. The German team had been allowed to train fulltime which meant pushing to the limit the idea of amateur competition. Germany's athletic superstar of the time was blond haired, blue eyed long jumper Lutz Lang, the perfect symbol of the Nazi Aryan racial superiority ideology. Once the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1931 made Berlin the host city of the 11th Summer Olympics, Hitler ordered the construction of a great sports complex in Grunewald named the "Reichssportfeld" (Reich Sport Field) with a completely new Olympiastadion (Olympic Stadium). Architect Werner March was in charge of the project, assisted by his brother Walter March. The construction took place from 1934 to 1936. When the Reichssportfeld was finished, it was 1.32 square kilometers (326 acres) and had a symmetrical layout. It consisted of (east to west): the Olympiastadion, the Maifeld (Mayfield) with a capacity of 50,000 people and the Waldbühne amphitheater with a capacity of 25,000 people. In addition, 150 buildings were constructed for different sports such as swimming, equestrian events, and field hockey. The new Olympiastadium was built over the original Deutsches Stadium and architect Werner March once again buried the lower half of the structure (12 meters) underground. The huge Olympiastadium has a maximum capacity of 110,000 spectators. It also has a VIP stand for Adolf Hitler and his political associates. At its end, aligned with the symmetrically-designed layout of the buildings of the Olympischer Platz and toward the Maifeld, was the "Marathontor" (Marathon Arch) with a big receptacle for the Olympic Flame. The walls of the Olympiastadium were built with sturdy stone from the area of the Lower Alps. Positioned around the stadium were sculptures by Josef Wackerle. These sculptures still exist and have been subject of many discussions in postwar Germany, some voices say that they glorify the Nazi era, even though they do not bear a single Nazi symbol.

The Maifeld (May Field) was created as a huge lawn (112,000 square metres or 28 acres) for gymnastic demonstrations and was specifically used at the annual May Day celebrations. During the 1936 Olympics the Maifeld was used for polo events and several allegorical Nazi gymnastic demonstrations. The total capacity of the Reichssportfeld was 250,000 people. Also located at the Maifeld were the Langemarck-Halle and the Glockenturm (Bell Tower). This tower crowned the western end of the Reichs Sportfield planted amid the tiers of the Maifeld stands. It is 77 meters (247 feet) high and from its top one can see almost the whole city of Berlin. During the Games it was used as observation post by administrators, Police officials and the media. Mounted in the tower was the Olympic Bell. On its surface, the Nazi regime engraved the five Olympic Rings, a motto ("I call the youth of the world" and "XI. Olympic Games 1936"), the Brandenburg Gate and the Nazi Eagle. Nearby of the Bell Tower, to the west, the Waldbühne (Forest Theatre) was built, a reproduction of the old theater of Epidaurus (3rd century BC). The theater was then named "Dietrich-Eckart-Bühne" in homage to Dietrich Eckart, one of the earliest Nazi party members who died in 1923. The Waldbühne had a capacity of 22,000. In the middle section it originally had a box for Adolf Hitler. During the Olympics gymnastics competitions and a variety of cultural programs were staged in the Waldbühne.

The Olympiastadion was one of the few Nazi buildings that survived not just in a recognizable form, but almost untouched after the Second World War. It only suffered the impact of machine gun shots. The most notorious battle around the Olympiastadion took place in April 1945 when the Soviet army fought to capture it. This was during the great final battle of the Second World War in Europe, with the total invasion of Berlin as the Allies' target. The only part of the Olympischer Platz that was destroyed was the Bell Tower. The Nazis used this structure to store archives (such as films) and when the Soviet troops arrived they set all its contents on fire. The structure emerged from the fire severely damaged and weakened. In 1947 British engineers demolished the tower once and for all. The Olympic Bell (which had survived the fire and remained in its place in the tower), fell 77 meters and cracked.