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Tragedy at the Munich Olympics I

Lead: The tragic murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics rested on the crossroads of opportunity inhabited by the West German government and Black September, the spin-off of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: It is not that they didn't try. Though they were morally and ideologically poles apart, the Nazi government of Adolf Hitler and the

democratically elected German Republic attempted to use the Olympic Games, 1936 and 1972, to improve their international public relations. In both cases they largely failed.

When, in 1931, the International Olympics Committee (IOC) awarded the site for the 1936 Olympiad to Berlin, the Weimar government of Germany at the time subscribed to the racially and internationally diverse spirit of the Olympics. By the time the Games rolled around, the Nazis were in charge of things and they weren't that good at re-enforcing the Olympic Ideal. A Party spokeswoman said the games would be "infested" with "Frenchmen,

Belgians, Pollacks, and Jew-Niggers” and a newspaper called for a “whites only” Olympics. Nevertheless, Information Minister Josef Goebbels convinced Hitler that this would be a great propaganda initiative. Germans turned out enthusiastically to welcome the international visitors, and to demonstrate their enthusiasm for all things Nazi, and the flawlessly run games, and the spectacular Olympic village with its 100,000 seat stadium. Someone forgot to get the talking points to the Fuehrer, however. When questioned as to why he would not be welcoming the clearly superior American Black track and field star, Jesse Owens, to his box, Hitler slipped off message. “Do you really think I will allow myself to be

photographed shaking hands with a negro?”

The ham-handed propaganda, the lackluster performance of Hitler’s hand-picked Aryan team, and the spectacular skills of the racially diverse foreign teams should have rendered the Nazi effort at Berlin 1936 a propaganda bust. If, however, Hitler’s purpose was to impress, intimidate and threaten future enemies, to send a message of German wealth, competence and power, then he may have, at least in part, succeeded.

In 1972 the German government was anxious to put all that of that aside and showcase the new Germany

at the “Games of Peace and Joy,” This was an opportunity to erase the memories of Germany’s sordid past and it worked – for 10 days. Security at Berlin was at a minimum so as to not seem too militarized. The cost in protection of the athletes was a tiny fraction of today’s expenditure. Guards at the Olympic Village were not the most competent and the fence around the complex was only slightly over six feet. Many of the teams hopped that fence on their way to and from nighttime excursions. And one night Palestinian terrorists, mingling with returning revelers, hopped that fence and murdered eleven Israeli athletes and coaches.

Next time: Olympic politics.

Research assistance by At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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