



Great nonfiction writing has the power to transport us to a specific time and place, and it does so with the authority of meticulously researched fact. These qualities are exemplified in the work of our November author of the month, Andrew Maraniss, and his latest book, *Games of Deception*. In this carefully researched book, Maraniss revisits one of the more surreal chapters of 20th-century world history: the 1936 Olympic Games. Hosted in Berlin during the third year of Adolf Hitler's dictatorship, the 1936 Games posed the international community with a glaring moral question: Would participation in the Games amount to an endorsement of Hitler's racist and anti-Semitic regime? With a trove of primary documents, transcripts, and photographs, Maraniss brings this controversial chapter of world history at the intersection of sports and politics to life. The book is written in highly accessible prose for middle to high-school aged readers, and it comes at a time when issues of nationalism, racism, and complicity are fresh in the national discourse. Read the interview with Andrew Maraniss below, and be sure to check out SLC's [highly recommended book review](#).

**The 1936 Olympics in Berlin were full of sports intrigue—Jesse Owens sprinting for four gold medals, the U.S. rowing team upsetting Germany and Italy—but basketball was sort of an afterthought. Why focus on this sport over some of the more "dramatic"**

**storylines from the Games?**

What appealed to me about writing about the first U.S. Olympic basketball team is that it's a relatively unknown story. Basketball has become such a popular international sport, but most people don't realize it made its Olympic debut in Nazi Germany. Telling a story that most people had never heard before, especially within an Olympic Games that has been so well documented in books and movies, is what intrigued me. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, was able to travel to Berlin to see his game become an Olympic sport 45 years after he created it, so I was able to explore the invention and development of the game. And the setting in Nazi Germany allowed me to write about the social and political themes of fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, and nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic. The combination of sports, history, and relevant social justice issues is what I'm looking for in my books. And in keeping with the theme of "deception" running through the book, the debut of Olympic basketball was not some grand spectacle as one might expect. Hardly anybody cared about basketball in Germany, and the gold medal game was played outside in a driving rainstorm. Even the players admitted it was a farce.

**This book is loaded with primary documents and photographs. Where did you develop your knack for detailed storytelling, and how do you approach historical research?**

Doing the research is my favorite part of writing a book. I love visiting archives, digging through old newspaper articles, discovering new people to interview, and finding the nuggets that add detail, color, and life to narrative nonfiction. I was a history major at Vanderbilt and much of my early training was in journalism. Also, my father has had a long career in journalism and as an author. One of his biggest pieces of advice to me has always been to "do the work" on research. There's no way around that when writing nonfiction. It's the most important part of the job. I wanted to fill this book with photographs to help readers place themselves in the moment. As a reader, I love a book with good photography. The 1930s were a visually interesting time and I wanted to convey that.

**Complicity is a theme that runs through much of *Games of Deception*. How bad had things gotten for Jews and other minority groups in Germany by 1936, and how much did the rest of the world really know about it?**

For the most part, Jews were not being rounded into concentration camps in 1936. The camps were more for political prisoners at that point. But Jews were the targets of vicious and dehumanizing persecution by that time and people knew it. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 stripped Jews of German citizenship and political rights. Enough people in the U.S. were aware of the situation in Nazi Germany that there was a major effort to boycott the Olympics. More than 100,000 people had marched through the streets of New York City in protest of Nazi policies as early as 1933. A Gallup Poll in 1935 indicated that 43% of Americans favored a boycott. Still, there were a lot of Americans who chose not to pay much attention to what was happening in Germany, didn't consider it their problem, or actively misled the American public. The American diplomat George Messersmith had been wiring the State Department since 1933 about the looming Nazi threat and the blow a boycott would deliver to Nazi prestige at home and abroad, but he was ignored.

Among the anti-Semitic Americans who admired the Nazis was Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee. He worked hand-in-hand with German officials to sway public opinion in the U.S. and ensure American participation in the Games. Interestingly, the vast majority of American athletes, including black and Jewish athletes who were aware of Hitler's views on Aryan supremacy, wanted to compete in Berlin, whether to disprove the views of the Nazis or just to fulfill their athletic dreams.

**The United States' decision not to boycott the Games remains highly controversial. How much of an impact did the Berlin Olympics have on Hitler's ability to wage World War II?**

The fact that the U.S. and other countries did not boycott the 1936 Olympics in Berlin illustrates several threads that allowed Hitler to amass power and eventually led to World War II. Some people considered German politics and policies "none of our business," rather than a humanitarian crisis. Some were weary of confrontation in the aftermath of World War I. Some were anti-Semitic and supported Hitler's actions. Some said we should solve our own racial problems before condemning the policies in Germany. Others said sports and politics should be kept separate (as if the Olympics hadn't always been about politics, or Hitler wasn't mixing the two).

Brundage, the leading proponent of participation in Berlin, led a two-pronged effort to influence public opinion in support of participation. First, he hired a public relations specialist to help craft messages that portrayed boycott proponents as un-American, since they would be denying American athletes a chance to participate in the Olympics. Boycott supporters argued that nothing was more American than standing up to Hitler, but Brundage's campaign was successful. Second, Brundage worked with Nazi officials to generate positive news coverage of Germany in the U.S. It was a propaganda effort meant to offset news of Nazi atrocities in American newspapers.

Taken together, all of this shows that there was significant ambivalence or even support for Hitler in the U.S. at the time of the Olympics. And if we weren't ready to boycott an Olympics, we certainly weren't ready to go to war. If we had boycotted, it would have indicated an earlier desire to stand up to Hitler, and one wonders how that might have changed history.

**"Nationalism" and "fascism" are two words that have made a comeback in recent years. What did these words mean in the 1930s and 1940s? Are they still relevant today?**

Unfortunately, I think those words are more relevant today than they have been since World War II. I keep the book centered in 1936 until the very last chapter. It's at that point that I reintroduce Al Miller, who had been a 13-year-old Jewish kid living in Berlin at the time of the 1936 Olympics. He was able to escape the country the following year, unsure if he'd ever see his family again. Miraculously, his parents were able to make it out under dramatic circumstances.

Dr. Miller is a retired dentist now in Cincinnati who meets with kids every month to tell them about the Holocaust. I asked him what he tells students about how to prevent fascism from taking hold in the U.S. His message is that students already know the answer. He said they've typically said the words out loud that very morning without realizing it. They are the final words of the Pledge of Allegiance, "Liberty and justice for all," with an emphasis on "all." I don't think there's any doubt that ideals like that, or the values we've always associated with the Statue of Liberty, are under attack, as are voting rights, the free press, the truth itself. I point out in the book that there has always been a tension in this country between the ideals of justice and equality in our founding documents, and the reality of racism and injustice in everyday life. The Nazis were aware of those contradictions and for a time held out hope that the U.S. would embrace its racist side and ally with them. I think we face that challenge again today. Which America do we want to be? My book is not heavy-handed in making connections between past and present, but students, teachers, and librarians will have plenty of material from which to draw their own conclusions.

**Is there anything else we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?**

I love visiting schools and libraries! If anyone is interested in having me visit and speak with their students, they can email me at [andrewmaraniss@gmail.com](mailto:andrewmaraniss@gmail.com).

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