

Richard Menkis and Harold Troper. *More Than Just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 281 pp., ISBN: 9781442626904.

Early on, Richard Menkis and Harold Troper query the relationship between the Olympics and human rights. As quickly as they pose the question, they resolve it. They run through sixty years of controversy, from the boycott of the Melbourne, Australia Games (1956) over the Soviet invasion of Hungary to the proposed boycott of the Sochi Games (2014) in response to Russian discrimination against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Frequently, tensions have arisen juxtaposing the stated ideals of the Olympic movement, the supposed apolitical purity of amateur athletics, discriminatory and violent behaviour on the part of host nation governments, and the corruption or dishonesty of Olympic committee members. With these strains as a backdrop, the campaign against the 1936 Berlin Olympics was the “grandfather” (xiii) of all human rights-related boycotts. This is the story of Canadian preparation for, participation in, and opposition to the Nazi Games. Woven into that story is a second central narrative, the Jewish Canadian response to the Games.

None of the opening musings on the failure of the Olympic movement to live up to its lofty ideals will surprise readers familiar with the outlines of Olympic history. With new information here and there, much of the book is a solid review of what the secondary literature has long established – the rise of Nazism, growing anti-Semitism, the 1936 Games as Hitlerian spectacle (successful in large measure for the participation of the “great powers”), the triumphs of US track star Jesse Owens, and with a few vociferous exceptions, an international community largely indifferent to the plight of German Jews. The scene having been set by the authors, with plenty of evidence that Canadians had all the information they needed to understand the evils of Hitler’s Germany, we learn of fascinating villains who held sway in popular opinion. In 1934, for example, “Rev. Dr. Bingham” (41) returned to Toronto from the World Assembly of Baptists in Germany to report that Hitler was an idealist and that “Jews were over-represented in Germany as doctors and lawyers” (41). Starting with the prominent Toronto Daily Star sports columnist Lou Marsh, there is a cast of those who may simply have been dull-witted and possibly anti-Semitic in ignoring Nazi violence, or in Marsh’s case, were perhaps too close to members of the flaccid Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) (“Old Boys,” according to the Vancouver Sun (61)) in rejecting calls for a Canadian boycott of the Nazi games. In November 1935, Marsh summed up his views: “Canada has no real reason for dropping out of the Olympics unless Great Britain decides to withdraw her team” (107).

The most compelling story protagonists are COC chair P. J. Mulqueen and Holy Blossom Temple spiritual leader Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath. Mulqueen is typical of the worst we know of officious, small-minded Olympic Committee members over

the past decades (minus the financial scandals). In the two years leading up to the 1936 Olympics, Mulqueen and the COC repeatedly made “sympathetic noises about ensuring the Olympic Charter [was] respected,” while proceeding privately “as if nothing was wrong” (33).” The authors show brilliantly how Mulqueen claimed publicly and in at least one private meeting with Eisendrath to have considered with care the arguments of those calling for a boycott, while never wavering privately from his firm commitment to Canadian participation, and to derailing the efforts of boycott proponents. Eisendrath is the most interesting figure in the book. He was “scathing” (213) in his criticisms of Nazi violence, a powerful public and behind-the-scenes voice against participation, and an intelligent strategist who worked diligently to exploit political opportunities to block a Canadian Olympic presence.

As much as anything, this is a story of Jewish Canadians working to sound the alarm on Nazi aggression and to stop Canada from sending athletes to the Olympics. The authors draw more heavily on Jewish institution archival collections than on any others. They explain masterfully the evolution of labour, Communist Party, and other politics in regard to Jewish community responses and debates with regard to Canadian preparations for and participation in the games. Most important, they identify key community actors that have not until now been examined in much detail, such as the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA), in crafting an analysis of Jewish community organizing and politics that goes well beyond the problem of the Nazi Olympics.

At the same time, the Jewish focus raises methodological questions. Why the Jews? In part, the answer is obvious – this was the most significant persecuted minority in Nazi Germany. Even so, why have the authors not asked themselves whether other ethnic communities were engaged in the boycott movement, particularly when we know how diverse the Canadian contingent was that traveled to Spain to fight against the Franco dictatorship during the Spanish Civil War? The authors delve into no archival or community/non-English-language newspaper sources for Finnish-Canadians, Ukrainian-Canadians, or other groups with strong political affiliations and important working-class identities, and that would have come into contact with Jewish-Canadians in the Communist Party and other organizations. This has the de facto methodological effect of recreating in the Canadian context a binary that reflects Maurice Eisendrath’s grim, anticipatory vision of the world’s response to Nazism, where an international Christendom had left Nazis triumphant, while consigning German Jews to an unimaginable fate (213).”

The binary – Jews versus others – is confirmed in how Menkis and Troper address cases of non-Jewish support for a Canadian boycott. Consistently, they are either anecdotal, or, if more significant, never part of a sustained political action in the manner of Jewish-Canadian opposition. “Across Canada,” the authors write, “Canadian Trades and Labour Congress affiliates pledged to boycott the Nazi Games

(85).” But there is never any detailed explanation for, or analysis of, Labour Congress boycott activities. The British Columbia Amateur Athletic Union strongly supported a boycott in specific response to the Nazi treatment of Jews. The authors offer no analysis of the evolution of that position in regional or other contexts. In a third of many examples, in reference to the vital role of the YMHA in the politics of the boycott movement, the authors include a poster for a March 1936 symposium in Montreal sponsored by the Canadian League Against War and Fascism. Featured speakers include Norman Gillespie (President, Quebec Football Association), Harvey Golden (Executive Director, YMHA), Madeleine Sheridan (Member, Women’s Catholic League), J.B. St. John (Member, Youth Forum, Emmanuel Church), and Stanley Ryerson (Member, Montreal Council, League Against War and Fascism). While Golden’s work is extensively documented in *More Than Just Games*, as is that of the YMHA, there is only brief reference to the activities of the League Against War and Fascism. Readers learn nothing of why Gillespie, Sheridan, St. John, or Ryerson were speaking that night or what their roles might have been in the boycott movement.

The Jew/non-Jew binary leads to three methodology-related queries in an otherwise interesting history. First there is little theoretical or methodological engagement with a growing literature on Jews in sports around the world. That literature tends increasingly to hold that sport marked a point of evolving Jewish identities in the United States, France and elsewhere, where those identities became framed not by the Jewish/non-Jewish binary, but by unprecedented and multiple forms of contacts between Jews and non-Jewish citizens. This approach contrasts sharply with the story in *More Than Just Games*, which places Jewish-Canadians apart – politically, socially, and culturally – from others in Canada at the time. Here, Jewish Canadians act as and reflect identities as “Jews” rather than as “Canadians.” Was that identity divide so rigid, particularly when we know that sport in Canada and the United States frequently led to evolving Jewish identities that integrated rather than set themselves further apart from “Canadian” identities? Second, in the Communist Party and other contexts, there are tantalizing hints suggesting that there might be more to this story on how Jews and non-Jews might have worked together and outside the boundaries of Jewish community institutions on the boycott movement. Finally, readers will find it is difficult to know ultimately how average Canadians in Calgary, Rimouski, and St. John felt about Nazis, Jews, the Olympics, and the boycott movement.

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