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The Olympic torch's shadowy past



By Chris Bowlby
BBC News

The Olympic torch is being welcomed this weekend in the UK as a symbol of the sporting spirit, uniting people around the world in peaceful competition.

But the idea of lighting the torch at the ancient Olympian site in Greece and then running it through different countries has much darker origins.

It was invented in its modern form by the organisers of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

And it was planned with immense care by the Nazi leadership to project the image of the Third Reich as a modern, economically dynamic state with growing international influence.

The organiser of the 1936 Olympics, Carl Diem, wanted an event linking the modern Olympics to the ancient.

The idea chimed perfectly with the Nazi belief that classical Greece was an Aryan forerunner of the modern German Reich.

And the event blended perfectly the perversion of history with



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publicity for contemporary German power.

The first torch was lit in Greece with the help of mirrors made by the German company Zeiss.

Steel-clad magnesium torches to carry the flame were specially produced by the Ruhr-based industrial giant Krupp.

Media coverage was masterminded by Nazi propaganda chief Josef Goebbels, using the latest techniques and technology.

Dramatic regular radio coverage of the torch's progress kept up the excitement, and Leni Riefenstahl filmed it to create powerful images.

Beijing relay

The route the torch takes has always been a matter of careful political planning too.

This year's route has already proved highly controversial.

Beijing wanted to take the torch through Taiwan's capital, Taipei, but this had to be changed by Olympic authorities due to political tensions between the Chinese and Taiwanese leaders.

And there is now great tension over plans to run the torch through Tibet after recent disturbances there.

In 1936 the torch made its way from Greece to Berlin through countries in south-eastern and central Europe where the Nazis were especially keen to enhance their influence.

Given what happened a few years later that route seems especially poignant now.

"Sporting chivalrous contest," Hitler declared just before the torch was lit, "helps knit the bonds of peace between nations. Therefore may the Olympic flame never expire."

Yet the flame's arrival in Vienna prompted major pro-Nazi demonstrations, helping pave the way for the Anschluss, or annexation of Austria, in 1938.

In Hungary gypsy musicians who serenaded the flame faced within a few years deportation to Nazi death camps.

Other countries on the relay route like Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia would soon be invaded by Germans equipped not with Krupp torches but with Krupp munitions.

And Carl Diem, the relay's inventor, ended the war as fanatical military commander at the Olympic stadium in Berlin, refusing to accept that the Third Reich was over.

Sparta

Reinhard Appel, a teenage member of the Hitler Youth based at the stadium, described to me a speech made by Diem in 1945 as the Red Army closed in.

"He kept referring to Sparta - the history of how the Spartans had not feared dying for their country. He demanded that we be heroes."



The arrival of the flame in Vienna saw pro-Nazi rallies

community

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Siegfried Eifrig lit a fire on an altar in Berlin in 1936

Hundreds of the youngsters were killed in a futile attempt to defend the stadium.

Diem however survived, and reinvented himself after the war as an academic specialising in the philosophy of sport.

Germans are still debating his reputation today.

In 1936 itself there was no doubt that the spectacle of his torch relay was judged a great international success.

As a suitably Aryan-looking German athlete carried the torch into the stadium in Berlin the BBC radio commentator was deeply impressed: "He's a fair young man in white shorts, he's beautifully made, a very fine sight as an athlete."

Another relay runner was Siegfried Eifrig, who had carried the torch as it arrived in the centre of Berlin.



Mr Eifrig said he was saddened by the 2008 controversy

Flanked by huge swastika flags, he then lit a fire on an altar - typical of the pseudo-religious symbolism Nazism relished.

Eifrig is still alive, aged 98, and still has his Krupp torch engraved with the route of the 1936 relay.

But he told me this week that he was saddened by the controversy this year's relay has attracted, as it ought to be kept a "purely sporting" affair.

And he is critical of the way the politicians always seek to exploit it, seeing the plan to take the torch across the summit of Mount Everest as a "pointless gesture" that makes a nonsense of the relay as an athletic challenge.

Having survived the war as a soldier and then a British prisoner of war, he now sees the 1936 relay in a more sober light than when he was one of its stars.

No matter how great the emphasis on the torch as a bright sporting symbol, he knows better than most that, amid the political wrangling and media hype, less welcome historical ghosts are running alongside.

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