

# Amid Covid fears, Tokyo Olympic Games' torch relay kicks off. It should be extinguished.

The spectacle risks sacrificing public health on the altar of an Olympic tradition — one established by the Nazis, no less.



Yoshihide Muroya, Japanese aerobatics pilot and race pilot, carries the Olympic torch in Minamisoma, Fukushima prefecture, Japan, on Thursday. Issei Kato / Reuters

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By Jules Boykoff, author of "Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics"

[Tokyo Olympic organizers](#) kicked off the Olympic torch relay in Japan on Thursday with 10,000 [torchbearers set to zigzag across the country](#) before they [arrive at the Olympic stadium](#) on July 23 for the opening ceremonies. Olympic organizers, whether from Tokyo or the International Olympic Committee, are quick to grasp for symbology as a salve. But amid a pandemic, the Tokyo torch relay risks sacrificing public health on the altar of Olympic pageantry — a tradition established by the Nazis, no less. Some traditions, especially those rooted in Nazi propaganda, should be extinguished.

The origin point of the torch relay — Fukushima, the site of the triple-whammy [earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown](#) that ravaged the prefecture in March 2011 — not only highlights the hypocrisy, harm and absurdity of this particular bit of ceremony, but it also epitomizes the problems with Japan's proceeding with the Olympics as a whole at this historic moment. The Tokyo 2020 Games (postponed by a year because of Covid-19) were originally branded the "[Recovery Olympics](#)" as a nod to the restoration of Fukushima.

But many in the region actually blame the Tokyo Olympics for Fukushima's slow recovery, with resources having been diverted from Fukushima to Tokyo to prepare for the games. Sports journalist Dave Zirin said during a 2019 visit to Fukushima: "I've never seen anything like this. They are theming the torch run around the idea of a recovery of a place that hasn't recovered. You can't get more cynical than that."

Many in Fukushima agree. "Fukushima is being sacrificed for the sake of the Tokyo Olympics," anti-Olympics activist Noriko Kyogoku told me. A week before the launch of the torch relay, Kyogoku joined protesters in Fukushima, unfurling a banner that read: "Just Stop It! No Olympics!" Another protester, Toshio Miyazaki, said the torch relay was "a political disguise" designed "to conceal the reality that there is no recovery in Fukushima." And Hiroki Ogasawara, a professor of sociology at Kobe University, dubbed the relay a "torch wash" that deflected attention from serious, lingering problems in Fukushima.

Furthermore, Olympic officials have co-opted their own slogan to imply that the games offer the entire country — nay, planet — a chance for restarting. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Olympic leaders lacquered bromides onto the moniker, calling the Tokyo Games "a beacon of hope to the world" and "the light at the end of the tunnel."

The only problem is that the Summer Olympics — starting with this week's torch relay — could actually make the pandemic worse. The vaccine rollout in Japan has only inched forward, so the population will not be fully vaccinated when the Olympics begin. And although Olympic organizers announced that foreign spectators will not be allowed, thousands of athletes, coaches and journalists are still expected to pour in, none of whom are required to get vaccinated. The Japanese public is understandably jittery. A whopping 80 percent of the population supports outright cancellation of the Olympics or further postponement.

The result is that Olympics skepticism in Japan is pervasive. When the government lifted its coronavirus-induced state of emergency Sunday, political commentators were suspicious of the timing. Satoko Itani, a professor of sport, gender and sexuality studies at Kansai University, told me, "Clearly one of the reasons why the state of emergency was lifted on March 21, despite the fact that infections are on the rise again, is that the torch relay is slated to start four days later."

Tokyo 2020 safety protocols state that if torch runners have temperatures above 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit, "they will be asked to refrain from running." Spectators

are [encouraged](#) to clap rather than cheer. But Dr. Megan Ranney, an American medical educator, [dismissed](#) recommendations like temperature checks as "hygiene theater."

Of course, the entire torch relay is theater — and another reason the spectacle should be snuffed. It was invented by the Nazis for the 1936 Summer Olympics as a way to spread their gospel via the Olympic flame.

At first, the Olympics, which the [International Olympic Committee handed to Berlin](#) before Adolf Hitler came to power, were of little interest to the Fuehrer, who [derided them](#) as "a plot by Freemasons and Jews." However, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels [convinced him](#) that the games were a remarkable opportunity to bathe the swastika in the Olympic glow for a global audience.

The Nazis conjured the Olympic torch relay as a way for [Germans to claim Aryan lineage](#) from the ancient Greeks. The relay began in Olympia, Greece, before wending its way to Berlin, allowing Hitler to spray Nazi propaganda through key geostrategic areas in Europe. A stereotypical blond, blue-eyed runner [concluded the torch run](#) in Berlin, and Olympics founder Pierre de Coubertin [described](#) it as "gallant and utterly successful."

Use of the torch relay as propaganda in modern times has had a slightly rockier path. Although the organizers of the 2008 Beijing Summer Games [styled](#) the event as the "Journey of Harmony," skirmishes broke out in city after city as pro-Tibet human rights activists used the opportunity to illuminate their cause.

Some protesters were met with repression, sometimes by phalanxes of enforcers from China's [police](#) called the "Sacred Flame Protection Unit." After this debacle, the [International Olympic Committee decided](#) to contain the torch relay within the host country. Nevertheless, activists persisted — at the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, protesters [forced](#) the torch relay to detour around their dissent.

This time Fukushima demonstrators — and people across Japan — called for the torch rally to be stopped before it started. It's time we listened.