

FROM EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
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H ORIGINAL

THE CLASH OF NATIONS

JOE LOUIS vs MAX SCHMELING



EDUCATION GUIDE

About the Show

Set against the rise of fascism in Europe and racial segregation in the U.S., *The Clash of Nations: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling* follows the parallel lives and careers of American Joe Louis and German Max Schmeling as they overcome social and political obstacles while hurtling on a collision course to two historic matchups in the ring. It's the U.S. versus Germany, and democracy versus fascism, symbolized by two human beings in a ring carrying the weight of the world. Through personal accounts, rare archival footage, and expert commentary from historians, authors, and relatives including Joe Louis's son, Joe Louis Barrow Jr., *The Clash of Nations* offers a nuanced portrait of how a single sporting event can shape culture, politics, and history.

Curriculum Links

This documentary is useful for American History, Social Studies, and Sociology courses, as well as lessons about World War II. It is appropriate for middle school through college students.

For The Educator

This documentary explores the historic rivalry between boxers Joe Louis and Max Schmeling, whose matches became symbolic of larger political and social tensions in the years leading up to World War II. It helps students engage with concepts including race in the United States, the rise of Nazism in Germany, propaganda, and the role of sports in shaping national identity and international politics. The documentary also provides insight into the lives and careers of two remarkable athletes and the ways their achievements and public images were influenced by the broader historical forces of their time. We encourage educators to use this guide as a resource as they develop lesson plans and activities that best suit the needs and interests of their students.

Thought Starter

Think of an international sporting event like the Olympics or the World Cup. Should athletes competing in these events be seen as representatives of their country or only as individual competitors? Why do you think so?

People to Know

- Joe Louis
- Max Schmeling
- Adolf Hitler
- Jack Johnson
- Joe Jacobs

Terms to Know

- Jim Crow
- Red Summer
- Great Migration
- World War II
- Nazi Party



Discussion Questions

- What are some of the reasons Joe Louis's family moved north to Detroit in 1926? What larger forces contributed to their decision?
- Why was Adolf Hitler especially interested in boxing and in Max Schmeling?
- What unique challenges did Black boxers, and Joe Louis specifically, face in the 1930s?
- How did the media depict Joe Louis? How did media depictions of him change over time?
- What do you think Joe Louis meant when he said "...lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain't going to fix them"?
- What is Joe Louis's legacy? How do you think he should be remembered? How about Max Schmeling?

Primary Source

The Negro Soldier (1944) is a World War II documentary featuring stories about boxer Joe Louis. It was produced by the U.S. War Department to encourage Black Americans to support the war effort and enlist in the armed forces. You can watch *The Negro Soldier*, courtesy of the U.S. National Archives, here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIn2dQyLNVU>

Watch a section of the film (the first 4:25 is a recommended section) or the entire film. Then, discuss as a class: (1) How does the film portray Joe Louis and African American service members generally? (2) How does the film connect Louis's boxing victories—especially over Max Schmeling—to larger ideas about patriotism, democracy, and the fight against Nazism? (3) Does the film acknowledge the racial inequalities African Americans faced at home? Why do you think the filmmakers made this choice?

Suggested Activity

After creating the film, the U.S. Army organized screenings for the public. Ask students to create an advertisement for one of these screenings in the form of a poster, pamphlet, or a script for a radio commercial. You may also ask students to complete a reflection on the assignment: How does your advertisement grab people's attention? What role, if any, does Joe Louis's image play in your advertisement? Why did you choose to use his image (or not)? How might a World War II ad differ from an ad today?

General Resources

When Joe Louis Boxed Nazi Favorite Max Schmeling, History.com

<https://www.history.com/articles/joe-louis-max-schmeling-match>

Joe Louis, National Museum of African American History and Culture

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/joe-louis>

Joe Louis: From Boxing Gloves to Combat Boots, The National WWII Museum

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/joe-louis-boxing>