

The End of Détente*

A Case Study of the 1980 Moscow Olympics

By Thomas Smith

After the election of Jimmy Carter as US President, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher flew to Washington on 17th December 1979 for her first official visit. Five days later NATO announced the deployment of a new generation of American rockets and Cruise missiles in Western Europe. On the 25th December Soviet troops marched into Afghanistan.



Photo: U.S. Government

Introduction

During the 1970s, relations between the West and the Soviet Union were marked by an era of détente. High-level treaties were signed; cultural exchanges occurred and foreign policy was driven by realpolitik and pragmatism. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 led to a significant shift in relations and actions taken in response to the invasion largely ended the period of détente and sparked off a new Cold War, spearheaded by the 'New Right' of President Ronald Reagan in the United States and the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in Britain.

Indeed, the response to the invasion which caused the most friction at the time, and a long-running debate in historical monographs ever since, was the choice of some Western leaders, such as President Jimmy Carter and Margaret Thatcher, to call for a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games that were to be held in Moscow. The reason this action caused much friction and debate was because the Olympics, according to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), was an explicitly non-political event and that "National Olympic Committees (NOCs) [which make up the decision-making body of the IOC] must be

autonomous and must resist all pressure of any kind whatsoever, whether of a political, religious or economic nature."¹ With British government documents from 1980 recently released under the Thirty Year Rule, the time seems apt to evaluate the debate about the Olympic boycott, and to ask the question: to what extent was the call by the British government for a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics an appropriate response to the invasion of Afghanistan?

Before the argument of the essay is established, it is first necessary to provide a brief narrative of the main events. Thatcher's government began discussing the idea of a boycott in early January 1980; however, their first action was to call for the Olympics to be moved to a different location. Once the IOC declared that relocating the Olympics was out of the question, Thatcher told the House of Commons that she was now advising athletes not to go to Moscow and wrote to Sir Denis Follows, Chairman of the BOA, informing him of the government's decision. The BOA, which was Britain's NOC and the organisation that could accept or decline the invitation to the Olympics, declared that they were against a boycott, but, at the wishes of the individual Governing Bodies of Sport (of which there were 26 which made up the BOA), postponed making a final decision until the 25th of March. In the meantime, the government undertook a variety of measures in order to persuade the BOA to support a boycott. Despite such efforts, on the 25th of March, the BOA declared that it was accepting the invitation to Moscow². From then on, the government concentrated its efforts on trying to persuade the Governing Bodies of Sport to boycott the Games, rather than the BOA, as these Governing Bodies reserved the right to defy the BOA's decision if they wished. As a result, four Governing Bodies, Equestrianism, Hockey, Shooting and Yachting, agreed to the boycott, while



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the remainder supported the BOA. In the end, a relatively complete British Olympic team made the trip, although, at the request of the BOA, the British team used an IOC flag throughout the competition rather than the Union Jack.

Crafted using a balanced evaluation of unique primary source material which documents the case both for and against the boycott, this essay will argue, contrary to the predominant trend in the general history of the boycott, that the British government's call for a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games was appropriate. This conclusion will be reached by approaching the question from a new perspective which argues that the government's call for a boycott should be analysed as two different types of response to the invasion of Afghanistan – a punitive response and a response which aimed at preventing the Soviet Union from exploiting British athletes for political purposes, which will be referred to as the preventative response. The appropriateness of the first response, it will be argued, was questionable, yet, the second, because of the way in which the Soviet Union was appropriating the Olympic Games during the invasion of Afghanistan, was a politically necessary response for the government, and thus, appropriate. Indeed, by arguing the political necessity of this response, this essay will also challenge the traditional approach to the boycott as one of a question over whether it was appropriate that politics should interfere in sport, and instead argue that such a debate was actually irrelevant.

The Punitive Response

A boycott came to epitomise, in the eyes of the government, the punitive response that the Soviet Union deserved in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan. Although the government emphasised that the boycott was part of a package of measures taken against the Soviet Union, such as withholding support for a Soviet Film Week at the National Film Theatre³, the boycott was clearly the centre point of a punitive response and all of the other measures were relatively minor in comparison. Thus, for Thatcher, a boycott would be a clear signal to the Soviet Union that "aggression cannot be committed without cost"⁴ and that for the West, appeasement and détente were no longer the top priorities⁵, a sentiment backed by most Conservative and also some Labour MPs⁶.

Although the government never expected that a boycott would alter the strategic situation in Afghanistan⁷, it was argued that a boycott would deter the Soviet Union from further expansion⁸, as Foreign Office Minister Douglas Hurd wrote in an article for the *Daily Express*, "If we can make the Russians think

twice over Afghanistan, then next time they see an opportunity they may decide to stay at home"⁹. Thus, not only would a boycott convey a strong message, but also it was hoped that it would induce a new global relationship with the Soviet Union, in which forays into the Third World would no longer be accepted and détente would be transformed into a two-way relationship. Furthermore, a boycott was also seen as the most conspicuous way "in which we can bring home to the Russian people that their rulers have miscalculated."¹⁰ Indeed, the Civil Service advised the government that a boycott would be "impossible to conceal"¹¹ by the Soviet authorities, unlike athletes making political gestures while at the Games (as some suggested as an alternative to a boycott) which would invariably be censored by the Soviet authorities as all "internal broadcasts will be recorded and edited before transmission."¹² Thus, the Olympic boycott was to be the crux of the punishment meted out by the British government to the Soviet Union in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan.



Sir Denis Follows
(1908–1983) had been Chairman of the British Olympic Association (BOA) from 1977. Previously, from 1963 to 1975, he served as Secretary of the Football Association.



However, although the arguments for the boycott as a punitive response to the invasion of Afghanistan are compelling, they are, in themselves, problematic. Firstly, although the Soviet citizens would notice a boycott, there was a good chance that the reasons behind it would be covered up by the Soviet government or portrayed as a measure to end détente and start a new Cold War. Indeed, the Soviet government, aided by the fact that the boycott was only partial, effectively portrayed the boycott as an anti-Soviet and anti-détente measure and, in conjunction, managed to successfully engender a sense of Soviet patriotism, which encouraged the solidarity of the population with the leadership.

Secondly, there was a persuasive argument to suggest that a boycott, rather than simply altering the nature of détente, could destroy it completely. Indeed, as Foreign Affairs expert Dr. Karen Dawisha explained in a statement to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, a boycott could "raise the temperature of

'Ah, the starting pistol! Let's go!'

Caricature: Daily Express



The British Olympic team handbook for Moscow 1980 looked very slim. The marks-men, riders, sailors and hockey players were missing after their national governing bodies voted to support the boycott. Chef de Mission was BOA Secretary Richard "Dick" Palmer was the only Briton to take part in the opening parade and carried the Olympic flag.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

the Cold War"¹³, not least by isolating the pro-détente members of the Politburo and allowing hardliners to rise to prominence within the Soviet Union. Again, such fears were proved correct – the NATO assessment of the boycott concluded that the boycott, as predicted, damaged détente irreparably, and relations between the Soviet Union and the West entered a new era of confrontation.

Finally, by arguing that the boycott was part of a package of punitive measures, the government was vulnerable to criticism because the boycott was clearly the strongest response and, in comparison, the other measures were relatively weak. Indeed, tougher measures (such as cutting off all trade and diplomatic relations) were not taken. This created a tangible feeling amongst athletes that they were being singled out and victimised, exemplified in Parliament by Tam Dalyell MP, who asked the Minister of Sport, Hector Monro, "What is the justification for allowing the Moscow branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank to continue its commercial operations ... while saying to the athletes 'You cannot go?'"¹⁴ Indeed, opponents of the boycott and athletes effectively argued that sport was not as important to the government as economic, strategic or high-ranking political relations and consequently, athletes' careers and aspirations were simply regarded as expendable. The government had no effective counter to the above argument, and thus, as Monro wrote in a letter to Hurd, "Most sportspeople still believe they are being singled out by the politicians"¹⁵, exemplified in Sebastian Coe's comment to *The Sun* that it was, "time athletes stopped carrying the can for every wrong-doing in the world."¹⁶

Thus, the examples above illustrate the inherent weaknesses of using a boycott as a punitive response to the invasion of Afghanistan because it would have been (and was) ineffective; would (and did) cause irreparable damage to the British-Soviet relations and, because it singled athletes out, was unlikely to (and did not) persuade athletes to boycott or achieve popular support.

The Preventative Response

Yet, there was another perspective to the boycott decision, not as a punitive response, but as a preventative response, and this becomes especially clear when the Olympic Games, and its appropriation by the Soviet Union, is taken into account. To understand this argument, it is first necessary to show how sport and politics are interlinked throughout the world, and how the Olympic Games have particular political significance. Indeed, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office produced this statement about sporting systems in the world in 1980:

*There is a system in the Soviet Bloc countries which unashamedly uses sport for the glorification of the State, there is a system in the Third World countries where the Government tend to run sport and thirdly, there is the system which is prevalent in the western democracies where sport is run on a voluntary principle, but where it has now become such a vital part of the social fabric that it is financially assisted each year by the Government.*¹⁷

None of the systems described above are independent of politics. In Britain, the government funded the Sports Council, which directed the development of sport in Britain. Indeed, the Sports Council itself part-funded the British Olympic Appeal, which meant that the government often indirectly funded British Olympic teams. However, government involvement in sport was not only financial, but also political. The Sports Council, although supposedly apolitical, was in fact was made up of members and a Chairman that were appointed by the government¹⁸. Indeed, Percy Lucas, Chairman of the Finance Committee of the Sports Council, in a letter to Lord Boyd-Carpenter ("one of the very few remaining Tories on the Sports Council"¹⁹), stated that he was unhappy that "left wing do-gooders"²⁰ in the Sports Council, appointed in the Harold Wilson and James Callaghan Labour governments, were trying to talk against a boycott. Furthermore, government interference in sporting events was not unknown, as shown by its opposition to the British Lions' Rugby Tour of South Africa, which the government opposed due to the Gleneagles Agreement whereby all Commonwealth governments advised against sporting contacts with South Africa, an apartheid regime²¹.

Thus, it can be seen that politics and sport were inextricably linked in Britain, yet, in the Soviet bloc, there was not even a veneer of independence, and sport was an arm of government policy. As a Foreign Office paper stated, "[a]ny decisions taken by the SOC [Soviet Olympic Committee] would undoubtedly be in accordance with the directions of the Soviet Government and it would be naïve to think otherwise."²² Indeed, in the Soviet bloc, "[s]port...was a serious business, with serious functions to perform; it was associated with health, hygiene, defence, patriotism, integration, productivity, international recognition, even nation building"²³, and there are many examples to prove this point. For example, in the Soviet Party Activists Handbook of 1980, it was stated that Soviet victories in the Olympics (since Helsinki in 1952) were directly linked to the ending of the United States' global hegemony in the post-war era while in the Montreal Olympics in 1976, socialist countries made up six of the top ten Olympic medals winners',



which they believed proved the success of the socialist system²⁴. Furthermore, sport had become even more important for the Soviet Union in the era of détente, in which the Soviet Union and the West were not in direct conflict with each other, and thus, conflict took other, softer, forms, such as sport. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the Soviet Union, sport was used to both legitimise their system of government, for political glorification, to enhance prestige in the international arena and as a tool of soft power in the Cold War. Hence, it is not presumptuous to assume that the Olympic Games would be used in the same way.

Indeed, the Soviet Union was able to exploit the Olympics in such a way because politics was inherently built into the Olympic system. The Ancient Olympic Games have been described as “political affairs of the highest magnitude”²⁵, while the founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, had political aims in re-establishing the Games due to his “wish for France to gain prestige through sport after its defeat in 1871 in the Franco-Prussian War.”²⁶ Indeed, the modern Olympic Games were shrouded in a new, dominant, ideology that emerged in the late nineteenth century, and continued into the twentieth century: nationalism. Nationalism called for the emotional mobilisation of the masses, and the Olympics, with its national teams, anthems, and point standings, enshrined the tenets of the surrounding political system and the philosophy of nationalism. Indeed, NOCs (“the guardians of the political element of the Olympic Movement”²⁷) ensured that only those wearing state colours could participate in the Games, and that only a country’s citizens could participate for that country.

Therefore, although the IOC were “willing to insist rhetorically that the Games were competitions among individual participants ... [they] perpetuat[ed] an organisational structure intimately connected to the state system, and designed to insure that the Games

were contests among national representatives.”²⁸ Indeed, even the structure of the IOC represented the state power system and the status quo, as it over-represented the late nineteenth-century Great Power nations in its inception, and, by 1980, was still weighted in favour of Western democracies. Thus, because the Olympics was so inherently political, governments of host cities could exploit a successful Olympics for political gain and achieve great political profit by using the Games to present the country’s ideology, culture and history in a favourable light. Indeed, the Olympics was the perfect stage for such a statement, as David Wallechinsky stated, “[t]here are only two places today where people from all parts of the world gather: the United Nations and the Olympics”²⁹ and thus, with the world’s eyes are directed on a city for those two weeks of the Olympics, the power of a political statement, especially an ideological one, is obvious.

Thus, the Olympic Games created an irresistible opportunity for the Soviet government to use the Games for political gain and to create a particular image of their nation within international circles³⁰. This was certainly recognised by the British government, as Thatcher explicitly expressed the view that the Moscow Games of 1980 was being used by the Soviet Union to “boost Soviet prestige in the world”³¹. Such a sentiment was expressed in official Soviet rhetoric and literature. For example, in their Party Activists’ Handbook for 1980, it was stated:

*[T]he history of the Olympic Movement is characterised by the constant struggle between progressive forces and reactionaries ... The decision to offer the honoured right to hold the Olympic Games in the capital of the first socialist state in the world was convincing proof of the universal recognition of the historical importance and correctness of the course of our country’s foreign policy, the vast contribution of the Soviet Union in the struggle for peace, and its contribution to the international Olympic Movement and the development of physical culture and sport.*³²

Although it would be naive to believe that the world community would think that the Olympic Games was given to Moscow because it was socialist (indeed, Lord Killanin, President of the IOC at the time, believed that the IOC decision to vote for Moscow was made within the spirit of détente³³), a successful Olympic Games would be presented by the Soviet Union, and perceived across the world, in positive terms and it would be assumed that Britain condoned Soviet domestic and foreign policy. This may have been tolerated, within the spirit of détente, by the British government, however, once the invasion of

The Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had no heart for participation in Moscow and remained unimpressed by British performances. Not one Moscow medallist was included in the following year’s honours list.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

A legendary 'duel in shorts': Steven Ovett beat world record-holder Sebastian Coe over 800 m, but in the 1500 m Coe was able to take his revenge.

Photo: Official Report
Moscow 1980



Afghanistan occurred, the government had to *prevent* their official presence at the Olympics from being used by the Soviet Union for political legitimacy and propaganda. Indeed, Colin Legum, writing in the *Observer*, put it most effectively when he wrote, "if the Moscow Games go ahead without serious disruption, the Soviet Government will claim this as evidence that the West is already merely reconciled to continued Soviet occupation of Afghanistan."³⁴

This is the preventative response that it is argued was politically appropriate. As Thatcher argued in her autobiography, it was necessary to "prevent their using the forthcoming Moscow Olympics for propaganda purposes."³⁵ Indeed, by politicising the Olympics, while at the same time invading Afghanistan, an action condemned by 104 states at the United Nations, the Soviet Union left the government with no choice but take political action, exemplified in a boycott.

Indeed, boycotts, terrorism and attacks to state legitimacy (as have occurred at all modern Olympic Games³⁶) have been used because the Olympics has been, from the outset, a political event as much as a sporting event. This is why it is argued that the debate over the appropriateness of a boycott is not one of whether politics should interfere in a sporting event because the concept of the boycott was directed not

against the Olympic Games, but against the political exploitation of the Olympic Games by the Soviet authorities as a means of boosting its political status in the international arena whilst the invasion of Afghanistan was taking place. Thus, it was necessary for the British government to prevent the British Olympic team's attendance in Moscow.

However, the government predominantly emphasised using a boycott as a punitive response. For example, Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, argued in a speech that "[i]f ... we have to embrace the use of sport for the first time as a political weapon, I feel that the end would justify the means."³⁷ Indeed, this statement illustrates that the government was choosing to use sport to punish the Soviet Union, an argument bound to frustrate athletes, and even after Thatcher's death, Seb Coe has stated that "[u]sing (sport) as a weapon was both craven and self-defeating,"³⁸ Instead of contending that sport needed to be used as an effective weapon against the Soviet Union, the government should have argued more emphatically that it had been forced to take political action to prevent the Soviet Union from profiting from British representation at the Olympics. The preventative response would have countered the accusations, addressed previously, that the government was singling out athletes because it

would have separated the boycott from other measures taken as a punitive response to the invasion. Thus, the argument over whether the boycott was proportionate to other measures taken would have been rendered irrelevant. The distinction between the punitive and preventative responses is important to understand why it was appropriate for a government to take the action of a boycott. One of the reasons that the government failed to persuade the BOA and the athletes was because they focussed too much on trying to show that they were undertaking a punitive response, which unfortunately encompassed sport, while not spending enough time in telling athletes that by politicising the Olympics, during the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union had forced the British government into taking the response of a boycott.

The British government and the BOA

Perhaps the most publicised aspect of the decision to call for a boycott was the quarrel between the government and the BOA, which was caused chiefly by consistent failures to accept the other side's positions and a stubbornness common to the two main protagonists, Margaret Thatcher and the Chairman of the BOA, Sir Denis Follows.

Although they condemned the invasion of Afghanistan from the outset³⁹, the BOA maintained that a boycott was inappropriate because sport and politics did not, and should not, mix. As Follows, (a "rock in support of non-political involvement in sport"⁴⁰) wrote, "[t]he Olympic Movement is always being used as a chopping block by politicians ... we would resist as strongly as we could any attempt by governments to interfere."⁴¹ Such a resolute line clearly frustrated the government, with Thatcher's tabloids unleashing their ire on Follows, calling him an "old buffer"⁴² and a "bald-headed buffoon"⁴³, while a group of, rather mischievous, backbench Conservative MPs tabled an amendment in the House of Commons suggesting that "this House considers that Sir Denis Follows merits the award of the Lenin Peace Prize."⁴⁴

Indeed, throughout the period, the government seemed to be on the back-foot, and allowed the BOA to frame the debate about the boycott into a direct standoff between politics versus sport. In this debate, the BOA claimed that any political interference in sport was simply wrong, while, in opposition, the government spent their time trying to justify using sport for political means (as a punitive response), as highlighted by Heseltine's comment that "[i]f ... we have to embrace the use of sport for the first time as a political weapon, I feel that the end would justify the means."⁴⁵ Such arguments alienated the government

from the athletes and the general public, as has previously been established, and thus, it is evident that the government made a fundamental mistake, in the build-up to the Olympics, of trying to win a debate that they, not only, could not win, but furthermore, was not even relevant to the appropriateness of a boycott. As David B. Kanin argued, "[o]ne of the primary errors of those seeking support for the 1980 Olympic boycott was to give lip service to those calls [about sport and politics not mixing]"⁴⁶, rather than simply dismissing them as irrelevant. Indeed, the government should have focussed on making a stronger case to the BOA regarding the position in which it had been placed by the Soviet Union in order to convince them of the need to make a response that prevented the Soviet Union from gaining a political propaganda victory that would be against the interests of Britain.

However, this is not to say that the BOA's decision to accept the invitation to Moscow was not appropriate, as their interests, in addition to their official role of accepting or declining the invitation to the Olympics, included the promotion of British Olympic sport. While the government had to take a political decision on an issue that would have been harmful to British interests, the BOA, as representatives of British Olympic sport, had to consider their decision in the interests of British Olympians who wanted to compete in Moscow, which, according to polls, was around 90% of the athletes⁴⁷.

Yet, the defence of British athletes and British sport by the BOA in the months leading up to the Olympics also highlighted how the organisation had to change in the future years. Indeed, Follows' preponderance on the argument that sport and politics did not mix emphasised how the BOA had not adapted to the changing times in which politics had an ever increasing part to play in the development of sport, and how major sporting events were as about "world politics"⁴⁸ as they were about sports. In future, the BOA would have to recognise, as it perhaps should have done in 1980, that politicised events required a political response, although that did not mean that the BOA could not resist such political decisions if they did not support them. Indeed, as General Secretary of the BOA, Robert Palmer, conceded in the aftermath of the 1980 Olympics, "[f]or sport to resist undue political pressure, to create political change in its favour, it must itself become an effective political pressure group. Presently we are hostage to any ill directed wind of political fortune."⁴⁹ The need for sport with engage in politics in order to better protect its interests is now the norm among sporting associations, and as John Coghlan has written, "sport in Britain has come increasingly to realise and benefit from this involvement."⁵⁰

Decision on the line:
Allan Wells became
the first Briton since
Harold Abrahams in
1924 in Paris to win
the 100 m. He was
given the same time
as Cuba's Silvio
Leonard.

Photo: Official Report
Moscow 1980



Conclusions

Historical consensus has been critical of the idea of an Olympic boycott and, in the end, decided it was a failure. Yet, this essay has argued that such conclusions were too simplistic, and neglects to evaluate the nuances behind the decision to boycott. Indeed, by the process of separating and analysing each reason for the boycott, it is evident that one should not see the decision to boycott as simply a choice that the government could utilise (as in a punitive response), but a political necessity because of the way in which the Olympic Games was appropriated by the Soviet Union during the invasion of Afghanistan, an action to which it has been established the British government considered to be a significant threat. The government was therefore left with no choice on this matter (although it failed to make this point convincingly), and therefore, it is argued that the emphasis of the debate around this question should shift away from sport versus politics, an issue essentially incompatible with the idea of a boycott as a preventative response.

Indeed, while it is wrong for governments to use sport as a political weapon (the punitive response), it must be recognised that major sporting events are often politically manipulated, and thus, there are circumstances where political action needs to be taken. Furthermore, the fact that sporting associations may disagree with such action and fight for the interests of sport (and succeeding, in the case of Britain in 1980) should not then be interpreted as an unedifying battle over political interference in sport, but, if anything, a triumph of democracy and independence as both sides fight to represent their relative interests. Unfortunately, in 1980, government strategy has sadly obscured this precedent and has, ultimately, left many involved in this saga from January to July 1980 feeling bitter. ■

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