

THE MELBOURNE OLYMPIC GAMES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS OF 1956¹

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A few days before the opening ceremony of the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956, two serious international crises erupted in Egypt and Hungary. The repercussions were immediate. Many nations withdrew from the Games. Some of them were protesting against the invasion of Hungary. Others were demonstrating their opposition to the military intervention of France and Great Britain in the Suez Canal affair. Finally, China did not tolerate Taiwan's participation in the Melbourne Games.

Meeting in Rome in April 1949 for their 43rd session, the members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had the opportunity to offer the Olympic Games to a city in the southern hemisphere for the first time. After Mexico, Detroit and Los Angeles were ruled out, Melbourne remained a contender in the final round of voting, along with Buenos Aires. The Australian city won the right to host the Games in 1956 by 21 votes to 20.⁴ This choice brought the Olympic Movement to a new frontier: it represented a step forward in the universalisation of the Olympic idea. Furthermore, it seemed to set the Olympic Games apart from the international political turbulence of the early stages of the Cold War. Oceania was a stable region and, since Australia was intimately linked with the British crown, there was no evidence to suggest that it would become a bone of contention in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. As such – “decentralised” and “secure” – the Melbourne celebrations would be testament to all the values of the Olympic idea.

Seven years later, when the time came to review the situation, the initial plans were revealed to be unfeasible. Nothing went as initially planned. The IOC was faced with a serious crisis; one of a different nature from previous crises, and notably from that of Berlin. Several delegations turned down the Australian Organising Committee's invitation, motivated by the political climate of the time, which was fraught with tension. In political terms, such a course of action is termed a boycott (or boycotting), a term now commonly associated with the sporting spectacle of 1956. It is frequently justified as a non-violent response of the weak to the strong. The lexicon of the Olympic Movement favours the word “withdrawal”, as demonstrated by the official report on the Melbourne Games, which uses it exclusively.⁵

The difficult final stages of organising the Games

Today, obtaining the right to host the Olympic Games requires the submission, prior to the vote of the members of the IOC, of an application dossier offering the clearest possible outline of the planned organisation. This was not yet the case in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The first task of Melbourne's organising committee was therefore to clarify its plans in consultation with the IOC and the International Federations. The memoirs of Otto Mayer, the Chancellor of the IOC throughout this period, attest that the difficulties to be

overcome were numerous and complex: “the organisation of the Games has got off to a bad start”, he surmised in April 1953.⁶ Although, with hindsight, the Chancellor may have exaggerated – as a result of his disputes with Hugh Weir, a member of the IOC and the director of the preparations for the Melbourne Games⁷ – the reality of the obstacles that had to be overcome was indisputable.

The opposition of the Australian population to the Games being held there was an early stumbling block which was swiftly removed by the Organising Committee. The latter had a survey carried out by the Gallup Institute, which showed that 80% of Melbourne's inhabitants were in favour of hosting the Games, but that this figure fell to 60% when extended to the Australian population as a whole. More seriously, the sanitation laws in force in Australia imposed a six-month quarantine on any animals brought into the country. This restriction affected the equestrian events. In view of the government's refusal to make an exception to this rule, the possibility of withdrawing the Games from Melbourne was raised. The intervention of a British member of the IOC prevented this from becoming a reality. The elimination of the equestrian events was then suggested. Finally, a compromise was reached which broke with the traditional unity of place of the Games. Sweden offered to welcome the equestrian Games in its capital in June 1956. As a result, the year 1956 would witness an unprecedented three separate Olympic celebrations: the Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo in Italy (in January and February), the Equestrian Games in Stockholm and the Summer Games in Melbourne.

Finally, the date of the first Games to be held in the southern hemisphere was to be the subject of prolonged discussions between the IOC and the organisers, to such an extent that it was modified on several occasions. The increased number of Olympic events and the inversion of the seasons south of the equator disturbed the rhythm of a typical Olympic year. On top of the long journey and the considerable travel costs for the delegations, certain athletes, having made prior commitments to their studies or their jobs, would be unable to participate. Others would be out of shape because the sporting season was out of synch with that of the northern hemisphere. This would work to the advantage of “sham amateur” athletes and real state-sponsored athletes – notably “the largest army of athletes that the world has ever known”,⁸ which the USSR was preparing in order to demonstrate the superiority of its political system. As a last resort, the dates of the Melbourne Games were definitively set as 22nd November to 8th December 1956.

Despite the impression of general disorder left by these bitter negotiations, the first two events in the 1956 Olympic calendar came and went without incident. In Cortina, the USSR – although it was taking part in the Winter Games for the first time – made a clean sweep of the medals, thus validating Brundage's prediction.⁹ In Stockholm, in June, the prevailing wintry weather put the

Scandinavian competitors at an advantage.

The realignment of international relations, followed by a conjuncture of serious crises during the second half of the year, would have a significant impact on the preparation for the Melbourne Games, and finally the way in which events unfolded.

The “first détente”,¹⁰ or the two dimensions of the thaw in relations

The death of Stalin in 1953 – which facilitated the end of the terrible Korean conflict but led to the partition of the peninsula – seemed to put the Cold War on hold. Relations between the two world superpowers began to thaw, a development which Nikita Khrushchev formalised at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 by advocating the peaceful coexistence of the two dominant ideological systems which had heretofore appeared inherently antagonistic. The American President, Eisenhower – who was recovering from a heart attack but nonetheless preparing to seek a second term – neither accepted nor refuted Khrushchev’s theory. He paid more attention to Khrushchev’s denunciation of his predecessor’s crimes, which represented the second dimension of the thaw. A fundamental change was underway in the heart of the Communist bloc. The normalisation of relations with Tito’s Yugoslavia, initiated in May 1955 by the First Secretary’s visit to Belgrade, which saw him affirm “the right of each socialist country to choose its own path”,¹¹ confirmed this to be the case. By validating the independent attitude which Tito had adopted since 1948, Khrushchev had “[dropped] a veritable bomb on what had long been the monolithic edifice of the Soviet bloc”.¹² Although the most sceptical Western observers remained unconvinced, the dissolution of Kominform and Khrushchev’s visit to London in April 1956 were interpreted as a clear signal by the popular democracies of Eastern Europe. Artists, students and workers came together throughout the region to pave the way for change. But the Stalinist leaders, anxious to hold onto their positions of power, intended to carry out de-Stalinisation on their own terms.

Tensions persist in Asia and spread to the Third World

Although the structure of the blocs prevailed in Europe, with any changes taking place internally, extreme tensions persisted in East Asia at least until the middle of 1955. By this point, the situation in Korea had been stabilised, as it was for a short while in Indochina, which the French had been pushed out of. However, the People’s Republic of China was threatening Formosa, where the defeated nationalists had been contained since 1949. In the face of Communist aggression, displayed through the bombing of the coastal islands in the Formosa Strait, Eisenhower asked for and was granted Congressional authorisation to use force if necessary to safeguard this essential component of the American defence system in

Asia. For a while, the international community feared the possibility of American nuclear attacks on China. But the situation became calmer during the lead-up to the Bandung Conference, of which the Communists, represented by Zhou Enlai, had high expectations. As “the iron curtain in the Far East [was becoming] more rigid”,¹³ the two Chinas would continue their antagonism on fresh terrain, albeit indirectly.

Bandung (April 1955) represented a break in the bipolar logic which had provided a structure for the world since the end of the Second World War. The aspirations of the participating countries, for the most part recently independent, were defined in a collective declaration which marked the birth of the Third World. Its condemnation of both colonialism and the permanent state of insecurity engendered by the opposition of the two superpowers, along with its call for the development of entire regions of the world that lived in the most extreme poverty, were the principal themes of the demands. The outcome of the Afro-Asian conference was an indictment of the West.

Yet it was Tito, a European, who kept the spirit of Bandung alive in July of the following year when he welcomed the recently elected Egyptian President Nasser and the Indian Prime Minister Nehru at his summer residence. On an Adriatic island, the three men would set out the foundations of what would become a movement of non-adherents and attempt to open up a third way between East and West. The collective declaration announced at Brioni on 19th July 1956 advocated the virtues of neutrality.

Nasser, strengthened by his pivotal position in the “International Alliance of Poor Countries”, by the new prospects offered by the diplomatic cooperation initiated at Brioni and the national mandate he had received in June, announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company upon his return to Cairo on 26th July. The Rais – abandoned by the United States on the Aswan dam construction programme, threatened by the United Kingdom which had established the Baghdad Pact against the wishes of the USSR and Egypt, and held in contempt by the French on account of his support for the Algerian FLN – wished to put an end to the existence of Israel. With all this in mind, Nasser launched a power struggle with the Western countries and their allies. The route which enabled Europe to replenish its oil supplies was now in his hands. The French and the British, who held shares in the Canal Company, protested most vehemently. They were ready to use force if necessary. Harold Macmillan, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, justified this stance to an emissary from the American government: “Both Britain and France must either rise to the challenge or be reduced to the level of second-class nations.”¹⁴ It was no longer a question of freedom of movement or law, but the maintenance of power. The United States were opposed to any military action and suggested that an international conference be held. This took place from 1st to 23rd November. Egypt refused to participate. The far-

from-straightforward outcome of the conference, a plan to internationalise the canal, was adopted by 18 members but rejected by the Soviet Union and India. Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister was commissioned to negotiate the matter with Nasser.

The international situation catches up with the Olympic Games

Since 1955, Robert Gordon Menzies had held, along with his political post, the official presidency of the Olympic Federation and that of the Games in Melbourne, a city to which he was particularly attached, having studied there.¹⁵ Even before his arrival in Cairo in early September 1956, Egypt had decided, seemingly just before mid-August, not to send a team to Melbourne. The reason given was that the United Kingdom was wielding significant influence over the Games. It was impossible not to see this as an attempt to put pressure on the Western negotiator, who was perceived as being under the thumb of the British. President Brundage and Otto Mayer learned the news through the press¹⁶. In a letter addressed to the Secretary of the Egyptian National Olympic Committee, Brundage contested the Egyptians' accusation. The Games, he argued, were "entirely under the international control of the International Olympic Committee and the International Federation of Amateur Sports". He then highlighted the fact that "the fundamental principle of the Olympic Movement is that it is apolitical and non-commercial". The Egyptian government's refusal to allow its athletes to go to Australia, he wrote, was unjust and undermined the preparations they had made. It would lead to "criticisms of your country". Brundage, who remembered having met Nasser in Cairo in spring 1956 during an official visit as President of the IOC, commissioned Touny to transmit his request. Neither Brundage's demand, nor the Menzies mission, found favour with the Rais. The Suez affair remained at an impasse and the Melbourne Games recorded their first defection.

The tensions in the Middle East made the headlines in the international press. They shared the front pages, however, with news of the events in Eastern Europe. The new set of circumstances initiated by Khrushchev allowed the anger that had been accumulating since satellisation to be expressed. In Poland, particularly in Poznan, there were rumblings of revolution. The disoriented apparatchiks attempted to act. In the hope of safeguarding the fundamentals of the Communist system, and under the threat of a Soviet intervention, Gomulka – who had been freed from prison after Stalin's death – was appointed party leader on 19th October. On the 23rd, he made an agreement with Moscow which clearly established the boundaries that were not to be overstepped during the process of liberalisation he intended to carry out.¹⁷ Radio Warsaw remarked on the joy of the Polish people, as displayed in public demonstrations throughout the country, and observed that spring had unexpectedly arrived in autumn.

Similarly, unrest had been brewing in Hungary since 1955. The announcement of the agreement with Poland which brought an "end to the terror"¹⁸ in the popular democracies of Eastern Europe ignited the flame. In this case, nationalism seemed as decisive a factor as the desire for more liberty. The oath which Olympic athletes were forced to take when they gathered at the Army Theatre in Budapest on 15th January 1956 provided a revealing example of this. It emphasised "the national spirit" and "the greatness of the motherland", along with "behaviour worthy of a socialist sportsman".¹⁹ Upon the announcement of the Polish victory, a nationalist insurrection broke out spontaneously, leading to the intervention of Soviet troops stationed in the country. The latter prompted the return to power of Imre Nagy and fuelled the dissent. After numerous discussions with the new leaders, Khrushchev ordered the Soviet troops to be evacuated from the Hungarian capital on the 31st. The days that followed were pivotal, since Nagy called into question Hungary's membership of the Soviet bloc, which even Gomulka had not done. He announced free elections, Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and, finally, its neutrality. A second intervention of the Soviet army, on a massive scale, began on 4th November. After a week of terrible fighting, Budapest was in flames. An appeal for help from the UNO went unanswered. The West, horrified but powerless, stood by and watched as thousands of Hungarians were killed, 200,000 others fled, and Nagy – who would be executed two years later – was arrested. Mere days before the American election, Eisenhower declared that he was "wholeheartedly with the Hungarian people".²⁰

The home straight of the long electoral process undoubtedly affected America's attitude to the two major crises which were unfolding simultaneously in early November. The French and the British, with the cooperation of the Israelis, thus drew up a plan which aimed to seize control of the canal and to overthrow Nasser without Washington's knowledge. As agreed, on 29th October, the Tsahal troops invaded the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, and proceeded to the banks of the Suez Canal. In order to protect the interests of the international community, at least officially, the Franco-British pairing issued the two belligerents with an ultimatum. Its troops, who were stationed in Cyprus and had been ready for some time, began a week-long bombardment of Port Saïd, which was followed by a land invasion on 5th November. However, the United States and the USSR forced what had been the dominant powers of the 19th century to cease all military activities. The agreement reached by the two superpowers on the Suez affair was a precursor to the Détente. Nasser had won the power struggle which he had started in July.

The Olympic reading of the geopolitical situation

The desire to universalise participation in the Games was a permanent "ideological" feature of the Olympic movement. The list of the 91 invitations sent out from 1st

October 1954 onwards by the Melbourne Organisational Committee is testament to this. A close examination of the list clearly demonstrates the will to exceed the number of nations participating in previous Games. The inviolable use of the term “nations” in the official communications of the Olympic Movement is in a clever way of breaking free from the standard international practice of using ‘state’ or, more frequently, “country”. Furthermore, internal communication – between Brundage and Mayer, for example – conformed to the language that was in general use rather than the official lexicon. The retention of the word “nation” thus revealed a conscious effort to promote a specific geography of the Olympic world; a geography of sport whose origins could be traced back to Coubertin. This gave the movement the freedom to apply its own, supposedly apolitical, reading of world events, as long as it did not stir up political opposition. In the case of Melbourne, it enabled nations which were not recognised as official states, and particularly those which were under British guardianship – Gold Coast, which would become Ghana in 1957; Uganda, which achieved independence in 1962; Malaysia and Singapore, which were separated in 1965, etc. – to be invited. Furthermore, this apolitical stance appeared to work to the advantage of the Western bloc’s positions. For example, South Vietnam and South Korea, states which were essential components of the American defence system in Asia, were invited under the name of Vietnam and Korea respectively. More well known is the case of the German delegation. The Melbourne Organising Committee invited athletes from the BRD, the GDR and the Saarland. The National Olympic Committee of the Saarland was dissolved at the end of 1956 when the decision was made to return the Saarland to the BRD. This reunification would not come into effect until 1st January 1957. Some time previously, the IOC had requested a unified team, to include the Saar athletes, under the aegis of West Germany.

The wave of withdrawals which the IOC received at the beginning of November thus touched a particularly sensitive spot.

“The storm of withdrawals”²¹

The official report on the Games makes a distinction, in terms of those countries that refused to participate, between those which withdrew and those which declined the invitation.²² The distinction is subtle and stems directly from a refusal to make the situation clear. The 11 withdrawals concern those nations that had formally agreed to come to Melbourne before pulling out. The 11 others announced their abstention outright. This latter group consists of principalities (e.g. Monaco) and poorer states, largely in Latin America and the Caribbean.

After Egypt pulled out in August, the Organising Committee and the IOC received ten more “withdrawals” between 7th and 9th November. This occurred at the height of the international crises, less than two weeks before the opening ceremony. President Brundage was

preparing to leave the United States to return to Australia and chair the IOC session which would directly precede the tournament.²³

Communist China seems to have been the first to communicate its decision directly to the President, who received at his home a 12-page wire detailing China’s official motives. He conveyed this information to Otto Mayer in a letter dated 9th November. Two years after the recognition of its Olympic Committee, the People’s Republic of China declined to send its athletes to Melbourne. Some of them might have had to compete against Taiwanese athletes. The football tournament, for example, did not exclude the possibility of a confrontation between the two Chinas. The root of the problem was to be found in the use of the name “China” by the nationalist committee (Taiwan). The news of China’s refusal came almost as a relief to Brundage, since he considered that it would “eliminate at least one source of trouble”.²⁴ Furthermore, he was considering suspending the recognition of Communist China’s Committee, which had focused almost all of its activity on political issues. Although the process he envisaged was unprecedented, it would not, according to him, be “a bad idea”. Incidentally, another paragraph of this letter made reference to a terse exchange of telegrams between Otto Mayer and the Dutch Olympic Committee. Brundage did not seem very worried by the Netherlands’ anger about the situation in Hungary, and of their demand for the exclusion of the Soviet delegation, he remarked,

“If countries are going to abstain from the Olympic Games because they do not like what some of the other countries are doing, we might as well give up, since there will always be some country that is misbehaving. It is much better, I think, to try to preserve the little nucleus of international cooperation and goodwill that we have developed, in the hope that it will spread its influence.”²⁵

It was obvious that President Brundage was unaware of the Dutch withdrawal, sent to Otto Mayer by telegram on the 7th²⁶ and confirmed on the 8th by a letter²⁷ which was intended to provide a lesson in Olympic morals. The members of the Dutch Committee unanimously decided to withdraw their national team from the Games. The Dutch members of the IOC would not participate in the Melbourne session either. To participate “would have implied a violation of Olympic ideals and our national pride and feelings of humanity”.²⁸ The indictment was all the more powerful because it touched upon the moral foundations of the Olympic institution and, consequently, objected to the way it was currently being run.

Spain joined the Netherlands in the alliance of those refusing to participate with a telegram on 8th November.²⁹ A long letter, dated 22nd November, would follow. The subject of non-participation had been broached on 6th November before being made official on the 8th. The

apologetic tone of the letter might have led one to believe that the NOC had had no choice but to comply with the orders of Franco's deeply anti-Communist government. The decision to hold two symbolic celebrations of the Games in Barcelona and Madrid during the tournament in Melbourne gave weight to this theory.³⁰

Finally, Switzerland adopted the same position. In the words of Otto Mayer himself, the situation was "very embarrassing"³¹ for the Lausanne-based institution. It was the manifestation of a division between the different representatives of the Swiss sporting world, which stirred up unrest between the country's linguistic communities: "That gives quite a revolution in this country between Swiss Germans and us."³² It was also a matter of a personal defeat for the Swiss Chancellor of the IOC. Neither his attempts at intervention, nor those of his brother Albert, were able to influence the course of events. In reaction to this affront, Mayer suggested to Brundage that he officially reprimand those NOCs that had refused to participate in the Melbourne Games: "If we do not do anything of the kind, politics will be mixed up more and more in our affairs."³³ The Swiss NOC certainly tried to redeem itself, claiming that, after the decision of the 8th, it had become impossible, despite a last-minute change of heart, to find transport for the delegation.³⁴

Finally, Lebanon also backed out, "because of current circumstances in the Middle East".³⁵ Gabriel Gemayel, a member of the IOC, explained in a letter dated 14th November that civilian aerial traffic had been interrupted, particularly in Lebanon. Belonging, like Egypt, to the Arab League, Lebanon was "at the centre of the confusion".³⁶

Throughout this period, communication between the Chancellor and the President had been poor. The acceleration of Olympic history and the limited technical means of communication made it difficult to combat the outflow. A thorough examination of the situation, and the reaction to it, would both take place in Melbourne.

The IOC resurrects the Olympic Truce

In spite of the extreme constraints imposed by the repression of the revolution in Budapest, the Hungarian delegation, with the notable exception of the prestigious football team, was on site. It had had to travel to Australia via Prague. The Chancellor of the IOC, Otto Mayer, had personally intervened in the last-minute organisation of the journey. It was with this announcement that Brundage opened the meeting of the Executive Commission which took place at the Menzies Hotel in Melbourne on 17th November. The aim, of course, was to regain control and to compensate for the absence of so many countries.

"The Hungarian team is present in Melbourne following the direct intervention of the IOC. The Chancellor succeeded in obtaining an Olympic truce in the middle of the civil war [sic], which enabled the Hungarians to leave Budapest in

*order to come to Prague. The Chancellor then helped them to find an aeroplane to bring them to Australia."*³⁷

Prince Axel of Denmark, a member of the Commission, continued the assault by adding that "the countries whose teams [have forfeited] the chance to take part in the Melbourne Games [must] feel rather ridiculous".³⁸

This was followed by a summary of the facts which added Iraq to the list of defectors but did not cite the case of Lebanon, and which offered a truncated vision of reality. According to this account, Egypt had abstained due to a lack of funds. President Brundage left open the opportunity for wavering nations to change their minds, although this would be financially impossible. "We hope that all those who have decided not to participate in the Melbourne Games would like to reconsider the matter."³⁹

The Commission then broached the difficult subject of China. It was clear from the exchanges that took place between Brundage and Mayer that a sanction was planned. "The recognition of Peking-governed China should perhaps be revoked, or in any case a very serious warning should be addressed to them."⁴⁰ Several members of the Commission advocated a more moderate approach and recommended that a warning be sent to the Chinese Olympic officials in order to "make them face up to their responsibilities in terms of the observation of Olympic rules in accordance with the Olympic spirit".⁴¹

The issue of which response was appropriate was thus carried forward to the plenary session, which opened on 19th November in the same place. Overshadowing the other issues on the agenda, the defection of 11 teams – which would soon be joined by Nkrumah's Gold Coast, most likely in solidarity with Egypt; and by Malta, Guatemala and Panama for reasons that were not specified – prompted the release of two statements. One came from the President:

*"Every civilised person recoils in horror at the savage massacre taking place in Hungary; but this is no reason to destroy the ideals of international co-operation and goodwill which belong to the Olympic Movement. The Olympic Games are competitions between individuals, not between nations... If, in this imperfect world, participation in sport is adversely affected each time politicians violate the laws of humanity, there will be very few international competitions."*⁴²

The second was collective. It advocated the restoration of the ancient truce and, in the context of the period, the elimination of any interference between international politics and the apolitical Olympic stance:

"The fifty-second Congress of the International Olympic Committee, gathered for its first meeting of

the Melbourne Session in November 1956, recalls that almost 1200 years ago the Ekecheiria was proclaimed during the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece. This ideal remains one of our concerns and the IOC, in the name of ten million supporters of the Olympic Movement, scattered throughout eighty-nine recognised countries, wishes to draw the attention of the world to this concept, and to the atmosphere of goodwill which prevails among athletes, officials and spectators from different nations – some of whom do not even maintain diplomatic relations – who respect the sporting rules of fair play, here in Australia, during the Games of the XVIth Olympiad."⁴³

A resolution, passed unanimously by those present, condemned those nations that were guilty of boycotting the Games. It was specifically addressed to six of them: the three European nations, Communist China, Lebanon and Iraq.

In an editorial in the daily newspaper *l'Equipe*, Antoine Blondin, after listing the difficulties the IOC had encountered in preserving its authority, offered a more accurate assessment of the situation:

*"What we call a truce ... is in fact a precarious tolerance ... quite the opposite of our concerns, our rifts, our dramas ... From this perspective, the gathering in Australia is something of a godsend. The Universe undoubtedly needed this kind of playground."*⁴⁴

The impact on the way the Games unfolded

Ultimately, Melbourne welcomed 67 delegations and 3,184 athletes, as compared to 69 and 4,925 four years earlier in Helsinki. The tone of the event, without lapsing into moroseness, was far from the "ideal Olympic atmosphere"⁴⁵ which had prevailed in Finland. As the situation was constantly evolving, the Australian organisers frequently had to deal with urgent matters as they arose: programmes scrapped, tournaments and events which had to be rethought due to an insufficient number of competitors, uncertainty surrounding the opening ceremony, etc. Their capacity to adapt – and their nerve – was put to the test, which evidently affected the general atmosphere. The essence of the Games, however, was preserved. The official report, published in 1958, betrayed a muffled resentment of the "withdrawal[s] of the eleventh hour",⁴⁶ and particularly those of the European countries. The official discourse remained tightly regulated and painted an idyllic picture of the events. There was no mention of the water polo match between Hungary and the USSR which ended in a tussle,⁴⁷ nor of the tensions which divided the German team. Not a word was said about the Hungarian athletes who refused to return to Budapest at the end of the Games and were welcomed in Australia or the United States.

A divided front: the boycotts, rather than the boycott

There was no doubt that Nasser's decision not to send a team to Melbourne opened a path which, for various reasons, was taken by other abstaining countries. Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland, for example, had never displayed any reluctance to participate in the Helsinki Games, despite the presence of Stalin's athletes. Although the international context was markedly more tense in 1956, it is difficult to imagine that such a course of action would have been considered without the Egyptian precedent. The attitude of the three European delegations was clearly perceived as a betrayal by the Australian organisers.

The variety of reasons given by those who had chosen not to undertake the long voyage to Melbourne led to the conclusion that the Games had in fact been the victim not of one boycott, but of several. In a sense, the retention of the term "boycott" was of limited use, since it implied one collective and concerted action. However, the fact that the refusals to participate in the Games occurred simultaneously, although seemingly without prior agreement, confirmed the pertinence of the term. The initiators – Egypt, the People's Republic of China, Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland – were eventually joined by withdrawals linked to Pan-Arabism (Lebanon, Iraq and perhaps Syria, which the official report for Melbourne considered as having declined the invitation) or to a Pan-African, Third World political solidarity (Gold Coast).

In reality, with the exception of Egypt, none of the withdrawals seemed to be directly linked to Australia. The Melbourne Games thus offer an example of a "second-degree"⁴⁸ boycott: one aimed not at the host country but at nations participating in the celebration. Effectively, it was an extension of a phenomenon that had first appeared during the Helsinki Games, when nationalist China had refused to participate in protest against the invitation extended to the People's Republic of China.

What were the perpetrators of this new kind of boycott condemning, if not the policy of the IOC, confronted with an international situation over which it had no control? Its handling of the situation was considered partisan: post-colonial here, excessively or not adequately favourable to the political interests of the West there. Whether or not these criticisms were well founded, they reflected the incontrovertible destiny of international sporting institutions, which were continuously forced to moderate and adopt a consensual position when faced with a political reality over which they had no control.

The Melbourne boycotts signalled the dawn of a new era in which the Olympic Movement would have no other choice but to engage with political issues. Dissent, although it took different forms, was now constantly present; and the withdrawal of the People's Republic of China from the IOC, the Soviet Union's demand that the IOC be radically reformed and Sukarno's alternative Games would be the first landmark events in the resulting cultural revolution. ■

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