

**'No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in the Olympic areas'.**

So states the Olympic Charter. This is an interesting statement, and it locates the Olympic Movement as possibly the only sports mega-event that seeks to formally excuse itself from the realm of politics.



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The historic use of sport, particularly within the non-Western world, offers us numerous examples of the overt use of sport in the furthering of political and nationalistic objectives; a concept that many nation states might see little reason to deny. After all, sport provides a platform for the potential reproduction, reflection and resistance of societal and cultural norms, or which politics play a key part. Other sporting mega-events such as the Maccabi Games and Pan Arab Games doubtless exist upon a clearly geopolitical foundation, given that their clearly stated objectives are to strengthen links between the nation states and individuals who share their fundamental religious, ethnic and cultural characteristics.

The Modern Olympic Movement has had to contend with wars, boycotts, protests, walkouts and even terrorist attack, yet still maintains a uniquely anti-political posturing. This begs the question: are the Olympic Games a robust example of the true spirit of amateurism, free from potentially corrupting

political influences, or does the Movement itself seek to wash its hands of what many view as its corporate social responsibility to consider the human rights of individuals in the nations that bid for and host the Games?

This case study presents key political events that occurred at each Olympic Summer Games in the history of the Modern Olympic Movement.

Between the first Olympic Summer Games in Athens (1896) and the Los Angeles Games of 1932, there were no notable political events (with the possible exception of the cancelling of the 1916 Games on account of WWI). This might partly be explained by the comparatively small size of the Games within this period, as compared to each Summer Games that followed, and by the fact that the Games were not subject to any media coverage before Berlin, 1936.

### 1936, Berlin



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The 1936 Olympic Games were awarded, controversially, to Germany. The country was greatly in favour of staging the Games as it was thought that holding them in Germany would contribute to the legitimization of the Nazi regime on a global stage. Hitler's use of the Games as a vehicle for showcasing Aryan supremacy was famously undermined by the US African-American athlete Jesse Owens, who became the hero of the Games winning four gold medals. Nevertheless, media footage shows us what a major, grand spectacle the Nazi Olympics proved to be. It is also relevant to consider that, at the time of these Games, racial segregation was still legal in the USA. This meant that Jesse Owens could not travel with, eat with, or sleep next to, his teammates, yet he was still expected to represent his country (and in terms of his athletic career, he was not treated well upon his return to the US). Some might consider it the ultimate irony that the only time Jesse Owens competed free from a legalized system of segregation was during his Olympic experience in Nazi Germany!

It could be argued that Hitler had not, by this point, implemented his most devastating laws against Jews, or built the death camps at which millions of Jews were to perish. Such an argument appears futile, however, as there was already much evidence in existence to indicate what Hitler's Third Reich had in store: *"We would have been very loath to hurt the feelings of our fellow Jews, by going to a land that would exterminate them if they could."* Sammy Luftspring, Canadian-Jewish boxer, announcing his withdrawal from the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

### 1948, London

Following WWII, the Olympic Games took on what could be argued to be a greater political significance, as participation came to symbolise political recognition and legitimacy of a nation state (particularly important given the geopolitical shifting of country borders and titles following the end of WWII). Germany and Japan were not invited to London because of their war-time roles. Although though there had been much debate as to whether or not the 1948 Olympic Games should go ahead, they turned out to be great success. However, the new state of Israel was excluded from the Games in a bid to avoid a possible Arab boycott.

Approximately 4,000 athletes participated, representing 59 countries. They were to be remembered principally as a successful vehicle for the development of volunteerism on a large scale (a notable but necessary achievement for a country that was still

recovering financially, socially and morally from the effects of war).

#### **1952, Helsinki**

West Germany participated for the first time, and the USSR returned to the Olympics after a 40-year absence. The USSR initially planned to house its athletes in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and fly them into Finland each day. Eventually, separate housing facilities for Eastern bloc athletes had to be provided.

#### **1956, Melbourne**

Three separate protests affected the Melbourne Games. China withdrew after the IOC recognised Taiwan, and did not return to the Olympic Games as a competitor for a significant period of time (this political conflict continues to affect the Games in the present day). Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon declined to compete in protest of Israel's invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. Many other countries, including the UK and USA, boycotted over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which was to form the basis of a *jihād*, lead to the destruction of millions of Afghani lives and contribute significantly to the advancement of terrorist ideologies and justifications that can be observed in the present day.

A particularly violent water polo match between the USSR and Hungary in the semi-finals of the competition is often cited as a clear example of political conflict being played out in the sporting arena. The game became so violent that the referee ended the game early.

#### **1960, Rome**

The Rome Games marked the beginning of a ban on South Africa's right to compete, in protest of its racist apartheid regime. South Africa did not compete again until 1992.

#### **1964, Tokyo**

The first Asian country to host the Olympics, Tokyo spent \$3bn rebuilding the city to showcase its post-war success.

#### **1968, Mexico City**



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Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who finished 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the 200m, created what was to become one of the most memorable sporting images of all time; the Black Power salute. The athletes were protesting against the racial injustices that black Americans continued to experience in the US. The athletes wore OPHR badges (the OPHR was the Olympic Project for Human Rights, a movement headed up by the American Sociologist Professor Harry Edwards). The athletes also wore a black scarf (Smith) to symbolize black pride, black beads (Carlos) to symbolize the lynchings, and black socks with no shoes to symbolize the poverty experienced by black people in the USA. Both men had their medals taken away from them because of their protest. Smith was later to recall: *"If I win, I am American, not a black American. But if I did something bad, then*

*they would say I am a Negro. We are black and we are proud of being black. Black America will understand what we did tonight."*

The image remains a powerful symbol of protest against racial injustice.

Pre-Games student protests saw 300 Mexican students killed by the Mexican authorities shortly before the Games began. The students were protesting against the Games as they felt that their City, suffering from tremendous poverty, should not have spent funds on a sporting event when it was so desperately needed for fundamental necessities such as healthcare.

East Germany also competed as a separate political entity to West Germany for the first time.

### **1972, Munich**

The largest Games yet staged, the 1972 Olympics were supposed to represent peace. But the Munich Games are most often remembered for the terrorist attack that resulted in the death of 11 Israeli athletes. With five days of the Games left, 8 Palestinian terrorists broke into the Olympic Village, killing two Israelis and taking nine others hostage. The Palestinians demanded the release of 200 prisoners from Israel. In an ensuing battle, all nine Israeli hostages were killed, as were five of the terrorists and one policeman. International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Avery Brundage took the decision to continue the Games after a brief suspension. This was a controversial decision.

### **1976, Montreal**

Around 30 African nations staged a last-minute boycott after the IOC allowed New Zealand to compete. New Zealand's rugby team had recently played in the racially segregated South Africa, who had been banned from the Olympics since 1964. Taiwan withdrew when Communist China pressured the host country (and trading partner) to deny the Taiwanese the right to compete.

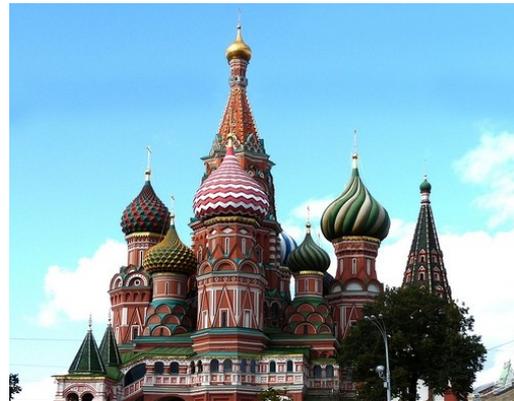


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### **1980, Moscow**

Over 60 nations including West Germany and Japan boycotted the Moscow Games to protest at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The American-led boycott reduced the number of participating nations from 120 to 81, the lowest number since 1956. Countries such as Britain and France supported the boycott, but allowed their Olympic committees to participate if they wished. Probably due to a lack of competition, the Moscow Games became the most successful for the British athletes, who finished ninth overall.

### **1984, Los Angeles**

Following the western boycott of the 1980 Games, the USSR led a boycott of the US-

staged event by 14 socialist nations. The absentees claimed the Los Angeles Olympic Committee was violating the spirit of the Olympics by using the Games to generate commercial profits.

#### ***1988, Seoul***

For the first time since the Munich Games, there was no organised boycott of the Summer Olympics although North Korea, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Cuba chose not to participate. The Seoul Games were conducted with little interruption, and their success represented a major milestone on the journey from dictatorship to democracy for South Korea.

#### ***1992, Barcelona***

The 1992 Barcelona Games marked the first Olympic Summer Games since the end of the Cold war. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia fielded separate teams, while the rest of the former Soviet Union competed as the "Unified Team". Germany competed under one flag for the first time since 1964, while post-apartheid South Africa was invited, ending a 32-year ban on the country.

#### ***1996, Atlanta***

The Atlanta Games were the first to be held without any governmental support. This led to a commercialisation of the Games that disappointed many. In addition, a pipe bomb exploded in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park killing two people and injuring a further 110. Although the incident was referred to as a terrorist bomb, the motive or group responsible was never determined.

Approximately 10,000 athletes participated in Atlanta, representing 197 countries (including Hong Kong and the Palestinian Authority).

#### ***2000, Sydney***



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The Sydney Games were the largest yet, with 10,651 athletes competing in 300 events. Despite its size, the event was well organised and renewed faith in the Olympic movement after the 1996 Atlanta bombing. The Australians chose Aboriginal athlete and national hero Cathy Freeman to light the Olympic torch.

#### ***2004, Athens***

Greece was the birthplace of the ancient Olympic Games more than 2,000 years ago, with Athens staging the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. The success of Greece in staging the Games passed with little political protests or occurrences.

#### ***2008, Beijing***

The 2008 Games provoked outrage from human rights groups who believed that allowing China to host the Games legitimised what they perceived to be a repressive regime.

Protestors claimed that China would use the Games as a propaganda tool. China voiced

disdain for protestors who disrupted the Olympic Torch Relay. Such disruption was caused by political protest against China for a number of reasons, China's human rights record, recent unrest in Tibet (during which protesting Tibetan monks were killed), the role of China in Darfur, and calls for Taiwanese independence.

Jacques Rogge, President of the IOC, described the Torch Relay protests as a 'crisis' for the Olympic Movement, and further stated that any athletes displaying Tibetan flags at Olympic venues risked expulsion from the Games.

The Olympic and Paralympic Games were, however, seen as a great coup for the Chinese Government, showcasing opening and closing ceremonies which are now widely regarded as possibly the grandest of all time.

#### ***FIND OUT MORE***

The Olympics Website: [www.olympic.org](http://www.olympic.org)

The Olympic Project for Human Rights: An Assessment Ten Years Later. Black Scholar, v10 n6-7 p2-8 Mar-Apr 1979

*Jerusalem Report*, (January 9, 2006); *JTA*, (May 4, 1999); Jonas, George. *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*. NY: Bantam Books, 1985; Thomas B. Hunter, "Wrath of God: The Israeli Response to the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre," *Journal of Counterterrorism & Security International*, Vol. 7, No. 4, (Summer 2001).

**CREDITS**

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