

Romanos, J., 2012

Story: Olympic and Commonwealth gam

Page 4 – Olympic politics and boycotts

Despite the Olympic ideals of amateurism and setting aside differences, politics have often impacted on the games, while host nations have always used the Olympics to showcase their countries. The 1936 Berlin Olympics were particularly controversial as they were used as a propaganda vehicle for the Nazi regime in Germany.

Mexico and Munich

The 1968 Mexico City Olympics began under a cloud. Only 10 days before the Olympics started, security forces in Mexico City shot and killed over 40 anti-government protesters in what became known as the Tlatelolco massacre. Nonetheless the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided the Olympics would go ahead.

Further controversy occurred against the backdrop of the civil rights movement when, while the 'Star-spangled banner' played, African-American athletes Tommie Smith (gold medallist) and John Carlos (bronze medallist) gave black-power salutes from the podium with the quiet support of Australian silver-medallist Peter Norman.

The Munich hostage drama

New Zealand runner Rod Dixon described hearing shots at night: 'We joked that maybe their [the Israeli] smallbore shooters were practising against a wall, and then we went to sleep. We didn't hear any more until there was banging on our door. The police asked us to evacuate ... we went to our balcony and could see the hooded terrorists standing watch only 50 metres away.'¹

The 1972 Munich Olympics were overshadowed by the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes taken hostage by Palestinian terrorists. From then on security became a major consideration at the Olympics.

The New Zealand controversy

At the 1976 Montreal Olympics New Zealand sparked a boycott. The African nations were angry that a New Zealand All Blacks rugby team was touring apartheid-era South Africa. The Africans wanted New Zealand banned from the Montreal Olympics.

Eventually 26 African countries, as well as Iraq and Guyana, boycotted Montreal over New Zealand's rugby activities. The boycott had a significant effect in athletics, as Africans were among the world's best at middle- and long-distance running.

An athlete's reaction to the 1980 boycott

On learning of the boycott of the Moscow games Gary Hurring, a member of the New Zealand swimming team, said, 'I was in shock. As a young adult I didn't really understand what was going on. All I realised was that I'd been training harder than ever before and that I was building to my peak, and then the whole thing crashed down around me with one phone call in the evening.'²

Cold-war rivalry – the Moscow and Los Angeles boycotts –

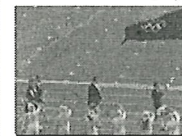
In 1980 US President Jimmy Carter called for a western-nations boycott of the Moscow Olympics to p

1976
Boycott of the Olympic Games

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The African bo
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The New Zealand
team, Moscow, 1980

against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Eventually 65 countries declined invitations to compete at Moscow. Other teams, including those from Britain and Australia, were seriously depleted.

The New Zealand government strongly discouraged athletes from attending the Moscow Olympics but did not prevent them from going. In the end only four New Zealand athletes from the original team of 100 competed: modern pentathlete Brian Newth and canoeists Ian Ferguson, Alan Thompson and Geoff Walker.

There was an answering boycott in 1984, with most of the communist nations (except Romania, Yugoslavia and China) boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics. It meant that the New Zealand canoeists, who won four gold medals at Los Angeles, were unable to compete against their keenest rivals, the East Germans.

Footnotes:

1. Joseph Romanos, *Our Olympic century*. Wellington: Trio Books, 2008, p. 134.
2. *Our Olympic century*, p. 152.

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