The Role of the European Community in the 1980 Olympic Games Boycott
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Going Global. The History of EC/EU External Relations. A Jean Monnet Module on the History of European Integration (Professor Sara Lorenzini)
In 1980, Moscow became the first Eastern Bloc capital to host the Olympic Games. However, the US-led opposition to the USSR in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 ultimately resulted in the international boycott of 1980 Moscow Olympic games. In the light of the strong leadership position taken by the US in that conflict, the role of the European Community is often disregarded.

First of all, it is worth noting, that the influence and the weight of the European Community at the time were still relatively scarce. When referring to the plans of the member states’ leadership in the internal correspondence, chef de cabinet of the President of European Commission Crispin Tickell frequently used following constructions: "I gather, I hear noises, bits of gossips etc.,”¹ - such rhetoric clearly demonstrates that Community did not possess a full established cooperation with regards to the relations with the sovereign governments of its member states.

Nevertheless, it is not to say that the Community did not have certain influence on the situation when the conflict was unfolding - and with a twist. For instance, Great Britain was amongst the original advocates of the boycott, but did not join in eventually. In this context, the more profound research of the issue seems very promising.

The end of the 1970s brought about largely anti-détente sentiments between USA and a Soviet Union and return to Cold War tensions. Following the invasion of Afghanistan, which served as a turning point, the coalition on Olympic boycott, initially proposed by the Rolf Pauls, the West German ambassador to NATO² and directed towards Soviets, had gained a significant momentum.

In 1978 The Political Affairs Committee³ has been asked to consider a motion for a resolution⁴, submitted in plenary sitting by Mr. Hamilton on the holding of the 1980 Olympic games in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and, in this connection, on the desirability of organizing a public hearing on the

¹ Crispin Tickell to Roy Jenkins, February 4, 1980, in Historical Archives of the European Union (hereinafter HAEU), EN 1298 Emile Noël collection.
³ Now: European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs (Previously Political Affairs Committee. Composed of 75 members and 74 substitutes, it has two subcommittees: the Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) and the Subcommittee on Security and Defense (SEDE)
respect for human rights in the USSR. Following the discussion, many members of the committee agreed that the USSR intended to exploit the holding of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow for propaganda purposes, virtually comparing Soviets’ agenda to Hitler’s manipulation of event in 1936: “USSR intended to exploit the holding of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow for propaganda purposes, as had happened in Berlin in 1936, and concluding from this argument that they should be boycotted or even cancelled.”

Unlike 1936, however, when the US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt chose not to be engaged in the public debate regarding the boycott (due to the long-respected tradition of the IOC to operate independently of government), in 1980 the then US president Jimmy Carter was - to say the least - very much involved in the issues connected with the boycott of Olympics in Moscow. Initial goal of the US and Western European states was to promote moving of Olympic games in 1980 from Moscow back to Greece, targeting Soviet self-esteem. The plan was that, financial losses aside, Kremlin would lose much awaited opportunity to throw a dust in the eyes of the Westerners and its own citizens.

The first official step towards boycott was taken by Jimmy Carter and came in the form of ultimatum: “Unless the Soviets withdraw their troops within a month from Afghanistan,” Carter said, he would insist “that the Olympic games be moved from Moscow to an alternative site, or multiple sites, or postponed or cancelled.” White House understood very well that a failure to persuade other nations to join the boycott movement will result in great embarrassment for the US. The US president largely counted on the European help over Afghanistan in a similar way they already had helped in the case of Iran. He hoped that the international community in general would act commensurably with the Soviet threat, therefore different strategies for selling the plan abroad were set in place. Among others, US State Department officials were dispatched to India in January 1980 to convince the boxing legend Muhammad Ali to go on a tour of Africa in an attempt to gain much-needed support of African nations for the boycott movement. The mission, however, ended in whole fiasco, with some leaders of African states insulted by the fact that the mere athlete was sent to discuss

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5 European Parliament Working Documents, November 8, 1978, in HAEU, PE0 Doc. 30/78.
political matters, and never managed to recover from the bad press, accusing Ali of being merely a “puppet of Jimmy Carter”.7

The transfer of the Olympics, which, at first sight, carried purely symbolic significance, was in fact meant to be addressed to the Soviet people in order to expose the flaws of the USSR’s position and the amount of respect it receives from the international community.

Soviet society, being a closed one, was able to shape public opinion and awareness, run propaganda and manipulate the information. If government has a monopoly of information of some sort within the country, that way people had limited access to whatever information state chose to be accessible for them. Western leaders knew that deep embarrassment caused by last-minute shift of venue would strike an unprecedented blow to the Soviet reputation in the eyes of its people, and perhaps more significant, send a tremendous shock through Soviet society.

Regardless, moving the Olympics and, consequently, boycotting the games, was considered by many a very minimum response for Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and multiple cases of human right violations by Soviet leadership, however, it was a start: in the phone call made by president of the EC Roy Jenkins to the president Carter 22 January 1980, both agreed that the goal of the international community at that point was to “make the Russians realize the enormity of what they had done”.8 President Carter then went on to acknowledge the unsteadiness of the international situation and promised that Americans “would not let the Russians get away with it. [...] there are limits to how much détente could be maintained in current circumstances.” The overall feelings of the international community regarding Soviet intervention were very strong at the time. Carter also stated: “It’s very important for the world to realize how serious a threat the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is. I do not want to inject politics into the Olympics and I would personally favor the establishment of a permanent Olympic site for both the summer and the winter games. In my opinion, the most appropriate permanent site for the summer games would be Greece.”9

7 N. E. Sarantakes, “Jimmy Carter’s Disastrous Olympic Boycott”.
9 J. P. Lohn, The Most Memorable Moments in Olympic Swimming, p. 54.
The Commission’s president Roy Jenkins had confirmed there was a political declaration of unambiguous support for Americans.\(^\text{10}\) However, he was also reported telling Secretary of State Cyrus Vance the question was for the individual member countries and their respective Olympic committees to decide.\(^\text{11}\)

He then backed his intentions to go through: “Community should not replace, directly or indirectly, the shortfall (in agricultural imports) created by the US on the Soviet market.”\(^\text{12}\)

At this point, undoubtedly, the position of the European community was complementary to that of the US. As president Carter himself stated in the conclusion of one of the phone talks, he was “impressed by the relatively few differences which Europeans and Americans had to iron out between them.”\(^\text{13}\)

In addition, Mr. Brzezinski, chairman of US National Security Council thought the Soviet action to be fundamentally defensive and said he was not sure they had fully understood the consequences of their actions and extent to which it had affected vital American interests. According to the Chairman Brzezinski, Russians seemed to have thought the Americans would be distracted by events in Iran: “If so, they miscalculated badly”. The growing concerns about the Arrest of Andrei Sakharov and the general situation with dissidents, emigration and human rights were expressed strongly.

What is worth noting, even despite these concerns, both Secretary of State Mr. Vance and US National Security Council Chairman Mr. Brzezinski emphasized the Americans are still willing to keep some aspects of détente alive.

However, European Community (European Parliament specifically) was deeply invested in the issues of multiple cases of the human rights violations long before the Afghanistan invasion. “For more than two centuries the history of Europe has been characterized by constant efforts to improve the protection of fundamental rights. Founded on the human and civil rights declarations of the eighteenth century, all European constitutions today contain an established body

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\(^{10}\) Political declaration issued by the nine ministers of foreign affairs on 15 January, and the economic statement made by the same ministers in their community capacity.


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
of inviolable fundamental rights and freedoms. This is particularly true of the member states of the European Communities.”

It was as early as 1978 when Parliament became increasingly concerned that the USSR does not comply with the international conventions in the area of fundamental human rights. After the 25 December 1979, and the invasion of Afghanistan, which added greatly to already multiple concerns, European Parliament was alarmed by a strong Soviet force “which constitutes a flagrant violation of all peoples to self-determination and an infringement of the obligation to refrain from intervention in the internal affairs of other states,” EP unconditionally condemned the military occupation and urgently called for the withdrawal of troops from the territory of Afghanistan and from all other countries of Southeast Asia that have been similarly occupied.

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was seen by Europeans as a serious threat to world peace and political stability: concerns were voiced of a possible revival in Europe and the world in general of the nuclear arms race and of a further period of confrontation between the US and the USSR in particular, “which might cause a return to dark days of the cold war and nullify the hard-won achievements in trade and cultural exchanges.” Parliamentarians saw the possible resolution of overheated situation in relaunching the policy of détente in order to secure the withdrawal of troops and to reach agreements and understandings in promoting détente, multilateral dialogue and peace.

As a European support for the American initiative, EP motion for a resolution from January 15 1980 explicitly “calls upon the Government of Member states to withdraw all official recognition for the holding of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, and to persuade their citizens to stay away” Following Carter’s ultimatum, in order to show an approval for Americans and demonstrate the Soviet leaders and to the nations of the USSR that the Europeans are also condemning the military intervention in Afghanistan and the persecution of dissidents in the Soviet Union as a violation of the International law (breach of the Helsinki Final Act), the Union of European Federalists (UEF) has urged the

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14 Memorandum on the accession of the European Communities to the convention for the protection of Human rights and fundamental freedoms, Brussels. 2nd May 1979, HAEU, Com (79) 210 final.
16 Ibid.
National Olympic Committees of all European Countries, not to attend the Olympic games 1980 in Moscow, among other things raising the issue of the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia in 1968: “Because the response to the Soviet entry in Afghanistan should be uttered in this absolutely peaceful form of an unequivocal disapprobation. If the Europeans of all the athletes were to participate in the Moscow Olympics it could seem as if they had completely forgotten the entry of the Red Army in the CSSR of the year 1968 or as if they even did approve it.”\textsuperscript{18}

The speaker, Ulrich Keitel, then went on to mention Berlin games of 1936 once again: “everybody knows about the misuse that totalitarian regimes are in habit of making with this sports event. We request the members of the National Olympic Committees, to consider the issue not only also and above all to take into account the political angle closely linked to it.” The motion finally culminated in the idea, following the proposal of the Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis that, in the future, Olympic games should be held in Greece exclusively.\textsuperscript{19}

The human rights agenda was becoming increasingly topical. Report on the situation of the Jewish Ethnic Group in the Soviet Union, drawn up on behalf of the Political Affairs Committee, which, referring both to the Helsinki Final Act and the ICCPR’s ratification by the Soviet Union, pointed out the strong anti-Semitic propaganda by certain media in the USSR and the “parodies of justice”\textsuperscript{20}, along with the generally deteriorating situation of the “ethnic, religious, cultural and religious rights and freedoms and compliance with the principles laid down in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference,\textsuperscript{21} concludes the constant violation of the human rights and basic freedoms of the Jewish Community in the Soviet Union, which serves as a pretext for repression. Political Affairs Committee was instructed to follow the development of the situation of the ethnic, religious, cultural linguistic and political minorities, especially that of the Jewish Community in the Soviet Union and report to it regularly on the situation. “European parliament acknowledges its clear-cut duty in the framework of the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act to take an active part in improving the

\textsuperscript{18} Motion to the Congress of the U.E.F. in Strasbourg on March 15, 1980, Presented by Ulrich Keitel, in HAEU, UEF, “Olympic Games in Moscow 1980”.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
respect of human rights in the Soviet Union. The idea was raised on creating a special Committee on the Olympic Games and Human Rights, whose aim is to take the opportunity presented by the holding of the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980 to make representations to, and where possible exert influence on, the Soviet Union, to persuade that country to bring its policy on human rights more in line with International Conventions.”

The motion also drew an attention to the necessity of dialogue and political cooperation between the Council, Commission, the Foreign Ministers and the Soviet Union to ascertain that, on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Moscow, athletes, supervisors, organization and the media are guaranteed freedom of access, of movement and of expression.

It was around that time in February 1980 when Community received another unpleasant confirmation of its irrelevance in the eyes of the member states: the meeting to which the Community representatives were offhandedly not invited, discussed by the heads of the states. The cover used for the meeting was a preparatory talks for the 1980 Venice Summit. In the secret correspondence from Commission President’s chef de cabinet Crispin Tickell writes to President Jenkins: “I heard from two different sources that moves were afoot to convene a meeting of a limited number of Western Foreign Ministers to discuss the crisis created by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. If the agenda of the meeting is not to be strictly military, but to range over relations with the Soviet Union and the communist world as a whole then, I thought, as in political cooperation, the Community should be represented by the Commission, presumably in the form of its president.”

Tickell further suggested that Jenkins should bring up the topic of commission president attending the meeting when speaking to Chancellor Schmidt and also discuss it with British delegation, which made an important point, namely: Commission’s President should well understand if he was invited to leave the room when military matters were discussed.

The issue of venue shifting or boycotting the Games, was deeply problematic in many dimensions. President Carter, who initially had received a very enthusiastic support from Mrs Thatcher regarding his Olympics agenda, was

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22 Motion for a resolution. On human rights in the Soviet Union and the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow, October 9, 1979, in HAEU, PE0, Document 1-431/79
criticized for drawing parallels between Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany, where the games were held in 1936. Another issue arises from the fact that the neither US Government nor European Community governments had no clear authority over athletes and their decision whether or not to participate in the games. In case of the various sports associations, it was evidently problematic to exert a political power on bodies which were essentially non-political.

International Olympic Committee confirmed this, insisting that sporting principles must prevail over political problems. “The replacements for Nations participating in the US-led boycott over the Soviet presence in Afghanistan will dilute the quality in many cases.” Ultimately, the IOC board decided not to allow individual athletes to participate in the Games without the backing of their National Olympic Committees.

Lord Kilanin, the Irish president of the IOC, had stated: “if international federations are holding their congresses in Moscow, and if we have asked athletes to go there, we should go ahead with the sessions as planned.” French veteran count Jean de Beaumont, have said the atmosphere in Moscow will not permit IOC members to take vital decisions affecting the future of the world sports body.

Meanwhile, the question of the boycott enforcement remained unresolved. Americans were slightly more optimistic; according to the US Secretary of State Cyrus R Vance, thanks to the widespread public support for President Carter’s position, the American Olympic Committee “would not be happy”, but would eventually comply. On the contrary, the position of the different members of the European Community on that same issue was somewhat different at the time. Position of the British was clear, but they would be facing difficulties in trying to put pressure on the Olympic Committee, French were perceived by US as reluctant and trying to hide behind Germans - there were even some disapproval voices from France and West Germany, worried about the détente deterioration.

The Political Affairs Committee’s position was that the European parliament should take action on two fronts: first, raise the awareness of the European public on the respect for human rights in the USSR and, second, to

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24 Clare McDermott, 22 Olympics- Daylead board, June 11, 1980, in HAEU, CEM2 619.
obtain as much detailed information as possible to enable it to take an informed decision on the fundamental problem. Possible scope for action included:

“a) contacting all the national and international bodies on which the organization of the Olympic games depends, with a view to notifying them of Parliament's position and exerting sufficient pressure to ensure it was respected.

b) require the Soviet authorities to guarantee, even before the Games were held, the freedom of movement of visitors and journalists and unrestricted freedom for such persons to enter into contact with the Russian people.

c) To ask each of the sports organizations travelling to the USSR to take up the cause of various political prisoners, establish contact with them and give the maximum publicity to their plight.”

The common objective was, once again, to inform international public opinion of multiple cases of the human rights violations and breaches of the international conventions in the USSR; and to make Russian people aware of the conditions under which they live by making them better acquainted with the system of collective and individual liberties of the Western democracies.

To make this case, The Political Affairs Committee’s plan was to bring in, inter alia, Amnesty International representatives, persons who have suffered violation of their liberties in the USSR and are now living in exile, representative of the Christian Church organization, representative of the Jewish community who has lived in the USSR along with some well-established and well-known academics who are specialists in Soviet affairs. The following hearing should was public, covered by newspapers, radio, television in order to raise public awareness on the issue.

**Conclusion**

The invasion was the Soviet Union’s first territorial aggression since the end of World War II. Where Washington saw communist aggression, the perspective was significantly different in Moscow. Soviet leaders wanted to bolster a flailing regime in their backyard, a short-term maneuver of no real importance to any other country. They, most probably, expected few international repercussions. As a reaction, boycott coalition had proposed bringing pressure on the national and international Olympic committees in order to enforce the boycott of Russian Olympic games. It could be seen as a somewhat utopian idea, that the

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threat of boycott might convince USSR to move its army away from Afghanistan which once again divided Western Europeans into two camps of opponents and supporters of the boycott movement. However, in this paper I argued that the goal was far more practical: to embarrass Russian leadership by undermining their position in international arena. As expected, an attempt to exercise political pressure on bodies which were by nature non-political run into great difficulties.
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