

Michael S. Gallagher  
Central Michigan University

## **Power Play: Cold War Politics and the Olympic Boycotts of 1980 and 1984**

This paper investigates the role of the Olympic Games of 1980 and 1984 within the framework of the Cold War. Since the early days of the games nations have attached political significance to Olympic competition. Many countries regarded victory as not only a triumph for athletes, but also a means of obtaining international recognition and prestige. The Soviet Union, a rather late arrival to the Olympic scene, took such ideals one step further, regarding the medal count as an indication of political legitimacy and strength. A heated race developed by the end of the 1970s between Soviet Union and its main ideological opponent, the

United States of America, for the top of the Olympic medals table. The nation with the highest medal total could boast of having the superior political system.

The rules of the game changed, however, with the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. President Jimmy Carter viewed the presence of an American team at the 1980 Olympic Games, scheduled for Moscow, as a propaganda opportunity that implied an acceptance of Soviet actions. Rather than legitimize the invasion of Afghanistan, Carter promoted an international boycott headed by the United States as a form of protest and punishment. The goal no longer was who could obtain the most medals in the games, but transformed into who could draw the most nations over to supporting their cause, whether it be for or against attending the games in Moscow.

Roles were reversed in 1984 with the Soviet Union attempting to garner support for a boycott of the Olympics slated for Los Angeles. With an election year facing then President Ronald Reagan, the Soviets wanted to demonstrate their displeasure with the anti-Communist rhetoric and military policy of the U. S. leader who intensified the strains in Cold War relations between the two super powers. Soviet leadership believed that an international boycott under their guidance would call Reagan's handling of foreign policy into question, forcing the American people to realize that it was impossible for the USSR and its communist allies to conduct business with Reagan that might lead to a reduction in Cold War tensions.

I contend that the United States and the Soviet Union turned the 1980 and 1984 Olympics into political weapons used against each other, with victory and the legitimacy of its efforts going to the country with the greater number of supporters. The strategy involved these Olympic boycotts did very little to improve one nation's standing over the other, or to legitimize their political stance. In my analysis of this thesis I look at some of the key figures and decisions made by each nation leading up to the actual boycotts. I also examine the key arguments and rationale employed by each nation to justify their boycotts. My examination of public opinion provides a feel of how much support the boycotts garnered and how people perceived the situation. The contemporary press and its views on the political wrangling between the Americans and Soviets are taken into consideration and reviewed. These

contrasting outlooks on the Olympic boycotts are scrutinized and woven together to support for my overall conclusion that the boycotts proved an ineffective tool for obtaining political prestige.

The Olympic boycotts of 1980 and 1984 demonstrate how international politics can often dominate international sport. While the Cold War is over, it is important to understand the overwhelming effect it had upon American and Soviet foreign policy. Even the Olympic Games, an event that supposedly transcends politics, lacked the strength to avoid being used by the two super powers to pursue their political ambitions. Their misguided efforts during the Cold War did not destroy the games, as some feared they might, or do any permanent damage to the institution itself, but instead left a mark on the Olympics. The boycotts were part of the Cold War and serve as a microcosmic example of the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union in which nothing was sacred, even events designed to promote friendship and goodwill. The problems between the two nations that typified the Cold War became intertwined with the Olympics, making victory and success not just a triumph for the individual athlete, but a political issue amongst powerful nations.