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# China Games

*Arch Puddington*

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THE “Genocide Olympics” is what Mia Farrow has called the games scheduled to open next summer in Beijing. The actress has been protesting China’s role in facilitating the slaughter in Darfur, but her efforts have not exactly generated a groundswell of support (unless one counts a single tough letter to the Chinese leaders from the director Steven Spielberg, who was perhaps making amends for the embarrassment of having previously agreed to help choreograph the opening ceremonies of the games). Thus far, despite some cosmetic gestures, Chinese policy toward the brutal regime in Sudan remains fundamentally unchanged, and the 2008 Olympics remain on track.

Nor is the Sudanese nightmare the most pressing issue arising out of the prospective games. Why, one might ask, was the People’s Republic of China awarded sponsorship of the world’s premier sporting competition in the first place? After all, it is not the only modern dictatorship to have been so honored—two earlier instances were Nazi Germany in 1936 and the Soviet Union in 1980—and one might think that history had provided plenty of warning signs to anyone who cared about the condition of free athletic competition. One would be wrong.

THE 1936 Berlin games are chiefly remembered as “Hitler’s Olympics.” To be sure, Hitler had inherited them; the International

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Olympic Committee (IOC) had designated Berlin as the host city some years before the Nazi accession in 1933. But the German dictator was quick to recognize the value of this opportunity to showcase the ideal of Aryan superiority and the glories of the Nazi state. Becoming intimately involved in the preparations, Hitler made decisions on details ranging from ceremonial pageantry to stadium architecture to the appropriate display of Nazi uniforms and insignia.

He also made decisions concerning the tricky issue of the Olympics and the “Jewish problem.” Almost from their first day in power, the Nazis had begun issuing decrees designed to reduce the status of Jews from citizens to subjects, and thence to victims. German-Jewish athletes, even the most talented among them, were not exempt from oppression.

This posed a dilemma for the IOC. While some of its leaders were made uneasy by Nazi conduct, the organization’s consistent position was that a host country’s political system was a matter of no concern: the Olympic movement stood above politics. Thus, neither the general climate of militarism and thuggery in Germany nor the restrictive measures placed on Jews and on Jewish athletes ever led the IOC to consider a change of venue.

Still, the right of athletes to compete regardless of race, religion, or creed lay at the heart of the Olympic ideal, and the committee could not simply ignore the issue of whether Jews would be al-

lowed to participate on the German team. Questioned on this matter by the IOC, the Nazis invariably replied that any German citizen who met the qualifying standards would be permitted to take part. This was a lie, if one that IOC officials were happy to swallow. One of the German dictatorship's first actions had been to bar Jews from membership in sport clubs and the use of training facilities, effectively denying them an opportunity to enter the tryouts.

To the willful naïveté of some in the IOC must be added the rank anti-Semitism of others. "There are not a dozen Jews in the world of Olympic caliber" was the succinct formulation of one official, evidently basing himself on the canard that Jews were not an athletic people. Such instinctive antipathy was exacerbated within the IOC by the growing call for an American boycott of the Berlin Olympics.

Proponents of a boycott ranged across the religious and political spectrum. But to Avery Brundage, a leading American sports official who would eventually come to serve as IOC president, the boycott was an alien and un-American idea, part of a malevolent scheme to politicize the Olympics. "[C]ertain Jews," he warned, "had better understand that they cannot use these games as weapons in their boycott against the Nazis." As criticism of the IOC mounted, it sought a way to defuse the pressure by concocting what might be called the "one Jew" solution.

In a personal meeting with Hitler, Charles Sherrill, an American IOC representative, urged the addition of a single token Jew to the German team. Hitler adopted a variant of this proposal: Gretel Bergman, a world-class high-jumper, was invited to return home from exile in England to compete for a position. For as long as the boycott remained a threat, she was treated as a contender—only to be dropped when the movement collapsed in 1935. With the exception of a partly Jewish female fencer, the German team had no Jewish participants.

That still left open the racial composition of the American team, which did include a number of Jews. As it happens, the 1936 Olympics are remembered in large measure for the superb performance of America's black athletes, especially the sprinter Jesse Owens, who took home four gold medals. Certainly Hitler was repelled by the presence of blacks on the victory podium—he had privately expressed the wish that they be banned from the competition altogether—but this was one aspect he was unable to control.

Nevertheless, the Nazi dictator could only have been delighted by the results on the playing fields,

where German athletes racked up 33 gold medals, nine more than the second-place United States. With fascist Italy finishing third, and Britain and France lagging dismally behind, Hitler was not the only observer to conclude that the 1936 Olympics certified the decline of the democracies and the coming ascendancy of the Reich. Nor could he have been dissatisfied with the IOC's complicity in the outcome.

**I**F THE AWARD of the 1936 Olympics to Germany was tragedy, the IOC's decision to give the 1980 Olympics to the USSR was farce—of a particularly grisly kind. In 1974, when the decision was taken, Moscow was the nerve center of a global empire of cruelty that encompassed not only the vast territory of the Soviet Union but also the countries of Eastern Europe and a growing handful of outposts in the developing world. As recently as 1968, when the Red Army invaded Czechoslovakia, the Kremlin had made it clear that efforts to achieve a measure of freedom in its sphere of influence would be crushed by force. Though the mass arrests and executions of Stalin's terror had long since abated, dissident writers, intellectuals, and human-rights campaigners were still routinely being packed off to the Gulag.

In designating Moscow as the Olympic host, the IOC was thus repeating its error of the 1930's. It was also impugning its own athletic principles. Like their totalitarian brethren in Nazi Germany, the Soviets treated with contempt the IOC's cherished concept that sport should be independent of politics. To the Soviets, such independence was an ideological absurdity. They had long recognized the propaganda value of athletic prowess, and the Olympics represented just another skirmish in the international class struggle.

Like all other institutions in Communist society, organized athletics in the USSR were thoroughly controlled by the ruling Communist party. Over a period of decades, the State Committee on Physical Culture and Sport had established a powerful, officially financed juggernaut whose overarching purpose was to prove Soviet athletic superiority to the world. Accumulating gold medals in Olympic competition was one of its major points of focus. Since the Soviet model was duly copied by other Communist countries, international sports had evolved into two very different systems: a Western one that carefully preserved an athlete's status as an amateur and a Communist one in which athletes, amateurs in name only, were trained and treated as professionals.

Given the stakes as they saw them, it was no accident that the Soviets became notorious for flouting the basic rules of sport. At a moment when other countries were establishing testing regimens for performance-enhancing drugs like steroids, Moscow moved in the opposite direction, employing its state-run athletic and medical infrastructure to develop ever more powerful substances and ever more refined methods for eluding their detection. IOC officials, well aware of the practice, closed their eyes to it, as they did to the Soviet penchant for rigging results in other ways. In preceding Olympics and in a long string of other international competitions, the bias of judges from the Soviet Union and allied Communist states had become an open secret.

ONLY AN accident of timing prevented the Kremlin's success in securing the 1980 Olympics from being capped by an undiluted propaganda triumph. Toward the end of 1979, Communist rule in neighboring Afghanistan had begun to unravel, and in December the USSR marched in to rescue the situation. American passivity in the decade of détente, especially in evidence under Jimmy Carter, had led Moscow to conclude it could act with impunity. But a stunned Carter responded to the invasion with a package of sanctions whose most important item was a boycott of the forthcoming Moscow games.

Carter's boycott decision was met with a hailstorm of opposition, both by some in the U.S. who saw it as too weak and by many others who saw it as too strong. The IOC rejected out of hand a proposal to find an alternative venue for the games; echoing the pieties of his predecessors in the 1930's, the IOC president, Lord Killanin, grandly declared that "the Olympics should not be used for political purposes." Carter even found it difficult to persuade the U.S. Olympic Committee to adhere voluntarily to his policy; at one point, he was compelled to threaten legal sanctions if American athletes chose to defy him.

The boycott faced even greater opposition from America's allies abroad. In particular, the refusal of Europe to participate in it led many observers to conclude that Carter's initiative had failed. Indeed it had, in its own terms: the USSR did not withdraw from Afghanistan, and the games went on just as they had in Berlin in 1936. But now there was a difference: China, the USSR's bitter adversary, joined with the United States in staying away, and so did most of the Muslim world out of solidarity with the Islamic victims of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan.

In the end, the absence of some 40 to 50 countries, not to mention of American television networks, delivered a bruising blow to Soviet morale.

True, the USSR collected a huge number of gold medals. But if the Kremlin had hoped to present a global audience with the image of a confident, efficient, and forward-looking superpower, the Moscow games became linked instead to the invasion of a small and defenseless country. This time around, the IOC would seem to have been taught a clear and painful lesson about the cost of placing its faith in a dictatorship.

EVIDENTLY not, however. Although Jacques Rogge, the current chairman of the IOC, has at least tacitly acknowledged that next summer's host country is a closed society, he has predicted confidently that the games will "open up China." He also seems to be hoping that the People's Republic cannot meaningfully be compared with Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia.

About this he is right—up to a point. China today has peaceful relations with its neighbors (Taiwan partially excepted), boasts one of the world's most dynamic economies, and is a far freer place than it was in the heyday of Chairman Mao. A new and more politically aware middle class is emerging. To many observers, progress toward greater freedom is all but inevitable. The Olympics themselves, as the Bush administration contended in supporting Beijing's bid, could prove a "powerful but intangible incentive" for democratic change.

Unfortunately, China seems to have grasped from the outset of the selection process that its political system would not be an issue of overriding importance or stand as an insuperable obstacle to its Olympic plans. It had reason to think this. In 1993, a mere four years after the massacre in Tiananmen Square, China was only narrowly defeated in its attempt to gain the 2000 games.

During the run-up to the IOC decision in that earlier instance, the Chinese had maneuvered to soften their image by releasing several high-profile political prisoners. This time they did not bother. To the contrary: at the very moment when the IOC was entering its final deliberations, Beijing stepped up its persecution of both the Falun Gong religious sect and independent journalists.

As the Chinese may have foreseen, the IOC was far more preoccupied with Beijing's environmental deficiencies than with its repressive politics. There were fears that the heavy cloud of soot and smog that perpetually hangs over the capital city would weaken performance on the field and irritate spec-

tators. And here was an issue on which the Chinese were prepared to respond with alacrity.

As part of its formal bid, Beijing laid out an elaborate “action plan” to create “a new image of Beijing.” This grand scheme centered on a drastic improvement in air quality, sweeping changes in the character of the city’s neighborhoods, and major upgrades in its transportation system. Specific steps for accomplishing these goals were carefully spelled out. Some 200 high-pollution factories would be relocated to sites outside the city; “green zones” would be established throughout Beijing; the sand storms that regularly blow in during the summer would be reduced through a massive project to reverse soil erosion in surrounding regions; the subway system would be expanded to cut automobile exhaust fumes and traffic congestion; clean natural gas would replace dirty coal as the city’s primary heating fuel.

We have already had some inkling as to how these undertakings are to be met—and at what human cost. In February 2001, during a visit to Beijing by an IOC inspection team, the Chinese authorities placed an ad-hoc moratorium on the use of coal to heat apartment buildings, producing a temporary improvement in air quality and no doubt impressing the IOC with China’s ability to act decisively—while also leaving millions of residents without heat in the dead of winter.

This was but a prelude to more far-reaching and permanent measures to modernize Beijing, including especially the massive destruction of older housing. Already it is estimated that over a million residents have been forcibly evicted, with an undetermined percentage of them left homeless. Those subject to “relocation”—primarily the poor and migrant workers from the provinces—enjoy no right of appeal or protest concerning the level of compensation set by the state, and those who do object risk imprisonment. The displacement has taken place in an information vacuum, with virtually no coverage by the controlled domestic media and very little by the international press.

Like much else in post-Mao China, media censorship has been modernized to suit the needs of a country now extensively involved with the outside world. Editors of Chinese newspapers have been instructed to stress the social benefits that will accompany the Olympics, and to avoid anything that might raise questions about the price being paid by the Chinese people. This is the same system that has successfully suppressed news about the defective merchandise produced in China for both domestic and foreign consumption and the spread of conta-

rious agricultural and human diseases like SARS.

In dealing with the media, the authorities prefer to rely on a sophisticated regime of regulations designed to encourage self-censorship. But, when necessary, they are also prepared to use an iron fist. Today’s China leads the world in the number of imprisoned journalists and the number of individuals charged with criminal offenses for “misusing” the Internet. Nor is it shy about intimidating foreign newsmen or native Chinese working for foreign outlets. Shortly after the IOC voted to approve Beijing’s bid, the authorities arrested Zhao Yan, an employee of the *New York Times*’s Beijing bureau, on charges of violating state secrets. The charges, later reduced to fraud, appeared to be baseless, and this September, after serving a full three-year sentence, he was released.

A major focus of Chinese concern has been the possibility of spontaneous or organized street demonstrations during the games themselves. Protests of this kind occurred prior to the Seoul games of 1988 and are widely regarded as having played a pivotal role in bringing about the collapse of South Korea’s military dictatorship. The Chinese are determined to avoid even a hint of the Korean experience. In their Olympic action plan, they promised “tight but friendly and peaceful security measures”; since then, as a preemptive measure, they have instituted policies that are neither friendly nor peaceful. In line with the clear predilection of the regime for avoiding unseemly publicity, officials have increasingly made use of house arrests and detention without trial as a means of silencing dissidents who might otherwise be emboldened to air their grievances to the foreign press. At the same time, lengthy prison terms for expressing “subversive” views are far from uncommon.

The Chinese have also been developing a strategy to deflect or control potential protests by foreigners. China’s intelligence services have launched an extensive information-gathering operation to pinpoint foreign organizations that might cause trouble during the games. “Trouble,” of course, means peaceful picketing, demonstrations, marches, press conferences, and the like—the sorts of actions that are perfectly legal in democratic settings. The IOC, for its part, has already indicated where its sympathies lie; an official has described plans for citizen protests at the Olympics as “regrettable.”

**H**OW WILL things play out? It is hard to know in advance. Some members of Congress, spurred on by Chinese dissidents, have begun calling for a Western boycott even as President Bush

has accepted an invitation to attend. Wherever such foreign factors might or might not lead, there is no escaping the fact that today's China is an exceptionally complicated society with subterranean currents that we can hardly discern. The Chinese authorities themselves might well be in the dark about what the Olympics finally portend and, as their recent clampdown suggests, may indeed have begun to fear adverse repercussions. In August, American newspapers were full of stories about a swine virus, the blue-ear pig disease, that had spread to 25 of China's 33 provinces, killing off a large fraction of one of the country's most important herds. Characteristically, the government kept its own public and the rest of the world officially unapprised of the nature and extent of the disease,

leaving it to private journalists and foreign sources to ferret out what they could.

If the past is any guide, it is the most sinister and shocking features of a dictatorship that are the likeliest to emerge when it hosts the Olympics. For Germany in 1936, it was anti-Semitism and militarism; for the Soviet Union in 1980, it was imperial aggression. Whatever happens in China in 2008, there is no evidence that democracy will be enhanced, human rights will be improved, or the suffering of the Chinese people will be alleviated. As for the International Olympic Committee, it seems to have learned little or nothing from its own past mistakes. In fact, with the news in July of the IOC's decision to award the 2014 winter games to Putin's Russia, it seems bent on repeating them.