Politics in the Ancient and Modern Olympic Games ©2021

by Melodie Miller | melodie.miller@colorado.edu

Matters of politics became entangled with the Olympic Games from its beginning in 776 BCE Greece, and continue as a durable factor in the modern era. In *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games,* Allen Guttmann writes that Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), held a political goal in reviving the modern games in 1896. According to Guttman, Coubertin intended to propagate a political message of world peace through cooperative athletics and, saw the IOC as an opportunity to use competitive means as a resource that might lead to international cooperation.[1]

However, Anthony Thomas tells us that Coubertin was obsessed with the idea of the socially elite, amateur male athlete competing in games for the glory of the sport, not financial gain. Women and laborers were deemed unsuitable to compete in the games. Women, due to the unseemly nature of females as athletes, and laborers, whose strength would naturally beat out the privileged competitor, were excluded from the games.[2] In these and other ways, Guttman proposes that the Olympic Games remain continuously threatened by political controversy.[3] From an analysis of Allen Guttmann's *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games,* it is evident that politics have always been part of the Olympic Games, beginning in ancient Greece extending into the modern Olympic era.

Ethnicity, Gender, and State Politics

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[1] Guttmann, Allen. *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games*. University of Illinois Press: 2nd edition, 2002, pg. 1.
[2] Thomas, Anthony. "The Real Olympics: A History of the Ancient and Modern Olympic Games."
[3] Guttmann, pg. ix.

Boycotting the Olympic Games became an early political strategy used by athletes and city-states in Ancient Greece. For example, the Athenian athlete, Kallippos, was accused of buying a pentathlon victory from his competitors in the 112th Olympiad. The Eleans' (the Olympic Committee) refused to remove an imposed penalty fine from Kallippos and the opponents he bribed.[4] Therefore, in 332 BCE, the Athenian athletes took a political stance and withdrew their city-state's participation by boycotting the Olympic Games.

Miller provides a second example of state politics interference in the ancient Olympic Games by referencing the writings of Thucydides.[5] Thucydides writes that in 420 BCE that the Eleans excommunicated the Spartans from the Festival of Olympia. The Spartans' exclusion from the festival coincided with Elis's political treaty with Athens, Argos, and Mantinea against Sparta, causing the Eleans to conflate sports and politics by disfavoring the Spartan athletes.

In the modern Olympic era, the power of Nazi Germany was on the rise, and Hitler's regime controlled the country. Berlin stood to host the 1936 Olympic Games; however, the Nazi's racist principles conflicted with the Olympic Charter. Nazi Germany restricted Jewish athletes from participation, while the IOC did not exclude athletes based on ethnicity or cultural affiliation. Therefore, the American Jewish Congress was opposed to involvement in the Berlin Games due to Germany's treatment of its Jewish athletes.

Attempting to solve the Berlin problem, Gustavus Town Kirby, an American citizen and IOC member prepared a resolution that threatened an American boycott unless German Jews were allowed to "train, prepare for and participate in the Olympics games of 1936."[6] A slightly modified version of Kirby's resolution passed, and Germany pledged at the 1933 OIC meeting in

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[4] Miller, Stephen. *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*. University of California Press; 4th edition, 2021, pg. 186.
[5] Miller, Stephen. *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, pg. 186.
[6] Guttmann, pg. 56.

Vienna to adhere to the doctrine. However, reports of discrimination against Jewish athletes continued, and the Anti-Defamation League called for the American Olympic Committee (AOC) and its teams to boycott the Berlin games. The boycott campaign spread to Canada, Great Britain and France. Pierre de Coubertin visited Berlin in 1935 and, through a radio broadcast, declared his confidence in the games' arrangements. In a political move to ensure the games occurred, the AOC concluded that Germany had accepted the Olympic rules. The IOC avoided the boycott.

Gender politics has played a role in the Olympic games since its inception. Women were not allowed to attend or compete in the games. Although excluded from the competitions at Olympia, women were allowed in the Games of Hera. Pausanias writes that sixteen females ran a "footrace for virgins"[7] on a track shortened one-sixth of the Olympic Stadium.

In the modern era, women athletes did not compete in the inaugural 1896 Olympic Games. Although the IOC included women's tennis and croquet events in 1900, women did not actively participate in the Games until 1926. After many years of disputing women's participation, the IOC voted to allow gymnastics, as well as track and field, on an experimental basis. In this trial introduction of women events, gymnastics was limited to team competition, and track and field were restricted to five events. Although women's events were limited, the athletes set new world records in the track and field events, and the introduction of women's sports appeared as a successful experiment. However, due to the limited number of female events offered, the British women athletes boycotted the 1928 Olympic Games.

The Olympics and Political Propaganda

Stephen Miller cites an example of political propaganda and leveraging in ancient Greece. He writes in *Arete* that city-states, such as the Sybarites (304 BCE), hoped to achieve

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[7] Miller, Stephen. *Ancient Greek Athletics*. Yale University Press. 2006, pg. 155.

power over the city of Elis. In an attempt to eclipse Elis, the Sybarites propagandized the games by offering "extraordinary prizes" [8] to lure the athletes to their games. The Sybarites' effort to usurp the Elis games manifested as a political move for Magna Graecia's benefit, not the athletes. In this way, "extraordinary prizes" became political leverage for the Sybarites.

Berlin, Germany, was scheduled to host the Olympic Games in 1936. Bruno Malitz, a spokesman for the Nazi regime, publicly condemned the modern sports of the Olympics. Malitz was opposed to culturally and ethnically diverse participation in Berlin. Malitz claimed that because the athletes came from a varied population, they were "internationally infested"[9] with undesirable traits. Nevertheless, Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, realized the games could act as a political opportunity for Germany to display its vitality and organizational expertise on the world stage. Guttmann writes that Hitler became "positively lyrical about the prospects for the grandest Olympics ever" and granted the sum of twenty million Reichsmarks to host the Games. The Berlin games became the spectacle that Hitler desired, broadcasting political propaganda to the world.

The Olympics and Political Violence

Political violence is not foreign to the Olympic games. In 363 BCE, the Arkadians captured Olympia. In the following year, at the 364 BCE Olympic games, during the pentathlon, the Eleans invaded the sanctuary forcing the Arkadians back to Altis. The Arkadians suffered an excessive loss of lives during the Olympic event and retired from the battle, but not the games.[10]

In 1972, political disagreements between countries escalated to entangle violence with sports during the Olympics hosted by Munich, Germany. Aimed at making a political statement

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[8] Miller, Stephen. *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, pg. 186.
[9] Guttmann, pg. 54.
[10] Miller, *Arete, pg. 222.*

against Israel's treatment of the State of Palestine and its people, eight individuals from the Black September group captured nine Israeli athletes in their Olympic Village dorm rooms. The captors demanded the release of 234 Palestinians held by Israel and two held by Germany in exchange for the nine Israeli athletes. Although some of the athletes escaped, the kidnappers killed two of the hostages and threw their bodies out the dorm window in a display of political violence. While attempting to flee Munich, police killed the captors and the remaining hostages.[11] Black September leveraged the Olympics to make a political statement to the world.

Historical evidence makes it clear that political entanglement is an intrinsic component of the Olympic Games. The entanglement has not improved since antiquity. As the world population grows and technology connects people across international borders, the Olympics' far-reaching power broadens. It seems that a drive to compete and win in both politics and sports dominates human nature. Therefore it follows that human beings will use whichever tools are at their disposal to find victory. As long as politics works as an effective tool in providing victory, it becomes probable that our species will not shake the need to use it.

Beginning with the ancient games in Greece, the Olympics have acted as a platform and bargaining chip for city-states and athletes. Political tools such as boycotts, ex-communication, propaganda, and violence work as leverage for political causes. With the increased broad reach of social media and technology, the Olympic Games' appeal as political leverage increases. Therefore, it follows that political debate may always find entanglement with Olympic Games. From examining Allen Guttmann's writings on politics and sports, it is evident that politics have always been part of the Olympic Games, beginning in ancient Greece continuing into the modern Olympic eras.

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[11] Guttmann, pg. 139.

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