

The Breakup of the All-German Olympic Team (October 11, 1968)

Abstract

Social ties between East and West Germany gradually ruptured because of the Wall. The Cold War moved beyond the political realm and spilled over into athletic competition, with each side viewing sports as an important arena in which to demonstrate its superiority. In 1968, the all-German Olympic team split into two separate teams.

Source

Between Tanks and Prestige: The Olympic Games of Mexico

[...]

Despite its popularity and despite the fascination with records, the modern Olympics—one of the greatest illusions of our time, the dream of a better world—is only fashioned from the stuff that dreams are made of after all. Today, it is writhing in the chokehold of world politics: the two giants are carrying out their political joust in the Olympic stadium as well. The starting shot for the duel between the Soviet Union and the United States—a contest that will ultimately be fought out in the much costlier race to the moon—went off in Helsinki in 1952, when the Russians marched into the Olympic arena for the first time and immediately took second place in the overall rankings, which officially aren't even supposed to exist.

At first, this challenge was not taken seriously by the Americans. But they suffered a serious defeat at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, as in the duel in outer space. The Russians took a clear lead in the overall rankings. Not only in space, but on Earth as well, on Olympic ground, the Soviets were first. They had lapped the Americans.

When athletic contests are considered only insignificant competitions, it is impossible to imagine the extent of the propaganda effect and the gain in prestige, especially with respect to neutral countries. Western politicians did not immediately recognize the new weapon that had been forged in the arsenal of the Cold War. Of course, one could hardly assume that Stalin and his successors had suddenly become inspired by the Olympic spirit when they set their state-supported amateurs against the athletes from the West. Up to that time in Moscow, "Olympia" was considered a decadent, bourgeois festival, against which the masses were mobilized in their own "Spartakiade."^[1]

De Gaulle was the first in Europe to recognize the dangerous situation after French athletes came home from Rome without a single gold medal. After that, he generously supported competitive athletics as a matter of state and let his newly named "minister of sports" build a huge training facility in Joinville outside Paris. President Kennedy, too, saw that the Russians had made their international success in sports, with its worldwide impact, into a political tool.

Only hesitatingly did West Germany decide to participate in the athletic arms race. But in 1964, when East Germany sent more Olympians to the all-German team than the Federal Republic, which was three times the size of the GDR, people also took fright in Bonn and made funds available, though they were hardly sufficient.

A Lost Dream

Ulbricht achieved his political goal in Mexico City as well, namely, to demonstrate the two-state theory by means of two German teams. Only small details were lacking for him. He was not allowed to show the “hammer and compass flag,” and instead of the Becher hymn, the Schiller-Beethoven *Ode to Joy* would be played. These alternative solutions will no longer apply in 1972 in Munich.

Avery Brundage of Chicago, the idealistic 81-year-old president of the International Olympic Committee, has therefore already failed. He tried in vain to “keep politics out of sports.” But politics take precedence over sports in the Eastern bloc, and it doesn’t appear to be any different in the neutral world.

Brundage and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) also had to capitulate in another political arena, that of the racial struggle. Through their comprehensive, Soviet-backed threat to boycott the 1968 Olympics, Third World politicians forced the IOC to rescind its majority decision to allow white and black South African athletes to participate.

Just as international political conflicts were once fought on historic battlefields, today they are fought on Olympic grounds. Humanity’s old romantic dream of the Olympic Games has come to an end—what a wistful realization.

NOTES

[1] The “Spartakiade” was a national sports competition for athletes from the Soviet republics. Like the Olympics, it was held every four years—eds.

Source: Adolf Metzner, “Zwischen Panzern und Prestige. Die Olympischen Spiele von Mexiko,” *Die Zeit*, October 11, 1968. Reproduced with permission. Available online at:
<https://www.zeit.de/1968/41/zwischen-panzern-und-prestige>

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