

THE UNHOLY TRINITY Si Frumkin

The 2008 Olympics in Beijing appear to be destined to join the historically regrettable duo of distasteful athletic events that contradicted the spirit and ideology they were supposed to represent.

The 1936 Berlin Olympics are remembered as “Hitler’s Olympics”. They had been planned for Berlin before Hitler came to power but showcased the ideal of Arian superiority and the glories of the Nazi state while denigrating the “inferior” races and attempting to limit their participation in the Games. An American campaign for a boycott of the games collapsed after the American representative of the Olympic Organizing Committee (OIC) met with Hitler and got him to agree to admit a single token Jew to Germany’s team. Hitler allowed himself to be persuaded, invited a Jewish high-jumper to join the team and then, after the boycott collapsed, barred her.

Avery Brundage, a leading American sport official and future OIC president, announced that the boycott was an “alien and un-American idea, part of an evil scheme to politicize the Olympics” and that “Jews had better understand that they cannot use the games as weapons in their boycott against the Nazis”.

In the end, Germany was triumphant with 33 gold medals, nine more than the second place U.S. and with fascist Italy finishing third.

The 1980 Olympics in Moscow also were also made possible by OIC’s decision to ignore the actuality of the Soviet regime where athletics were strictly controlled by the government. The athletes were trained and financed by the State; the overriding purpose was to prove Soviet superiority to the rest of the world. Thus two diverging systems emerged: in the West the athletes carefully preserved amateur status while in the Communist world they were trained, treated and rewarded as professionals.

The only coincidence that prevented these Olympics from being an undiluted Soviet triumph was the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan in 1979. A surprised

and stunned president Carter responded by decreeing a boycott of the Moscow games. The OIC was aghast. It refused to consider an alternate venue, urged that the boycott be disregarded and only gave in after Carter threatened legal action against it. Still, the world reaction was very different from that in 1936 – China and most Moslem countries joined the American boycott and, in the end, more than 40 countries decided not to participate.

The result was a crushing blow to Soviet morale.

So did the OIC learn the lesson that games should not be awarded to oppressive dictatorships? Apparently not.

Jacques Rogge, the current chairman of the OIC, admits that China is a closed society but predicts that the games would “open China” and rejects comparisons of China with Nazi Germany or the USSR. The Bush administration has concurred by claiming that the Olympics would prove to be a powerful incentive for democratic change and President Bush has already accepted an invitation to attend. The Chinese understand that their political system is not an obstacle to OIC approval and are concentrating on environmental issues that appear to be much more important to the West than China’s leading the world in the number of imprisoned journalists and “misusers” of the Internet.

China has carefully listed what it will do to improve Beijing’s polluted air: 200 factories would be relocated out of the city, “green zones” would be established, natural gas would replace coal as the city’s primary fuel, subways would be expanded and automobile traffic reduced, sand storms that blow in the summer would be reduced by massive projects to reverse soil erosion, and much else.

In February 2001, when a team of IOC inspectors visited the city, the government placed a prohibition on the use of coal to heat apartment buildings; this temporarily improved air quality but left millions without heat in the middle of winter! Older housing is being destroyed and over a million residents have been

forcibly evicted and made homeless without a right of appeal or compensation. None of this had been reported either by the foreign or domestic media.

China promises “tight but friendly and peaceful security measures”. In the past this meant house arrests and detentions of prospective dissidents, harassment of foreign journalists and those who may want to share grievances with them, and lengthy prison terms for expressing “subversive” views. Chinese intelligence services have already compiled lists of foreign organizations that may cause “trouble” during the games. The OIC has meanwhile assumed its traditional role: an official has described plans for citizen protests at the Olympics as “regrettable”.

It seems that the IOC hasn’t learned from its mistakes. It is proceeding with the 2008 celebration of an oppressive regime and has already indicated that it intends to continue doing so by deciding to award Putin’s Russia the 2014 winter games.

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