

SPORTS, TERRORISM AND THE MEDIA: THE MUNICH HOSTAGE CRISIS OF 1972

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Abstract

Taking the Munich Olympics of 1972 as a starting point, I will show in my article that the West German authorities were not prepared to respond to international terrorism in the early nineteen-seventies. Likewise, the organizing committee for the Olympics was more eager to erase the memory of the Nazi Games of 1936 than to prevent terrorist attacks during the Games. Only after the Munich hostage crisis the GSG 9, an anti-terror unit of the German border police, was founded – a unit that successfully ended the skyjacking of a Lufthansa airplane to Mogadishu in 1977. In addition I will argue that during the nineteen-seventies terrorist attacks in general became media events as defined by Danyel Dayan and Elihu Katz – meaning that they were not reported upon *ex post* but that from then on a terrorist event became an event in the moment of its appearance in audiovisual media. The terrorist assault on the Munich Olympics is an early example. However, while terrorists intended to arouse international attention in order to gain support for their cause, the international public reacted by clearly condemning any form of political violence.

Keywords: Terrorism; Olympic Games

I. Anti-Fascist Aesthetics and Security Concepts

After the Nazi Games of 1936, the Munich Olympics were the second to take place in Germany. Already before the Games started, the Organizing Committee of 1972 had to deal with various difficulties: They had to set up a professional broadcasting system so that the world public could follow all the competitions on TV, they were the first Games in which two completely autonomous German teams took part (one as host and one as a rather critical guest (Blasius 2001: 291-310)) and they intended to supplant all memories of the Nazi past and establish a “new Germany”, at least in the world of sports. As an American commentator

phrased it: “That summer Germany staged its first Olympic Games since the Nazi Propaganda Circus of 1936. The West Germans spent 615 million Dollars in an effort to erase that memory”.¹

The organizing team of the Munich Games met all three problems quite successfully. As Uta Balbier has shown, the National Olympic Committee of Germany (NOK) organized a cheerful, colorful and altogether anti-nationalistic opening ceremony. Serious efforts were made to suppress any form of nationalism and militarism, for example by playing folk songs instead of national anthems when the national teams walked into the stadium: The arrival of the US-American team was accompanied by *When the Saints go Marching in*, while during the arrival of the German team the big band played *Hoch auf dem gelben Wagen* – a cheerful popular song favored by Walter Scheel, the German president of 1972 (Balbier 2005: 108-111).

Chief designer Otl Aicher chose light blue, light green and orange to be the colors of the Munich Games – bright colors not representing any political ideology in Germany or any other Western country. Items like Olympic flags, symbols, referee uniforms, souvenirs etc. were made in these colors; emblems visualizing different sports disciplines were deliberately modern in form, remotely evoking Bauhaus aesthetics. Thus, the Munich aesthetics were altogether different from any kind of fascist sports aesthetics, not to speak of the martial red, white and black design of the Munich Olympics in 1936. In sum, the German Olympic Committee managed to get rid of all militaristic elements (unlike the Moscow Olympics of 1980 that included goose-stepping sportsmen carrying the Olympic flag during the closing ceremony²) and to stage the Games as friendly, light-hearted Games (“*heitere Spiele*”). Ironically, it was this very success that eventually turned the Munich Olympics into a catastrophe for the organizers as well as for the German authorities, for the audience, the

active participants and most of all for those eleven sportsmen from Israel who were killed in a terrorist attack on September 5, 1972 and their families.

II. The Attack of September 5, 1972

Before the Games started, German police and intelligence had collected information about expected terrorist attacks, however they seemingly ignored information according to which some Palestinian terrorists (among them Leila Khaled, the hijacker of a TWA aircraft in 1969) left Beirut for Europe late in August. Even if the Bavarian police or federal intelligence had taken this information seriously, it is rather unlikely that they would have taken any measures to make the Olympic village a safer place – for reasons that, as mentioned before, were aesthetic rather than political by nature. Consequently, it was remarkably easy for eight Palestinian terrorists to enter the athletes' village and the building in which the male Israeli athletes were sleeping and to force open the door of one of their apartments. Yosef Gutfreund, who woke up on arrival of the terrorists, first thought that the intruders were fellow sportsmen returning late at night from Munich. Only when they forced the door open he realized that he was facing masked and heavily armed terrorist. He tried to keep them from entering the apartment, thus giving his roommate an opportunity to escape through the window. During the fight wrestling coach Moshe Weinberg, who had appeared on the scene, was shot in the face; before he was eventually shot dead he attacked one of the intruders with a knife, allowing wrestler Gad Tsabari to escape to the parking lot underneath the building. Yosef Romano, a weightlifter, was also shot and bled to death in the apartment in which nine more sportsmen were kept hostage.

The terrorists, all of them members of the Palestinian terrorist group *Black September*, demanded that 234 Palestinians be released from Israeli prisons ?? by what time? in exchange for their hostages. In addition, they demanded that Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, both

members of the German terrorist group RAF (*Rote Armee Fraktion/Red Army Faction*), and Kozo Okamoto of the Japanese Red Army, who had been tried in Israel for killing several tourists in a massacre at Tel Aviv Airport, should be set free – apparently in order to cater to German and Japanese radical leftists who openly sympathized with Palestinian radicals at that time.³

Since the Israeli government refused to meet the terrorists' demands, Bavarian authorities suddenly saw themselves responsible for freeing the hostages. They managed to prolong the ultimatum until 5 pm and then pretended to respond to the terrorists' order while starting to prepare the liberation of the hostages on their way to the airport. Shortly after 10 pm two helicopters took the eight terrorists and nine hostages to the military airport at Fürstenfeldbruck where a Lufthansa aircraft was placed on the airstrip. Four of the terrorists started inspecting the plane; soon they realized that there was no crew on board and that the planned exchange of hostages was a big bluff. When they walked back to the helicopters police started firing, killing two terrorists and wounding the other two. Immediately the surviving terrorists started firing back. The combat lasted for more than an hour and finally those terrorists who were still alive threw their hand grenades into the helicopters. All hostages, handcuffed and belted to their seats, suffocated and burnt to death. Along with them, German policeman Anton Fliegerbauer was killed during the shootout and the three surviving terrorists were imprisoned in Munich.

For reasons still unclear, a rumor spread around midnight that the hostages had been freed and were alive. However, about an hour later, the German authorities had to admit that the opposite was true (or: that the rumor was not true, or: that x hostages had been killed). Since many people had switched off their TV sets and radios and gone to sleep by this time, they first learned about the disaster early the next morning – a case of misinformation that was criticized, most of all, by the families of the victims.

In October 1972, a Lufthansa aircraft was hijacked on its way from Beirut to Germany and the remaining three *Black September* terrorists were released from the Munich jail in exchange for the crew and passengers. Today, there are still rumors that the German government staged the hijacking in order to get rid of the Munich terrorists. However, no evidence has ever been brought forward that would seriously support this theory.

Before the massacre, Germany had nearly succeeded in their desperate attempt to make the Munich games the friendly games they hoped they would be. Even on August 27, 1972 – the second day of the Games – the peaceful atmosphere in the Olympic village had been praised in the daily report on German public television: “There are 250 guards,” the speaker said, “dressed in civil uniforms, without guns [Schießeisen] but armed with impressive walky-talkies. Whoever wants to enter the athletes’ village will go through security twice; however, according to the motto of the ‘cheerful games’, there are no barbed wires and seemingly wire netting has loopholes.”⁴

Consequently, the official report on the terrorist attack released by the German government and the Bavarian authorities opens with a report on the anti-totalitarian aesthetic concept of the Games – a concept that could neither have tolerated an absolute priority of security aspects of any sort nor the total presence of heavily-armed police: “The visual design of these Olympics, its architecture and organization could not have tolerated an absolute priority of security aspects of any sort neither could it have tolerated the total presence of heavily armed police: Barbed wire and automatic weapons would not have been suitable to create a peaceful atmosphere for an international meeting in the frame of the Olympics or to present the true image of today’s Germany to the world public – an image that differs in any respect from that of the Games of 1936” (Der Überfall auf die israelische Olympiamannschaft 1972: 9f.).

Only retrospectively did the Federal government realize that terrorism had become an international problem and that anti-terrorist measures needed to be taken in Germany as well as in any other country in the world. Therefore, the GSG9 was founded, an anti-terror special commando of the border police that, five years later, successfully freed the passengers of a Lufthansa aircraft that had been hijacked to Mogadishu by Palestinian terrorists who once again demanded that RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Ulrike Meinhof and Jan Carl Raspe be released from prison.

III. Reactions in East and West Germany

In the Federal Republic of Germany, as in most other Western countries, the attack was unanimously condemned by politicians, journalists and by a broad majority of ordinary people. During a demonstration against terrorism on September 5 (while the hostages were still alive), banners were shown claiming “Anybody can be the victim tomorrow”, “Stop Terrorism” and “Sports not War”.⁵ It is astonishing, however, that there was very little information about the political background of Palestinian terrorism and about the situation in the Middle East. After all, the Munich Olympics took place only five years after the Six Days War that resulted in the occupation of the West Bank, Sinai, the Gaza strip and the Golan heights and turned more than a million Palestinians into permanent residents of territories occupied by Israel. This would, of course, not justify any terrorist action, but it would have been only natural to explain the situation in order to better explain the terrorists’ condition and logic of their action to the audience.

The observation that there was little or no information about the historical context is also relevant to two documentary films that were produced in Germany in 1982 and in 1992 respectively.⁶ Both films offer a detailed reconstruction of the course of events on September 5, 1972, but neither of them goes into the political and historical background.

In contrast, East German commentators made political comments very soon. Already on September 5, they insisted that the real aggressor in the Middle East was Israel and that the terrorist attack was a delayed consequence of the occupation that had started five years before. Journalists vehemently condemned any criminal and terrorist action but made sure that one could not speak of Palestinian terrorism without mentioning the miserable situation of the Palestinian people. TV commentator Heinz Florian Oertel took this position rather bluntly: “Needless to stress that we strictly reject any such form of confrontation. Individual terror has never been an appropriate means to solve individual conflicts – this is as true today as it was fifty years ago. We do not know the motives of the armed group and we do not know who they represent. Maybe the aim of their spectacular action is to draw the world’s attention to the fact that Arab territory has been illegally occupied by Israel for more than five years, that Arabic patriots have been kept in Israeli concentration camps under inhuman conditions for more than five years, that Israel has been laughing to the rest of the world for almost five years, refusing to follow the UN security council resolution of November 1967 ordering the immediate withdrawal from Arab territory. It is possible that the adventurers [Abenteurer] intended to draw public attention to all these facts, but – as said before – we do not know their motifs and those of their backers. However, if this was their intent, they have rendered a very bad service to the Arabic cause. In their initial reactions, progressive Arabs including Arabic sportsmen and official representatives here in Munich, among them the Secretary General of Egypt’s National Olympic Committee, have distanced themselves radically from this adventurous attack. Such actions will eventually only support the aggressor in the Middle East [i.e.: Israel], no matter whether this was the terrorists’ intention or not.”⁷

This comment was perfectly in line with the German Democratic Republic’s politics in the Middle East. Like the Soviet Union, the Socialist German state declared its overall solidarity with the ‘progressive Arabic nations’ that were threatened by the ‘imperialist

aggressor' Israel (e.g. Engmann 1981). Unlike the West German governments under conservative chancellor Adenauer and, later, under social democratic chancellor Willy Brandt, the GDR did not feel any particular responsibility for the surviving Jewish victims of National Socialism. From their perspective, the GDR had already contributed to the process of reconciliation by founding an anti-fascist.

In fact, not only did East German commentators attack Israel, they also criticized the German authorities quite harshly. During the mourning ceremony held in the Olympic stadium in Munich on September 6, East German commentator Oertel condemned the West German strategy that had led to the death of all hostages, three Palestinian terrorists and one German policeman: "It deeply troubles us that during the Olympic Games, of all times and places, the authorities failed to do anything to prevent the inane bloodshed at the military airfield of Fürstenfeldbruck in which all nine hostages were killed. Information about the incident was suppressed for six hours while more optimistic information was inconsiderately passed to the public. ... Sportsmen from the socialist countries are deeply disturbed by the events ..., and we offer our condolences to the innocent victims. But even in this moment we cannot deny that there are worlds between our political convictions and those of the Israeli government and its aggressive politics in the Middle East."⁸

At the same time it was particularly important for the GDR to maintain the Olympic ideal, which, in their opinion, was actually very close to the socialist ideal of a 'friendship of the nations' (*Völkerfreundschaft*). Therefore, commentator Heinz Florian Oertel decided to clearly condemn the terrorist attack during the closing ceremony: "The power and influence of those who oppose communication and accommodation [the terrorists] were successfully overpowered [by the Olympic audience]. Therefore the climate [in Munich] eventually supported the Olympic idea; therefore the spirit of the friendship of the nations could triumph over the dark shadows. I believe that our attitude towards the events has proven the will of our

countries to defend the Olympic idea as well as the politics of peaceful co-existence against any assault.”⁹

IV. Terrorism as Media Event

The Munich massacre was an act of political violence. At the same time it was a media event that was closely observed, commented and debated by television and its audience. According to Danyel Dayan and Elihu Katz a media event exists through its media presence; It differs (or can be distinguished) from an event that will later be broadcasted in that the act of performing and broadcasting constitutes and becomes the event itself (Dayan/Katz 2002: 430). TV events (like the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Di, the Olympics, or a terrorist attack) often highlight their messages visually and comment on them in real time, thus transforming the event into a coherent narrative before its end – in which case the creator of the event is identical with its interpreter (Dayan/Katz 2002: 423). TV ‘naturalizes’ the event and fights ambivalence on the basis of mere repetition. As Patricia Mellencamp has pointed out: “Via repetition, information, and constant coverage, TV is both source and solution.” (Mellencamp 1990:246). The constant coverage – e.g. the Kennedy assassination – seems to realize “television's democratic dream that by informing us and setting a good, calm, and rational example via the protocratic anchors, the populace will be united, soothed, and finally ennobled by repetition of and patient waiting for information” (Mellencamp 1990: 254). Information will then become story, therapy, collective ritual and, finally, myth (Mellencamp 1990: 248).

TV has the power to both structure and interrupt the flow of everyday life and, as the Munich Olympics have shown very powerfully, the only event that can compete with or interrupt a media event is another media event. The Olympics, themselves a first class TV spectacle, were only interrupted by the terrorist attack on the Israeli team (Dayan/Katz 2002:

428). TV time contains “the thrill of live coverage of death events” (Mellencamp 1990: 244) at the price of a brief breakdown of the commentator who suddenly has to comment on an event he hardly knows anything about. Thus he can only repeat what he himself has heard and seen on the screen and try to make sense of events that are both unprecedented and beyond his expertise.

According to Mellencamp, TV is the perfect medium for dealing with anxiety in that it gives anxiety a temporal structure: Generally, TV time is “[s]uccessive, simultaneous time, measured by regular, on-the-half-hour programming ... hypostatized by familiar formats and aging stars in reruns and remakes, trivialized by scandal and gossip,” unless it is “disrupted by the discontinuity of catastrophe coverage” (Mellencamp 1990: 243). At the same time, media events and especially TV events tend to erase the “particular social context” of the event and to replace it in a “society of the spectacle”¹⁰

In historical perspective, both the Munich Olympics and the terrorist assault appear as media events, and together they cover a large part of what is attractive for TV: Sport, entertainment and violence. The fact that terrorists chose one TV event in order to stage another one was the result of good planning and even better intuition. Retrospectively, it seems as if the *Black September* had anticipated Dayan’s and Katz’s definition of media events as well as Mellencamp’s dictum according to which television is always “one step ahead of its theorists.” (Mellencamp 1990: 241). Catastrophe “argues for the importance, the urgent value, the truth of television and its watching which will be good for us – providing catharsis or, better, mastery via repetition of the same which is fascinating, mesmerizing” (Mellencamp 1990: 258)

Watching catastrophes taking place elsewhere (in the double sense of geographically elsewhere and in the media) makes us feel safe, for “if it were happening to us, we wouldn't be watching television. We exist as vicarious participants, whose presence is critical,

acknowledged, and flattered yet we are never in danger of being touched, seen, or heard” (Mellencamp 1990: 262). Thus, the main result of TV catastrophe is not information but, as in film, theater and literature, catharsis.

Ironically, this is by no means what the Munich terrorists had intended. They had hoped that the world would – at least for one day – take notice of their misery, of Palestinian refugees, of Israeli occupation and of UN resolutions that had not been followed. Their good sense made them choose TV as a medium for staging catastrophe; their bad sense made them kill innocent Israelis, and thereby force their audience to identify with the victims and distance themselves from their actual problem, namely the Middle East conflict.

V. Facts and Fictions: Munich '72 in Film and Literature

The Munich Olympics were a live TV event, in fact they were the first ‘totally televised’ sports event (Knall, Schuß, bumms, raus, weg: 38, speaking of ,totale Television’). Shortly afterwards, they became the subject of various films. In Germany, two documentaries were produced for public TV: the first in 1982 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the event, the second on the occasion of the 20th anniversary in 1992. In both documentaries, the events of September 5 are minutely reconstructed and feature interviews of eyewitnesses and high officials, such as Bavarian minister of the Interior Bruno Merk or police president Manfred Schreiber, who both state that it would have been impossible to prevent any terrorist attack unless the Olympic village would have been turned into a fortress. In both films, family members such as Ankie Spitzer, widow of André Spitzer who was killed in Fürstfeldbruck, claim that those responsible for the disaster be put on trial and that all relevant files be made accessible for the victims’ families and their lawyers. Again, as with the West German news reports, the lack of historical information pertaining to the attacks is remarkable. The documentaries neither provide information about the Middle East wars, the PLO, or *Black*

September, nor refer to the complex dynamic within German-Israeli-Palestinian relations that was made even more complex by (topical and) conflicting interests such as oil supply and the establishment of German-Israeli diplomatic relations in the 1960s.

However, both documentaries are good examples of what Mellencamp would describe as TV logics based on repetition, lacking social context and not referring to intellectual discourse. They “do not repeat merely an event but each other, in a sequence that is both successive and simultaneous.” (Mellencamp 1990: 255)

In 1999, Kevin Macdonald made a documentary film entitled *One Day in September* (Switzerland/Germany/UK 1999, d: Kevin Macdonald). This film was widely praised for going into details that had not played a role in the previous films. He did, for example, interview – along with German officials – Jamal Al Gashey, the only surviving Munich terrorist. Macdonald provided background information both about the Israeli-Arab conflict and about the Olympics. This film was eventually followed by the 2006 German production *München '72 – Die wahre Geschichte* (*Munich '72 – The True Story*, Germany 2006, d: Sebastian Dehnhardt/Uli Weidenbach), a film that finally made mention of the political and historical circumstances surrounding the Munich attacks.¹¹

In addition to the documentary films, there are several docudramas about the Munich massacre. Already in 1976, US director William A. Graham directed the movie *21 Hours at Munich*, which was first shown in November 1976. Instead of repeating the facts, Graham had the events staged by professional actors. In contrast, another docudrama entitled *Sword of Gideon* (Canada/USA, TV production 1986, d: Michael Anderson) focused on the events that followed the hostage crisis. Like Spielberg in ‘Munich’ (USA 2005), he retells the story of the Mossad team that hunted down two of the surviving *Black September* terrorists and a handful of supporters in several countries. The existence of these movies seems to be proof positive

that there is a strong need for narrative catharsis – and this is valid not only for the Munich massacre but for all terrorist attacks up to and including 9/11.

VI. Why Sports?

There is one important question which has only briefly been touched upon: Why did the *Black September* terrorists choose the Olympics and not any other important TV event as background for their terrorist attack? Some reasons are easy to find: First of all, there was hardly any event that would draw more international attention. In fact, until today large sports events like the Olympics, the Soccer World Cup or the Super Bowl attract more people than any other media event including elections, hurricanes, war and terrorist attacks (probably with 9/11 as an exception confirming the rule). In the digital age, we can even assume that live sports events are the only media events that still depend on TV as a live medium. We can watch any movie anywhere, we can check email and read news at any time; however, nobody would ever tape the finals of a soccer world cup in order to watch it next day. Sports are and have always been the motor of live TV and has therefore been highly attractive events for terrorists who want to draw the world's attention to their cause.

Secondly, sports – like violence – are (at least partly) independent of language. Although each nation has its own commentators, people still watch the same moving images, and it seems that, unless something unprecedented happened, sports commentaries are quite similar throughout the world. To sum up, Olympic Games provide a perfect setting for terrorist attacks because they transform real time into TV time and vice versa: For two weeks the world is tuned into the steady, regular time of competitions that will only be interrupted by news and – as in the Munich case – by breaking news. It is this very combination that Patricia Mellencamp has described as the dialectic of TV time and catastrophe – a dialectic, which is at the core of TV proper.

However, there is another element in sports that would attract terrorists. Despite the fact that sports are often described as mirroring politics and as shaping social structures, we can also understand sports as a spectacle independent of social and political influences. After all, people do not watch the Olympics in order to learn that socialism will save the world or that only democracy will make them happy. They watch sports because they love sports; it is entertaining and gives them aesthetic pleasure – and it seems to be this very pleasure that outrages terrorists. If we assume that sports are apolitical by nature, they seem a natural target for terrorists. However, the world (as we have learned from the documentary films described above) did not give any more attention to the fate of the Palestinians after the Munich attack. Ironically, the international community of sports fans regarded Israel to be the victim, and even the GDR had to stress, that Arabic politicians and diplomats had condemned the attack. In the short run, *Black September* won the TV competition for attention; in the long run, it did not change the response to their political cause and provide them with the international support they had anticipated. Perhaps this explains why Al Qaida, or any other terrorist group, did not attack the 2006 Soccer World Cup in Germany, and how the World Cup indeed became the friendly sports events Germany had so longed to stage in 1972.

Notes

¹ ABC-Interview München '72, ABC: USA February 1987 (12'50"); Archive of the German Olympic Sports Association (DOSB-Archiv) #72.

² Final Ceremony, Moscow 1980, Aktuelle Kamera, Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv Babelsberg (DRAB), AC14105/DRAB/1/1.

³ In fact, the German RAF later published a statement in which the Munich attack was praised as an act of Anti-Imperialist resistance. See: Die Aktion des ‚Schwarzen September‘ in München. Zur Strategie des antiimperialistischen Kampfes (November 1972), in: Martin Hoffmann (ed.), Rote Armee Fraktion: Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der RAF, Berlin: ID-Archiv 1997, 151-177.

⁴ München 1972. Treffpunkt Olympiastudio: Rückblick auf den 27.8.1972, ARD/Bayrischer Rundfunk: 27.8.1997, 9:35 pm (my translation).

⁵ Deutsches Sport- und Olympiamuseum (ed.), München 1972: Die Höhepunkte (VHS video), Archive of the German Olympic Association (DOSB) No. 541, 12'15''.

⁶ Ingolf Falkenstein, Roderich Frantz and Wulfing von Rohr: Das Olympia-Attentat von München. Eine Retrospektive, Germany (3Sat) 1982; Walter Harrich and Danuta Harrich-Zandberg: Das Attentat von München, Germany (Diva-Film/ZDF) 1992 (first broadcasted on ZDF, 2.9.1992, 22:25).

⁷ Terroranschlag in München, DDR-1, Sept. 5,1972, Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv Babelsberg (DRAB), ID-Nr. 71207, AC12329/ DRAB/1/1.

⁸ Mourning ceremony, Sept. 7, 1972 at the Olympic stadium, broadcasted by DDR 1 and DDR 2, Sept. 7, 1972, 10:10 am, DRAB, ID-No. 71269, AC12329/DRAB/1/1.

⁹ Abschlussfeier der Spiele in München, kommentiert von Heinz Florian Oertel, broadcasted on DDR 1 and DDR 2, Sept. 10, 1972, 7:25 pm, DRAB, ID-Nr. 58112, OVC145/DRAB/1/1.

¹⁰ Mellencamp 1990: 253. Mellencamp refers to Samuel Henry Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change*, New York: AMS Press 1968 (first edition: Columbia University Press 1920), 78-79. She does not mention Guy Debord: *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books 1994 (first published in French: *La société du spectacle*, Paris: Champ Libre, 1971).

¹¹ München '72 – Die wahre Geschichte, , 90 minutes, first broadcasted on ZDF (Germany) on August 15, 2006.

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