

An Olympic-Size Mistake: The Carter Administration and the 1980 Moscow Games

Thomas M. Hunt

Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, The Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War, by Nicholas Evan Sarantakes. Cambridge University Press, 2011, 356 pages. \$28.99 (paperback).

Reflecting a growing sensitivity to cultural matters in the study of international affairs, the literature on sport and diplomacy grew substantially in both number and analytical complexity over the last decade.¹ Nevertheless, significant gaps remained within this scholarship on many subjects, including one concerning the most prominent use of sport in the diplomacy of a national government: the U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games. Happily, the publication of Nicholas Evan Sarantakes' excellent new book *Dropping the Torch* goes a considerable way towards resolving this historiographical weakness.

Among those who have conducted research on the history of international sport, Sarantakes holds a somewhat unique educational and professional background. A diplomatic historian by training and the author of several fine studies on U.S. foreign and military affairs, he also teaches courses on strategy and policy at the U.S. Naval War College.² The product of painstaking research in multiple languages on both sides of the Atlantic, *Dropping the Torch* makes the central argument that the Carter administration made a colossal mistake in reacting to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with the boycott. In making this case, Sarantakes first reasons that the boycott was unlikely to trigger a policy reversal by the Soviet leadership. Moreover, it forfeited an important symbolic opportunity for America—one in which the country's best athletes competed on the very soil of its superpower rival. Sadly, Sarantakes remarks, the episode resulted in the collapse of détente rather than contributing to the more peaceful international situation that Carter entered office hoping to build.

In the first of two very minor weaknesses, the work comes close to exhibiting an exaggerated idealism towards the role played by sport in international affairs. "While it is true that the Olympics fuel nationalism," Sarantakes admits,

Thomas M. Hunt, J.D., Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University of Texas at Austin, where he also holds an appointment as Assistant Director for Academic Affairs at the H.J. Lucher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports.

they also according to him “direct those energies into nonlethal forums and, as a result, encourage mutual understanding.”³ Compared to the rest of the sports world, it is perhaps true that the Olympic movement serves a unique function as an agent of mutual understanding. However, it should be remembered that sporting competitions have on a handful of occasions actually played a role in sparking armed conflict. In the first, a June 1969 World Cup preliminary series involving El Salvador and Honduras triggered what became known as the “Football War” between the two Latin American neighbors.⁴ In the second, a 1990 match between two soccer teams affiliated with opposing ethnic groups acted as a catalyst to civil war in the former Yugoslavia.⁵

In a second, albeit small misstatement, Sarantakes frames the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles as a retaliatory measure against the American government for what happened in Moscow four years earlier. While this perhaps served as the single most important factor behind the boycott, Soviet motivations were more complex. Possessing propaganda importance beyond the superpower conflict with the United States, sporting success was perceived by Soviet leaders as integral to maintaining the perception of Soviet superiority among the satellite states of Eastern Europe. The possibility that the German Democratic Republic might surpass the Soviet Union on the medal tables in Los Angeles worried them considerably. Describing the poor Soviet performance at the 1984 Winter Games, Peter Ueberroth stated as head of the Olympic organizing committee in California, “They didn’t do well, and this is way underestimated. . . . The East Germans beat them in the measurements that count.”⁶

These are mere blemishes, however. Strongly researched and soundly argued, *Dropping the Torch* Sarantakes deftly forges connections between the international athletics and high-level geopolitical diplomacy. In doing so, he has set a new standard in the study of sport and international relations. *Dropping the Torch* is on the whole an exemplary piece of Cold War scholarship.

Notes

¹ See, for noteworthy examples, Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Harvard University Press, 2006); Kevin B. Witherspoon, *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2008); Victor D. Cha, *Beyond the Final Score: The Politics of Sport in Asia* (Columbia University Press, 2009); Thomas M. Hunt, *Drug Games: The International Olympic Committee and the Politics of Doping, 1960–2008*, Terry and Jan Todd Series on Physical Culture and Sports (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).

² A PDF copy of Sarantakes’s c.v. is available at Nicholas Evan Sarantakes U.S. Naval War College Faculty Profile, <http://www.usnwc.edu/Academics/Faculty/Nicholas-Sarantakes.aspx>.

³ Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, The Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15.

⁴ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Soccer War*, 1st international ed. (New York: Vintage, 1992), 157–184.

⁵ Dave Fowler, “Football, Blood and War,” *Observer Sports Magazine*, January 18, 2002.

⁶ Kenneth Reich, *Making It Happen: Peter Ueberroth and the 1984 Olympics* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1986).