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Munich Olympics

“When I was kid, my father used to say ‘our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized.’ Our worst fears have been realized tonight. They’ve now said that there were eleven hostages. Two were killed in their rooms yesterday morning, nine were killed at the airport tonight. They’re all gone.” Jim McKay, ABC Reporter

These somber words were spoken live for the whole world to hear from Munich, Germany on September 6, 1972 at 3:24 A.M. The XX Summer Olympic Games which were in progress had been horrifically interrupted by the hostage crisis and the dreadful murders of Israeli athletes by the terrorist group, Black September. Even though the International Olympic Committee had followed standard procedure in planning for the event, the comprehensive security plan was completely inadequate, the execution of the rescue was amateur, and the aftermath was morally and ethically questionable.

It was the 11th day of the Munich Olympics and the world did not imagine the tragedy evolving that morning. These Olympic Games were to be the games of peace and joy to show the world that West Germany has progressed since the embarrassing 1936 Olympics with the tone of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Germany wanted to erase the memory of the racism in the Berlin Olympics, thirty-six years previous. The 1972 games consisted of 195 events and 7,123 athletes from 121 nations (Tucker 709). These games should have been remembered for Mark Spitz’s record in swimming with seven gold

medals or for Olga Korbut's incredible balance beam performance (Sandomir 1). These performances were all record-breaking accomplishments in Olympic history; however, when people first think of the Munich Olympics, they do not remember these outstanding athletes. They remember the horrifying day of sorrow and grief which was the infamous day that eleven, young, strong athletes from Israel were murdered.

Before the games, Shmuel Lalkin, head of the Israeli Olympic Delegation, had many concerns about the security arrangements for the 20th Olympic Games. He was very worried about the dangerous fact that the Israeli team was to be housed in the ground floor rooms. Having written a letter with his concerns, he assumed that the German authorities were handling the situation. Three weeks later he went to West Germany for a tour of the Israeli Olympic dorms at 31 Connollystrasse where he saw that their rooms had not been moved (Klein 20). The ground floor location was vulnerable and insecure. When he told the Munich Police Department that he was uncomfortable with this plan, they assured him that the Israeli dorm would be under high security. Furthermore, Lalkin was told, "Sir, I don't think it's any of your business" (Klein 21). Worried, Lalkin returned to Israel with trepidation.

During the games the athletes did not notice many security personnel around the village. Everyone presumed that security forces were on the job, but they were hard to spot since they were undercover. In the book *Striking Back*, by Aaron J. Klein, he says, "German authorities were well equipped to deal with unruly men and copious quantities of beer, but were utterly unprepared for a terrorist attack" (Maslin 1). Clearly, the security plan was not ready for the games; however, an international awareness of

conflict and terrorist developments might have prevented the massacre and the deaths so many innocent athletes.

The sun was coming up in the Olympic village on the 11th day of the XX Olympics when eight Palestinian terrorists went into the village. The Palestinians were part of a terrorist group known as Black September which was associated with the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat. Dressed as athletes with their weapons in gym bags, five terrorists scaled the unguarded fence to the village while the three other men had obtained credentials to the village. They went straight to the Israeli apartment building and knocked on one of the rooms with Israeli athletes. At about 5:00 a.m. the wrestling coach, Moshe Weinberg, opened the door. Seeing the men, he tried to close the door, yelling, "Boys get out!" (Kushner 247). With the help of weightlifter Joseph Romano, Weinberg tried to hold the door, but bullets rained through the wood killing Romano and wounding Weinberg. Hearing the gun shots, many athletes successfully were able to escape out of the windows. The terrorists managed, however, to seize nine more Israeli athletes before the area around the building was sealed off ("Munich Olympics").

The media was a major part of the Munich Massacre because most of the hostage crisis was captured on international television. News stations around the world were trying to get good camera angles of the hostages and to record the unfolding events. Throughout the hostage crisis people were watching plans and hearing negotiations handled on live T.V. Jim McKay was anchoring throughout the day, keeping people around the world informed about the developments. ABC's anchors Arledge and McKay

would later win Emmy Awards for their coverage of all the events. History suggests that the presence of the media might have caused interference with negotiations and strategic plans to take down the terrorists. The Palestinian terrorists watched the actual plans and specific police placements on the screen of the television (Reeve 157). This unfortunate media situation supports the fact that the German security forces were indeed inexperienced and naive around this sophisticated technology. Specifically, the cameras blew the cover of the officers attempting to rescue the captives.

Even though a hostage situation was happening, the International Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage and his staff decided that the Olympics must continue. At 9:35 A.M. the terrorists made their demands. They stated that by a noon deadline, they wanted 234 Arab prisoners being held in Israeli jails to be set free and given safe passage home. If the demands were not met, they would begin to kill athletes. The Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and the Israeli government confirmed that they would stand by their policy and would never negotiate with terrorists (Gorman 260). The negotiations were lead by the Munich Police Chief Manfred Schreiber who offered a ransom payment and also offered replacement hostages. He and two other high ranking German officials would trade places with the hostages. Black September did not agree. After extending the deadline three times, the negotiators came up with an agreement that the terrorists and the hostages would be flown into Cairo (Gorman 259). The Israeli stand was obviously clear and the German authorities moved ahead and took control. From a thirty-year perspective, the mobility of the terrorists and the movement of the hostages appear to increase the risk of error.

The plan was simply to try to stop the terrorists. The terrorists and the hostages would be taken to Fürstenfeldbruck military airfield where two police groups would be waiting to target the terrorists. The first group of key players was thirteen police from the Special Tasks Command Force; they dressed as stewards and cabin crew. When the terrorists proceeded to inspect the plane, they would be ambushed. The second group of key military was the five sharpshooters. They would wait until the men checking the plane were caught and then they would shoot the other terrorists and free the hostages (Rubner 3).

This plan was all a very good idea, but that was not what happened. Everything went wrong because the Germans did not have the expertise for this complicated situation. Thousands of unexpected protesters were blocking the road and travel was difficult in the Olympic Village. This unfortunate mess was another indication of the lack of vision of the security planners. The head terrorist, Issa, wisely demanded a bus ride to the helicopter. The master plan had already been altered. In addition, the hostages were blindfolded, bound at the waist, and pushed into the busses. They were taken to the landing pad where the helicopters were waiting. Once the German government counted the number of terrorist, they realized that they had made a huge mistake (Klein 68-69). They only had five sharpshooters and there were eight terrorists. The inadequate strategic planning was evident. Beyond a doubt, there should have been double the number of marksmen.

The two helicopters took off into the night sky with all the captors and their hostages. Eventually the two terrorists checked the plane and noticed that it was not ready

for the flight to Cairo, so they started walking back to the helicopters. Everyone could feel the uneasy feeling; finally, German officials signaled the marksmen to fire. Then it became a gunfight in which the terrorists unleashed the rain of their automatic weapons and grenades at the control tower for several minutes. The marksmen were unable to see anything because the terrorists were hiding the shadows of the helicopter. The angle of the parked helicopters was not advantageous for the sharpshooters (Klein 73). Poor planning in a crisis situation was evident.

The Palestinians realized that they might fail, so one of the terrorists threw a fragmentation grenade into the helicopter. Less than a minute later, another terrorist assassinated the remaining Israeli athletes with his automatic weapon. Police spent hours looking for the remaining men in an open field and when they finally found all three of them, they were captured and imprisoned (Kushner 248). After everything was done, eleven Israeli athletes, five terrorists, and one German policeman were dead. After announcing to world Jim McKay later told everyone that nine Israeli athletes were dead. In his last words he said "They're all gone."

Was this horrific terrorist event really handled in the right way and could it have been prevented? The German government, the Israeli government, and the International Olympic Committee could have been much more prepared for the XX summer games and they might have prevented the hostage situation. Officials wanted the summer Olympics to be the games of peace but they were not prepared for terrorist actions. This could have been prevented if the International Olympic Committee spent more time on the security plan and additional money on preventative measures.

No one at the games was prepared for the colossal act of hatred against the Israeli athletes. In Olympics of today, security is one of the most important expenses and in the 2004 Olympics they spent over \$1 billion. In the 1972 games they spent a mere \$2 million which was obviously not adequate for the times and the location (Maslin 2). The International Olympic Committee did not want to be seen with an array of guns which might remind people of the Berlin games. The main security that they used included two thousand guards who watched over perimeter security and managed traffic control. They stood outside the six-foot fence around the village, but as the games progressed, they became more low-key and relaxed. In fact, it even became normal for athletes to hop the fence after midnight coming back from Munich's beer halls (Klein 40). The atmosphere of the village and the attitude of the Olympic organization appeared to be casual and even lax. The seriousness of the international times was not reflected in the planning of the security for this major event.

It was not just the International Olympic Committee's fault; it was also Israel's fault because they should have been more persistent about the location of the athletes dorms. The Israeli government should have taken extra precautions to keep their athletes safe. This negligence was a major mistake shared by the I.O.C. and the Israeli Olympic Committee.

The main argument historians debate about in the Munich Olympics is whether the terrorist situation was handled in the proper manner. Throughout the twenty hours of the hostage situation, many critical mistakes were made by the Israeli government, the German government, and International Olympic Committee. The first mistake that was

made was that Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir refused to negotiate and left the matter up to the German authorities. The Israeli officials did not have to negotiate with the terrorist but they could have helped in other ways such as sending in back-up forces for the German authorities instead of just abandoning their athletes. The author of *Striking Back*, Aaron Klein writes, "The German incompetence during the hostage crisis was absolute" (Maslin 2). The foremost mistake that the German and International Olympic Committee made was the verification of the correct number of terrorists. Since they thought that there were only five terrorists, they only provided five sharp shooters at Fürstfeldbruck military airfield. Accurate information and proper military equipment are vital in a hostage crisis and this glaring error represents the lack of experience.

A ongoing controversy today is the Israel response to the Munich Massacre after the games were over. The main goal of the Israeli government was revenge on the Palestinian people. On October 29, 1972 Palestinian terrorists hijacked a Lufthansa jet demanding that the release of the three Munich terrorists. Ironically, they were successful in getting all three out of prison (Kushner 248-49). The Israeli people had been pushed enough and the Munich Massacre was a turning point. Prime Minister Golda Meir made a top secret operation by the Mossad (Israeli special operations) to take down everyone involved in the massacre. Meir stated in anger, "We have no choice but to strike at the terrorist organizations wherever we can reach them. That is our obligation to ourselves and to peace. We shall fulfill that obligation undauntedly" (Kushner 248). They did achieve their goal but it was done in a sloppy way. They wanted to kill an Arab terrorist hiding in Norway, but the person they killed was really a Moroccan waiter (Rubner 4-5).

The Israeli military did not handle things in the right manner because all they wanted was revenge and they did not consider if civilian lives were at stake. The boundaries of moral and ethical actions were pushed in the retaliation on Palestine. The Israeli government might have talked to the Palestine government and worked out their problems in a non-violent way. Instead, the actions of Israel appeared to the world to be outright vengeful.

In retrospect, the Israeli government, the West German government, and International Olympic Committee (IOC) share the responsibility for inadequately preparing for the security of the athletes. Furthermore, the rescue operation was filled with blunder and mistakes. At the end of the Olympics the reports from the Germans were suspicious and the reaction of the Israeli government was impulsive and retaliatory. Nobody was truly prepared for the XX Munich Olympics of 1972. The sadness lives on in the history books.

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