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Faraway' countries have regularly caused problems for British policymakers back in London. Indeed, the need to confront difficulties in distant places proves an occupational hazard for any global power. Nevertheless, in September 1938 this did not prevent Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain telling the British people that it seemed amazing that their country was making active preparations for war because of a crisis in ‘faraway’ Czechoslovakia. Today British policymakers are seeking to disengage their military forces from another ‘faraway’ country, Afghanistan, where they have been fighting the Taliban as part of an American-led NATO force. Nor is this the first time that Afghanistan has posed serious questions about policy and power for British governments, as evidenced by the 1839-1842 British-Afghan War and the 1885 British-Russian Pandjeh crisis.¹ In December 1979 Afghanistan moved yet again towards the top of Britain’s foreign policy agenda when Soviet forces entered the country, nominally in support of the Marxist revolution undertaken by the Peoples’ Democratic Party of Afghanistan. In the event, British policymakers ruled out a resort to force. Instead, the principal response favoured by the British government took the form of soft, not hard, power in the shape of sporting sanctions imposed against the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

Paul Corthorn, a historian based at Queen’s University Belfast, begins his *Cold War History* study of the proposed British boycott of Moscow 1980 by outlining briefly the manner in which the government’s response was framed by discussions with the

¹ The sub-text of William Dalrymple’s recent study of the 1839-42 Afghan War emphasizes parallels with events since the late 1970s, as highlighted when quoting the prescient observation made in 1839 by Mehrab Khan of Qalat, a local Afghan chieftain: “You have brought an army into the country. But how do you propose to take it out again?”; William Dalrymple, *Return of a King: the Battle for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 161.
American government, the European Economic Community (EEC) and NATO as well as at the UN. For Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government, the Soviet action was interpreted as unwarranted aggression conducted against an independent country outside the Warsaw Pact area as well as yet another chapter in the post-1945 history of communist bloc expansion. Corthorn quotes a Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) briefing paper recording that the Soviet Union’s future resort to the military option would be influenced by how sharply the West responded to this invasion (47). Unsurprisingly Prime Minister Thatcher, whose uncompromising anti-Soviet ‘iron lady’ image was already well established, feared that merely condemning the invasion but doing nothing effective “would be fatal to the future” (48).

For the American and British governments, the perceived need for a strong response was qualified by an appreciation of the difficulties of effective military and economic action. As a result, one of their principal proposed responses took the form of a boycott of the forthcoming 1980 Moscow Olympics. Looking back in her memoirs, Thatcher stressed a desire to keep in step with the American President: “Like President Carter, I was sure that the most effective thing we could do would be to prevent their [the Soviet Government] using the forthcoming Moscow Olympics for propaganda purposes.”  

Representing the invasion of Afghanistan as contrary to Olympic ideals of peace and understanding, Thatcher deemed it essential to prevent the Olympiad being exploited by the Soviet Union.

Pointing to the way in which recent British governments had come increasingly to view sport, especially the Olympics, as a political instrument, Corthorn records how British policymakers soon opted for a two-pronged strategy: an Olympic boycott and a switch of the Summer Games to an alternative location. As Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary, claimed, “few things would hurt Soviet prestige more than the absence of a number of Western countries from the Olympic Games” (47). Gaining support from both Thatcher and Sir Curtis Keeble, the British ambassador in Moscow (1978-82), the proposed boycott was endorsed by a Cabinet anxious to deny the Soviet Union “a major propaganda victory” (47). Moreover, there seemed a certain logic regarding the choice of this option, given the strong constraints upon Britain’s resort to military and economic sanctions and the recent recourse to sporting boycotts as a political weapon against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Also the government recognised a boycott’s merit given the manner in which the Cold War had become largely a battle of ideology and propaganda in the absence of direct East-West military confrontation (66). At the same time, Corthorn cites documentary evidence that ministers, though claiming publicly that a boycott would dent Soviet prestige and discourage future use of the military option, admitted privately that a boycott was “unlikely to dislodge the Soviet Union from Afghanistan itself” (49).

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Having decided upon a plan of action, Thatcher turned her attention to the British Olympic Association (BOA), telling Sir Denis Follows, its chairman, that British participation in the Moscow Games was in neither the national nor the wider Western interest. In addition, the government introduced a series of measures intended to pressure the BOA and Britain’s sports NGOs into submission. They included a refusal to meet any shortfall in the British team’s Olympic costs left uncovered by the BOA’s public appeal for funds or to grant paid leave to civil servants and military personnel selected for the Games. Individual athletes, like Sebastian Coe, were targeted by ministers and urged not to participate. Restrictions were imposed also on television coverage of the Moscow Olympics and Aeroflot Olympic charter flights between London and Moscow.

Glossing over British discussions with other governments and international organisations, Corthorn concentrates upon the domestic dimension, that is the British debate about an Olympic boycott conducted within and outside government. Highlighting the politics of international sport, the debate (or rather the debates) ranged widely across political parties, the media, the Church, and intellectuals. Sharp divisions within, as well as between, political parties, the media, and organisations, reflected contrasting perceptions of the Cold War. Indeed, as debate continued, the central focus gradually shifted away from the government’s preferred focus upon the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan towards longstanding Cold War issues like human rights and détente (55). For example, The Guardian newspaper and the Liberal Party represented the case for an Olympic boycott more in terms of attacking ongoing Soviet mistreatment of dissidents. For the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and the Communist Party of Great Britain, a boycott threatened the cause of détente.

Yet another area of domestic debate centred upon the role of government in a liberal democracy, given the manner in which the government’s exertion of strong pressure upon sports NGOs and individual sportspeople challenged traditional images regarding the autonomy of British sport. In reality, British governments, though emphasising publicly their contrasting approach towards sport as compared to, say, the Soviet Union, had often adopted in private a somewhat interventionist interpretation of non-intervention in sport, even if this failed to dent public perceptions regarding the apolitical nature of British sport. Within this context, the Thatcher government’s espousal of a free society left it particularly vulnerable to media and public criticism about its apparent adoption of Soviet-style methods to press for a boycott. In the event the government, albeit successfully persuading a few sports federations (e.g. equestrian, hockey, yachting) to boycott the Games, failed to stop a British team going to Moscow. On 25 March 1980 the BOA announced that it had accepted the invitation to attend the Olympics. Described by Carrington as “made of cement from the tip of his toes to the top of his head”, Follows refused to buckle in the face of Thatcher’s handbagging (51). Nor, as noted by the White House, did the BOA’s decision help the broader boycott campaign.

Looking back to 1980, Corthorn concluded that:

“The public debate over the Moscow Olympics was notable as one of those relatively rare occasions when there was wide and sustained engagement with a foreign-policy question. The government did not come out of it well ... It was indeed a defeat for the Thatcher government - but not a decisive one” (66).

Admittedly several countries, including Japan, Kenya, Norway, and West Germany, joined the United States in the boycott, but the Moscow Olympics still took place with 80 countries present. Not only was a British team in attendance, but Olympic medal-winning performances meant that several members became the subject of high profile media stories. For Coe, a Moscow gold medallist, Thatcher’s failure helped Britain’s bid to host the 2012 Olympics. Thus, when leading London’s final bid presentation at Singapore in 2005, he could tell the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that Britons had competed in every Olympiad since the Modern Olympics were revived in 1896.4

Apart from reaffirming her anti-Soviet image, Thatcher’s response to the Afghanistan crisis offered an early example of a tendency to take foreign policy into her own hands in a pro-American direction, while pushing ahead regardless of ministerial advice in favour of a more cautious approach. In turn, her preparedness to wield state power over the world of sport prompted one commentator quoted by Corthorn to highlight Thatcher’s adoption of a contradictory approach based upon a “free economy and the strong state” (66). For Corthorn, the British government demonstrated a clear lack of understanding about the politics of sport, most notably failing to appreciate such matters as the influence, indeed power, of the IOC, the complex logistics of hosting an Olympiad, or the BOA’s traditional independence of government.

In this vein, Corthorn’s assessment echoes that articulated about the Carter Administration by Nicholas Sarantakes, whose book *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War* (2011) criticized the American government for pressing ahead in a manner demonstrating minimal appreciation of, let alone concern for, the world of sport in general and the Olympic movement in particular.5 For Sarantakes, Carter’s success in getting the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) to accept a

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boycott was qualified by the fact that the American action not only failed to stop the Games but also cleared the way for the Soviet Union to acquire global kudos by hosting the Games and heading the Olympics medals table. In brief, the boycott “was too weak to change Soviet actions but too strong for them to ignore.” Undermining the prospects for détente and reactivating the Cold War, Sarantakes concluded that the boycott changed nothing in Afghanistan, harmed the Olympic Movement, and penalised American athletes.

Despite offering sound and wide-ranging coverage of Britain’s multi-layered domestic debate and drawing upon a strong set of primary and secondary sources boosted by recent archival releases, Corthorn still leaves a few gaps concerning points of historical significance. For example, he mentions the House of Commons’ endorsement of a proposed boycott on 17 March 1980, but glosses over the “high-profile debate” leading up to the vote. Yet this parliamentary debate, specifically intended not only to secure political backing for government policy but also to ratchet up the pressure exerted upon the BOA, sports NGOs, and individual athletes, represented a central part of the domestic controversies foregrounded in this article. Nor are readers informed that the debate lasted over six hours, reportedly the longest hitherto held on the Olympics, attracted over fifty speakers, and showed that not all Conservative MPs backed government policy. Instead, Corthorn merely uses a footnote to record coverage of the debate in Christopher R. Hill’s Olympic Politics (1992) (45 note 8). Perhaps the most serious omission concerns any mention of the fact that Thatcher’s Minister of Sport, Hector Monro, did not speak in the parliamentary debate. Clearly, his reservations about government policy led him to be increasingly sidelined. Instead, Michael Heseltine, the Secretary of State for the Environment, played a key role pushing Thatcher’s line when delivering the crucial closing speech in the parliamentary debate.

Corthorn’s exclusion of any mention of Heseltine, alongside his apparent failure to consult the files (coded AT) of the Department of Environment, which held overall responsibility for sport, reflects his limited coverage of the debate about Moscow 1980 within government itself. By contrast, his article is much stronger when discussing the debate outside government. Even so, there are exceptions. For example, Corthorn offers extended coverage of the views of Christopher Booker, a Daily Mail journalist (58-59), but fails to draw out Booker’s illuminating references to the heated arguments between staff working for the Daily Mail: “On the one side were the paper’s political writers ... who were worked up over Afghanistan and strongly in favour of the boycott. On the other were the sports department ... who took the view that sport and politics should be kept as far apart

6 Sarantakes, 264.

a possible.” Public opinion, though mentioned by Corthorn in passing as increasingly supportive of British participation, is taken for granted, with no actual opinion polls or totals being mentioned, let alone referenced (46-47).

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to one of the hotter phases of the Cold War. Even so, the 1979-80 Afghanistan crisis did not escalate into a hot war. What the episode showed was the manner in which the Cold War, albeit never quite becoming a full scale military conflict between the major adversaries, became a hot war in the world of sport. Sports stadiums provided an alternative high profile East-West battlefield upon which both sides of the Iron Curtain competed for primacy and were so represented by governments and the media to a global audience. In this respect, a boycott of Moscow 1980 was seen by the American and British governments as depriving the Soviet Union of the propaganda gains accruing from both hosting the Olympics and dominating the medals table.

Readers seeking to place Corthorn’s study in the broader British foreign policy/Cold War context can turn to not only well established publications like Paul Sharp’s *Thatcher’s Diplomacy: The Revival of British Foreign Policy* or Sean Greenwood’s *Britain and the Cold War 1945–91* but also Daniel J. Lahey’s article in the same issue of *Cold War History* (2013). Viewing the British response to Soviet intervention in Afghanistan from the perspective of the Cold War, the Anglo-American relationship, and the parlous state of the British economy, Lahey provides a useful overarching framework for readers of Corthorn’s article. Also he is the only person discussed here to have referenced the Thatcher papers at the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge. According to Lahey, Thatcher, though anxious to work with the United States and to condemn the Soviet Union, was unable to offer the U.S. much support in the sphere of economic sanctions principally because of “the woeful state of the British economy.” Hence, there resulted a reliance on rhetoric and an “indefatigable, albeit failed, effort to support the American-led boycott of the Moscow Games.” For Lahey, the Thatcher government’s efforts warrant praise: “That the government could not overcome the tremendous barriers to success in the latter initiative [Olympic boycott], most notably the obduracy of the BOA, does not diminish the extraordinary effort it made to assist Carter’s move.” Moreover, Lahey’s attempt to represent the failure of the boycott campaign as being largely “due to

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10 Lahey, 28, 33.

11 Lahey, 23, 38-42.

12 Lahey, 40.
the resistance of the athletic community” goes against the views of most other writers by glossing over the serious failings characterising Thatcher’s diplomacy.13

For readers focusing on the broader international sporting and Olympic context, Aaron Beacom’s recent monograph, entitled *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement: the New Mediators*, is of particular relevance.14 Conceptualising ‘Olympic diplomacy’ within the framework of state diplomacy, Beacom studies the use over time of Olympic boycotts, including that proposed in 1980, as diplomatic tools.15 Notwithstanding the wide ranging coverage promised by the title, in reality the book has a narrow British focus in terms of content and sources, but this does ensure reasonable coverage of the proposed British boycott of Moscow 1980.16

Last but not least is Kevin Jefferys, most notably his article ‘Britain and the Boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics’ published in *Sport in History*.17 Apart from offering the clearest study of the key stages in the development of the crisis, Jefferys concludes with a lengthy and highly critical appraisal of British government policy and strategy. Indeed, his conclusion should be read by anyone studying the 1980 boycott episode not so much in terms of accepting his explanation of why the government failed to stop a British team going to Moscow in 1980 but rather of suggesting prompts for evaluating the validity of the arguments articulated by Beacom, Corthorn and Lahey.18 Jefferys discusses the boycott issue also in *Sport and Politics in Modern Britain: the Road to 2012*, a monograph studying British government policy towards sport since 1945.19 Viewing the 1980 episode within this broader politico-sporting context, Jefferys echoes the points made by Martin Polley in *Moving the Goalposts*, a well-informed study published before recent archival releases, when arguing that the Thatcher government’s boycott campaign inserted a punctuation mark into the flow of the politics/sport relationship:

13 Lahey, 42.


15 Beacom, 5, 36-38, 255.

16 Beacom, 124-37.


18 Jefferys, ”Britain and the Boycott”, 294-299.

“By the late 1970s Whitehall’s traditional detachment towards top level sport appeared to be on the way out ... But the trend towards closer ties between politicians and sport ... was abruptly interrupted in 1980 ... Rather than moving inexorably closer - as had been the case since the mid-1960s - the relationship between sport and politics across the board in Britain was entering a troubled phase, and was to remain fraught for a decade to come.”

None of the authors mentioned above referenced - and presumably therefore did not consult - what should be treated as an essential archival source for anyone studying recent British diplomacy, the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme (BDOHP) archive held at Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge. One transcript, based upon a private memoir written by Sir Curtis Keeble, the British ambassador in Moscow, contributes a Moscow-centred British perspective on the crisis. Keeble gave strong support to the boycott proposal because of the perceived need to make a response adjudged sharp enough to prompt the Soviet leadership to fear that they underestimated the likely British reaction, thereby encouraging caution in future about undertaking further adventures. Despite admitting the patchy response to calls for a boycott within and outside Britain, Keeble claimed that the absence of several countries limited the extent of the anticipated propaganda “boost” from hosting the Olympics.

In turn, the ‘frosty’ nature of the British-Soviet relationship consequent upon the Afghan invasion led the FCO to instruct Keeble to keep his contacts with the Soviet regime to a minimum. Thus, he found himself in “a kind of diplomatic ‘black hole,’ an ultimate negative factor, the symbolic frown on the British face.” Unsurprisingly, the ambassador was instructed by the Thatcher government to absent himself not only from such events as the May Day parade but also from Moscow itself while the Olympic Games were being held. As a result, on the day the Moscow Games opened the Daily Express photographed Keeble and his wife drinking tea under an apple tree in the garden of their


21 For details about the BDOHP, see Peter J. Beck, “British Diplomatic Oral History Programme: ‘Old diplomats drooling about their youth’ or a major new source for international historians?,” The British International History Group Newsletter, 9 (2002), 4-5, http://www.bihg.ac.uk/AboutUs/News.aspx. BDOHP transcripts are now available online, as evidenced by those cited in footnotes 22 and 26.


23 Keeble, 105.

house back in England. Another BDOHP transcript, based upon an interview with Sir Andrew Wood, the Head of Chancery at the British embassy in Moscow between 1979 and 1982, highlights the “pretty catastrophic” impact of the Afghan crisis upon relations between London and Moscow: “It meant that dialogue for a substantial part of the time simply ceased.”

Corthorn’s article, like the other studies mentioned in this review, represents yet another chapter in the ongoing debate about the nature of the linkages between sport, domestic politics and international relations. Notwithstanding longstanding efforts to stress Britain’s distinctive separation of politics and sport, during recent decades British governments have assumed a more activist role as regards international sport, and particularly the Olympics. Moreover, as claimed by Corthorn, his article contributes also to ongoing efforts to integrate the cultural and social dimensions with the diplomatic and political narratives in Cold War historiography (44). Finally, Corthorn’s article, like the other texts cited above, highlights the research and teaching potential of a topic focused upon Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the 1980 Olympics. By implication, he presses also the case for further research on Moscow 1980 with special regard to the policies of other countries, particularly the Soviet Union, sports NGOs, the media, and public opinion.

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Keeble, 105.

Interview with Sir Andrew Wood, 2003, DOHP 77, 44, BDOHP, http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Wood.pdf. This page highlights also the pros and cons of oral testimony, especially the problems resulting from edited memories and faulty recall. Thus, at one point, when asked about British participation in Moscow 1980, Wood replied that “The Americans withdrew, we withdrew.”

One book worth noting here is Donald Macintosh and Michael Hawes, Sport and Canadian Diplomacy (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).
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