

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 420

Published on 2 August 2013

Updated, 13 June 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and
Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Daniel James Lahey. "The Thatcher Government's Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979-1980." *Cold War History* 13:1 (February 2013): 21-42. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2012.721355. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.721355>

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR420.pdf>

Reviewed by **Scott Kaufman**, Francis Marion University

“Sir Dennis is a living Colonel Blimp, whose only other international experience has been 12 years as Secretary of the British Airline Pilots Association. He is a pure Olympian who puts aside all responsibilities as a citizen of the West in favor of sports as the last hope of world peace.” So commented Lloyd Cutler, the counsel to President Jimmy Carter, on Sir Dennis Follows, chairman of the British Olympic Association (BOA).¹ At issue was President Carter’s call for an international boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games, which were to be held in the Soviet Union; this was one of several measures called for by Carter to punish the Soviet Union for its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Cutler’s comment suggested an unwillingness on London’s part to endorse the U.S. policy of pressure. In fact, the British response was much more nuanced, as explained by Daniel James Lahey in this excellent article.

Having desired to reinvigorate a U.S.-Soviet détente that by 1976 had shown signs of weakness, Carter was infuriated with the Soviet invasion. In addition to the boycott, he called for imposing economic sanctions on Moscow—including an embargo on grain shipments—, warned the Kremlin that the White House would use “any means necessary” to prevent a Soviet takeover of the Persian Gulf, and implemented a U.S. military buildup. For the United States, any effective punishment of the Soviet Union required international support, and probably no other nation was more important than Great Britain. As Lahey explains, since London was “a formidable military power and one of America’s closest partners,” the U.S. looked to it in particular “to assist in the implementation of a forceful Western response” (24).

¹ Memo by Cutler re Olympics, 20 March 1980, “Olympics, 3/80,” National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, Subject File, Box 49, James Earl Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sought to help. Not only was she a fervent anticommunist, but Whitehall had since World War II “come to depend increasingly on the special relationship [with the United States] to help stem the steady decline of London’s international power and influence” (26). Yet there were limits to how far she could or would go. For one, the British had long opposed using trade sanctions as a weapon—indeed, as a number of authors have pointed out, this was true not just with respect to trade with the Soviet Union, but also with the other major communist power, the People’s Republic of China.² The Thatcher government understood that the United Kingdom relied heavily on international commerce, and any goods London decided not to sell to Moscow “could easily be substituted by French, German and Japanese firms” (28). Additionally, Whitehall had to take into account Britain’s economic weakness in the late 1970s and early 1980s; hence, any curtailment of trade risked serious harm both to the nation and to the Thatcher government’s political future. Accordingly, London limited its trade sanctions to commodities that had little impact upon the British economy. Thatcher and her aides did try to prevent the British Olympic team from attending the Summer Games, but the BOA was independent of any decision-making by Whitehall. Ultimately, most of the United Kingdom’s athletes attended.

Lahey has done a commendable job of incorporating into his article a wide range of documents from the Prime Minister’s and cabinet files at the British National Archives, along with a smattering of materials from the Jimmy Carter Library, to offer a clearer understanding of the decision-making that took place in London behind the scenes. I was disappointed that he did not look at the papers of the British Olympic Association in London. Furthermore, I wonder what Lahey’s study might say more broadly about the use of sanctions as a weapon. A paragraph or two that incorporated works by individuals such as Michael Mastanduno, Douglas E. McDaniel, and Tor Egil Førland could have gone some distance to answering this question.³ These quibbles aside, Lahey has done much to help scholars understand the efficacy, or lack thereof, of Carter’s effort to punish the Soviets for invading Afghanistan.

Scott Kaufman is Professor of History at Francis Marion University, with a specialization in U.S. foreign policy and twentieth-century American military history. He has authored or co-authored eight books, including *Plans Unraveled: The*

² See, for instance, Zhang Shu Guang, *Economic Cold War: America’s Embargo against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949-1963* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2001); Victor Scott Kaufman, *Confronting Communism: U.S. and British Policies toward China* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment: CoCom and the Politics of East-West Trade*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

³ Mastanduno, *Economic Containment*; Douglas E. McDaniel, *United States Technology Export Control: An Assessment* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1993); Tor Egil Førland, *Cold Economic Warfare: CoCom and the Forging of Strategic Export Controls* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Republic of Letters, 2009).

Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008). His most recent publication is *Project Plowshare: The Peaceful Use of Nuclear Explosives in Cold War America* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

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