

Opinion – The Long History of the Olympic Industry and Totalitarian Regimes

Written by Mac Ross and Helen Jefferson Lenskyj

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MAC ROSS AND HELEN JEFFERSON LENSKYJ, NOV 12 2021

In recent days, protestors have risen up in defiance of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Chinese Communist Part (CCP), demanding that the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics be removed from the People's Republic of China (PRC) on humanitarian grounds. Their rally cry is now well known. Over a million Turkic Muslims have been rounded up and sent to re-education camps, where they are forced to endure classes in language, cultural, and politics. Reports of rape and torture these camps are now making headlines. According to Freedom House, Tibet remains the least free place in the world, with religion, politics, and traditional ways of life all under relentless CCP attack. At least 157 monks and nuns have self-immolated since 2009 in hopes of illustrating the seriousness of their suffering. On the PRC's other border, Southern Mongolians are facing forced assimilation through the elimination of their language in schools and the relocation of hundreds of thousands of traditional herdsmen to urban settings. Each region – Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia – has seen the state sanctioned settlement of thousands of Han Chinese, in what can only be regarded as settler-colonialism, alive and well in the twenty-first century. In Hong Kong, the CCP has laid siege to the “One Country, Two Systems” ideal, pushing through a National Security Law, replacing the freedoms of speech and assembly with speedy trials and convictions for peaceful protestors, who can now also be extradited to the PRC.

Although not all of the CCP's human rights violations were in full swing when the IOC awarded Beijing the 2022 Games, international observers representing groups such as Amnesty International and Freedom House had already vocally denounced the human rights disaster that was the Beijing 2008 Olympics and noted the leverage that the mega event gave the CCP to brutally crack down on Tibet. That the CCP is now using the 2022 Olympics to sport wash their human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Hong Kong, is now obvious. The mega event is now a part of their oppressive machine, replicated with the sanction of the IOC and all nations who refuse to boycott. But we've been here before. We know the dangers of awarding the Olympics to authoritarian regimes. The blood of the victims soaks the earth from Berlin to Mexico City, Seoul to Sochi. Yet here we are. Again.

Contemporary sport studies and political science literature uses the term “sport washing” to describe how authoritarian regimes use mega events to distract attention away from their human rights abuses. The IOC has been a willing partner in these efforts, clinging to its fictional “apolitical” stance to ignore the slaughter of citizens in host nations, as well as the suffering of millions more. This is not hyperbole.

In 1936, despite public outcry in the USA, Canada, and beyond, the IOC rolled into Nazi Germany to support the grandest example of sport washing the world has ever seen. Although there was already abundant evidence of state sanctioned anti-Semitism, Adolf Hitler made the stance of the Nazi Party crystal clear via the Nuremberg Laws in 1935. As historians Richard Menkis and Harold Troper explain in their book *More than Just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics*, the new legislation denied “Jews any and all protections of the German state, including citizenship, and gave legal sanction to the total excision of Jews from German society.” The new laws had little impact on the IOC. In fact, IOC member Charles H. Sherrill was not only on hand in Nuremberg, he was also impressed by the spectacle and pageantry of it all. US Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage fully supported Hitler, while opposing American calls for a boycott. Later, the Olympic Games had a similar effect on the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), illustrating the event's power to sport wash heinous, racist Nazi policies with the momentary

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glamour of the Games. “And so what was surely one of the greatest sports festivals of all times came to an end,” reflected the COC, “having made its magnificent contribution toward a fitter youth and more peaceful international relationships.” Three years later Hitler instigated World War II, during which roughly 60 million people lost their lives. So much for “peaceful international relationships.”

Just over thirty years later, it was clear the IOC had learned little from the debacle in Berlin. Following founder De Coubertin’s goal of ‘sportifying’ the globe in line with the Olympic faster/higher/stronger principle, the IOC eagerly awarded the 1968 Olympic Games to Mexico City, under the control of the nation’s single-party, authoritarian government. When student protestors rose up, opposing the notion of hosting an Olympics while so many Mexicans struggled to feed and house their families, the authorities sent in the Olympia Battalion – raised specifically for the Games – to massacre hundreds of protestors. The IOC did not question the incident, accepting the party-line from Mexican officials. Brundage, now IOC president, wanted the games to go on uninterrupted, but the IOC, keeping up appearances as usual, decided on a one-day interval before resuming the competition.

Flash forward to 1981 and we find the IOC awarding the 1988 Olympic Games to tyrant Chun Doo-hwan. Much like the CCP today, the Chun government arrested citizens and sent them to re-education camps without any due process, resulting in the imprisonment of at least 60,000 people in the months leading up to Seoul’s successful bid alone. Before the end of 1980, Chun would lead a military assault on protestors in Gwangju, massacring his citizenry for two days, resulting in 4,900 deaths. Emboldened by Seoul’s victorious Olympic bid, Chun increasingly cracked down on dissenters. The camps continued, becoming sites of not only political re-education, but rape, torture, and murder. To make way for the Olympics, authorities displaced 750,000 people from their homes, representing the most Olympic-related displacements other than Beijing 2008.

When Sochi came knocking, with its unlimited money and authoritarian management, the IOC salivated over the excess and grandeur Vladimir Putin could lend to the Olympic Movement. Putin’s legal assault on LGBTQ+ rights drew the ire of protesters worldwide and should have been enough for the IOC to move the Games. But the money. The power. It was all too much for the IOC to pass up. The bulldozing of homes, and displacement of 2,000 people, largely flew under the radar. There were voices within Russia who opposed the Games and Putin. In a 2013 interview with *Real Sports with Bryant Gumble*, Boris Nemtsov called Sochi 2014 “a festival of corruption and mismanagement.” He continued: “We have 20 million poor people in this country. We have a problem in police. We have a problem in our hospitals. Putin spent \$50 billion for what? For what?” He was assassinated in 2015.

What make the 2022 Beijing Olympics so utterly indefensible is that we’ve been here before. Not even two full decades have passed since the last PRC-IOC festival of human rights violations, yet the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) of the world are lining up to participate. Back in 2008, IOC President Jacques Rogge claimed the Olympics would improve the human rights situation in the PRC. The opposite happened. In fact, things are now so bad that current IOC President Thomas Bach won’t utter a word about the state of human rights in the PRC. It’s game over. The Olympic ideal of peaceful internationalism has always belonged in the realm of mythology. There is no dearth of evidence to show that these so-called ideals are dead and buried beneath the capitalist excesses of the IOC and the authoritarian regimes of recent host countries.

About the author:

Mac Ross is Assistant Professor in the School of Kinesiology at Western University, Canada. His research interests include the Social History of Sport and Sport and Human Rights and. He has been published in the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *Sport History Review* and the *Journal of Sport History*, among others.

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is Professor Emerita at the University of Toronto, Canada. She has written seven books on the Olympic industry as well as other publications on gender and sport – see helenlenskyj.ca. She has been in anti-Olympic and Olympic watchdog groups in Toronto, Vancouver, and Sydney, Australia.

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