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Munich massacre

Research study of propaganda in communist countries

Abstract

In this analysis the author notices a difference in the perception of the Munich massacre in various countries of the communist bloc, which was justified by the political situation. It was a consequence of the race of the two strongest countries in that period. It inspired the author of the publication to make an in-depth analysis of the Polish and Soviet press of that period.

Keywords: terrorism, communism, propaganda, Munich massacre, USSR, Poland, Israel, Olympic Games, Black September, Palestine, newspapers

The purpose of this article is to show the coverage of events at the Olympic Games in Munich by analyzing the press of the communist bloc. A detailed analysis of the following newspapers allowed for plumbing the knowledge of this subject and also had a cognitive purpose, namely how that event was perceived in different source materials.

Trybuna Robotnicza (Workers' Tribune), initially named Trybuna Śląska. It was a regional Silesian newspaper. It was one of the largest regional papers in communist bloc, as close to 20 thousand copies were published every day. The Trybuna Ludu (People's Tribune) daily was the second largest newspaper in communist Poland. The paper was formed by a merger of two newspapers: Głos Ludu (People's Voice), the press organ of the PPR and Robotnik (Worker), the press organ of the PPS. Its average circulation was 1,5 million copies published every day. Izvestia (Известия) is also a daily broadsheet newspaper in the USSR/Russia. The average circulation was around 235 thousand copies every day. Each of those newspapers was dependent on the communist parties, so they were censored. Currently, there are many studies describing and examining the relations and answering the question why those events happened.¹

The Olympic Games in Munich, which took place between 26 August and 11 September 1972, have been remembered in history for two reasons. First of all, because they were the first Olympics after World War Two held in Germany and because of the attack against Israeli athletes carried out by the terrorists from the radical Palestinian organization Black September. The Palestinians chose the most

¹ Klein (2005); Groussard (1975); Dobson, Payne (1977), Fareell (2010); Marcovitz (2002).

convenient - from their point of view - time to wield such a cruel attack, because the Olympic Games were the most popular sports event in the world, covered by most of the TV stations. Undoubtedly, they wanted to draw attention to themselves and show the whole world the cause for which they have been fighting for almost a quarter of a century. The Palestinians planned the strike with precision and additionally their attack had an ideological background. Noteworthy is the fact that the Jews for the first time since the creation of the independent state decided to represent their country in the state that had been so negatively recorded in their history. For a long time, it was debated whether Israel would participate in these Olympic Games. Although more than 25 years had passed since the end of World War II, the Jews could not entirely forgive the tragedy that the Germans had brought on them. On the other hand, total separation from the world would show the weakness of the Israelis, and sending their athletes to such a dignified sports event, moreover organized by Germany, would show the world their toughness and strength. All of these facts were described by the most of popular communist newspapers such as *Trybuna Ludu*, *Trybuna Robotnicza* and *Izvestia*. They showed that the point of view depended on the political situation.

Trybuna Ludu, 6 September 1972

According to *Trybuna Ludu*'s reports, for the first time in history on Tuesday afternoon, 6 September 1972, the Olympic Games were interrupted as a result of the assassination of members of the Israeli team by a group of Palestinian commandos. The International Olympic Committee and the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games decided

to suspend those events that were scheduled for Tuesday evening. At the same time, it was announced that a funeral ceremony commemorating the victims would be held at the main Olympic stadium on Wednesday at 10 a.m.²

According to the reports of the correspondents accredited at the Games, early Tuesday morning a group of armed Palestinian commandos from a small extremist organization Black September sneaked into the Olympic village and overtook the building where a part of the Israeli team lived. An Israeli team coach and one of the Israeli weightlifters died in unexplained circumstances. The assassins barricaded themselves inside the building, in which they imprisoned five Israeli athletes and five accompanying persons as hostages. The commandos demanded the release of 230 Palestinian prisoners in Israel, some of whom had been taking part in various actions organized by Black September. The assassins demanded that these prisoners were to be taken to any Arab capital except Beirut and Amman, though not by Israeli planes. The attackers initially demanded that their requests had to be accepted by midnight, but then they extended the deadline several times. They warned the West German police that any attempts to free the hostages would end up in shooting the Israeli Olympic team members. The negotiations with terrorists continued to take place. They were led by representatives of West German authorities and the IOC. From early morning hours, pavilion No. 33, in which the drama was taking place, was surrounded by a strong cordon of the Bavarian police. A similar cordon was formed around the Olympic village. A few police armoured cars

² *Act of terror in the Olympic village (1972).*

and a large group of police sharpshooters also came down to the scene.³

According to *Trybuna Ludu*, the Olympic Games Organizing Committee published an official announcement on Tuesday afternoon: The Olympic peace has been interrupted by criminal terrorists. The entire civilization condemns this barbaric feat. To commemorate the victims and as a sign of solidarity with the tragedy of the hostages still being held by the terrorists, all sports competitions this afternoon will be discontinued. These Games that are in being played will be brought to an end. The International Olympic Committee and the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games will take part together with all participants in the Games in a manifestation commemorating terrorists' victims tomorrow, on Wednesday, September 6 at 10 a.m. in the Olympic Stadium. This manifestation should clearly show that the Olympic idea is stronger than terror and violence. We have all been deeply shaken by the events. In Munich, in the city of the Olympic Games, which from its earliest history has served to manifest peace and friendship between nations, a group of extremists from the Black September organization committed acts of terror. Sportsmen died. This terrorist action cannot be justified by either political reasons or the dignity of militants for a good cause. Thus, the actions of the assassins were condemned by the Arab countries and the main Palestinian representation – the Palestine Liberation Organization. The action of the assassins was firmly condemned by Polish public opinion. We regret the death of athletes - participants in the Games. Terror cannot be a form of solving any socio-political conflicts, it turns against those who use it.

³ Ibidem.

The drama deepened on Tuesday night. Information about the neutralization of the assassins came. We do not know the exact course of the events that took place at the West German military airport. We only know that it ended up in killing or injuring the organizers of the attack. There was new bloodshed. For decades, the Olympians have been guided by the idea of bringing together the youth of the world, disseminating friendship among nations. I regret that this noble idea has been violated. During an extraordinary meeting of the International Olympic Committee, convened on Tuesday evening, the leadership of the Polish Olympic team made a statement in which they expressed their deep regret at the tragic terrorist action and the disruption of Olympic peace.⁴

A few hours after the assassination, the Israeli cabinet met in Tel Aviv, and at the end of the meeting, Prime Minister Golda Meir called for the suspension of the Olympic Games until ten hostages were released. She gave orders to Israeli sportsmen to temporarily not take part in any competition. The Prime Minister of Israel did not mention a word about accepting the demands of the commandos - the release of 230 Palestinian prisoners.⁵

In the afternoon, a meeting of the West German cabinet took place. Chancellor Willy Brandt appealed to all heads of state and governments of the Arab countries to do everything in their power and help in freeing members of the Israeli team. Brandt then went to Munich to personally supervise negotiations with the commandos. In the evening, Chancellor Willy Brandt made a statement to the German television

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem: 10.

about the Tuesday Olympic tragedy. He said that painful circumstances forced the organizers to stop the Games. What had happened was a painful blow to the Olympic idea, which the terrorists disgraced. The tragic incident caused serious damage to the Federal Republic of Germany. Brandt said that attempts were made throughout the day to free the hostages, but all efforts to drive the terrorists away from the criminal intention failed so far. The Chancellor assured that the relevant authorities were in constant contact with the terrorists and that he himself was involved in person. The question was also whether proper security measures had been taken so that the tragedy did not occur again. Brandt assured that this matter would be subject to a detailed examination, however, one should not delude oneself that absolute protection could be found against desperate people. The Chancellor appealed to close all orders for cooperation in order to prevent such events from recurring in the future and expressed a personal opinion that the Games should be continued because, in his opinion, it could not be allowed that the extremists would impose their will on the whole world in such situations.⁶

According to *Trybuna Ludu*, the first reactions of leading politicians from around the world to the events that took place in the Olympic village were quickly reported. UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim appealed for the immediate release of the hostages. The attack carried out by the commandos was condemned by President Nixon, the West German government, the Dutch, the Vatican, and also by the leaders of both US parties in the Senate. The Office of the Arab League in Bonn issued a statement condemning the acts

⁶ Ibidem.

of terror performed by the extremists of the Black September organization. The Palestine Liberation Organization, which represents the majority of the Palestinians, also condemned the Tuesday attack. Rutkowski - the head of the Polish representation, expressed the regret over the tragic incident and condemned its perpetrators to the chairman of the West German organizing committee on behalf of of the entire Polish representation.⁷

As reported by *Trybuna Ludu* journalists, late in the evening on Tuesday, September 6, a press conference was held with the participation of Will Daume - chairman of the organizing committee of the XX Olympic Games. Daume said that the programme of the Olympic Games will be implemented with a 24-hour delay. At 10 p.m., the International Olympic Committee met to consider the current situation. At the end of the conference, a statement was made by the leadership of the Soviet team, which condemned the act of terror and expressed deep regret over the incidents that took place in the Olympic village. According to AFP and Reuters correspondents, just after 10 p.m. Warsaw time, five assassins with nine hostages left the Israeli team building and by coach went to a place where three West German military helicopters were waiting for them. The assassins and the hostages took their seats in one of the machines, and a moment later all three helicopters rose into the air heading for the airport. In one of them were several West German negotiators, including the interior minister Genscher. Immediately after the helicopters landed at the military airport, there was a short-term shooting.⁸

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

West German government's spokesman Conrad Ahlers said that the action taken against the commandos at the airport had been planned. He stated that the attempt to abduct the Israeli hostages was unsuccessful. Five of the Arab commandos were killed or injured. All Israeli athletes were released. According to supplementary information, another dead Israeli and three wounded Arabs were found in the building of the Israeli team after the departure of commandos and the hostages. It follows that the Israelis defended themselves.⁹

Trybuna Ludu, 7 September 1972

Contrary to the initial information of the news agencies, the action to free Israeli hostages held by Palestinian extremists ended on Tuesday, 6 September 1972, with a terrible tragedy. All Israeli hostages, in the number of nine, were killed.¹⁰

Because on Tuesday morning the Palestinians shot two members of the Israeli team in the Olympic village, the total number of fatalities of the tragedy in Munich increased to 18. Several people, including three Palestinian extremists, and one of the pilots, were injured. The tragedy at the Munich military airport put in question the continuation of the Olympics. The decision to resume the Games and extend them by one day was taken on Wednesday, 7 September, at the meeting of the IOC Executive Board. On Wednesday, September 7, the next Olympic competition was started. The first

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ *The course of the tragic events at the Munich airport (1972).*

competition after the break was a handball match between Romania and Hungary.¹¹

As the journalists reported, the first news about the tragedy at the military airport near Munich came on Wednesday at 3 p.m. Warsaw time, when the mayor of Munich Kronawitter declared that the Israelis could not be saved; an hour later, at the ad-hoc press conference, the Minister of the Interior, NRF Genscher, gave the official version of the events, according to which the action of West German police did not succeed because the headlights installed at the airport were poorly placed and hidden sharpshooters did not have good visibility in the ambush. When the first shots were fired at the Palestinians, the assassins opened fire at the helicopter in which the hostages were placed. A grenade thrown into the interior almost ripped the machine apart, and all Israelis and one of the pilots died on the spot.¹²

The Interior Minister Ganscher said that the police action had to be decided because the federal government was not be able to obtain a guarantee from Israel that 230 Arab prisoners in Israel would be released as the terrorists demanded.

On Wednesday, at 10 a.m. Warsaw time, a mourning ceremony was held at the upper Olympic Stadium in Munich in honour of the victims of the tragic events. The stadium gathered members of sports teams from all countries, including Poland, who merely ten days earlier took part in the joyous opening ceremony of the XX Olympic Games. The flags of all participants in the Games were lowered to the half-mast. In the grandstand were the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Gustav Heinemann, Chancellor Willy

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem: 10.

Brandt, Minister of Foreign Affairs Walter Scheel and many personalities from the political and cultural world. The ceremony began with the rendering of the Beethoven's funeral march. The main speaker was the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Heinemann, who said that the final answer to the question of who was to be blamed for the tragic events could not be given, but there was no doubt that the terrorist organizations were guilty, and those countries that did not interfere with the criminal practices of extremists were also seriously responsible. Heinemann ended his speech with an appeal for jointly opposing acts of terror so that the beautiful Olympic idea would not be lost. On Wednesday, 7 September, the head of the Polish Olympic team Józef Rutkowski expressed his condolences to the leadership of the Olympic team of Israel because of the further victims of the tragic events who died on the night of 5 September. On the same day, in the afternoon, the government of the FRG met in Bonn under the chairmanship of Chancellor Brandt. At that meeting, the FRG Minister of the Interior Genscher informed the Bonn cabinet about the course of the events in Munich. West German government spokesman Konrad Ahlers stated after the cabinet meeting that the Federal Republic of Germany would ask the UN Secretary-General to take steps within this organization that would put an end to the terrorist activities.¹³

On Wednesday, at 4 a.m., in the holiday resort of the Olympic village, the Interior Ministers of Bavaria and the FRG Bruno Merk and Dietrich Genscher held a press conference. Both ministers tried to justify the unsuccessful action of the West German police. Genscher said that the decision

¹³ Ibidem.

to attack the commandos was made because the federal government had failed to obtain a guarantee from Israel that two hundred Arab prisoners in Israel would be actually released in exchange for the hostages. According to Genscher, West German marksmen opened fire at the commandos when they were leaving the helicopter. According to the FRG Minister, the action did not succeed because it turned out that the headlights installed at the airport were poorly set and the shooters did not have good visibility. When the first shots of the Fedayeen were fired, they opened fire at the helicopter in which the hostages were placed. A grenade thrown by the terrorists completely destroyed one of the helicopters. The Interior Minister of Bavaria Bruno Merk said for his part that there was no way to free the hostages while they were still in the Olympic village. The tragedy in Munich is basically the only topic of news agency reports. They write about the indignation of world public opinion about what happened on Tuesday in Munich.¹⁴

The TASS agency in Moscow provided a statement that was announced by the Committee on Physical Culture and Sports at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the Olympic Committee and the Soviet delegation to the XX Olympic Games. Soviet sports organizations deeply regretted the tragic events that took place on 6 September in Munich. Soviet athletes and the Soviet public believe that terrorist acts are incompatible with the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding between nations that underlies the international Olympic movement.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

Izvestia - Известия, 6 September 1972

According to the reports of the most widely read Soviet newspaper, on 6 September 1972 there was an agreement between two parties - the terrorist organization Black September and the authorities of the Federal Republic of Germany regarding the flight of the terrorists and the hostages to one of the Arab countries. Late in the evening, the hostages were transported to the border of the Olympic village, and then two helicopters transported them to the airport 25 kilometres away from Munich, where a Boeing aircraft waited for them. When the helicopters landed, the snipers in hiding opened fire at the terrorists. During the shooting, the terrorists killed the hostages, a pilot of one of the helicopters and a policeman with grenades. Three other policemen were injured. As a result of the grenade explosion, a helicopter was destroyed. The police and the military police circled off the territory of the airport and began searching the area. The Bavarian Minister of the Interior commented on the events as follows: Not taking into account that the hostages agreed to fly with the terrorists to Cairo or Morocco, the German authorities that negotiated with the terrorists were afraid that the hostages would be taken to one of the listed places and liquidated; that is why the police tried to save the hostages before the take-off. Five terrorists were killed during the shooting and three were arrested. According to Ahlers, the federal authorities were prepared to prevent the take-off of the terrorists with the hostages. Ahlers said that the action at the airport had been planned.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Shooting at Fuerstenfeldbruck - Перестрелка в Фюрстенфельбруке (1972).*

The Committee on Physical Culture and Sports at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the Olympic Committee of the USSR and the Soviet delegation to the XX Olympic Games in an official statement expressed deep regret over the tragic incident, which took place on 5 September 1972, during the Olympiad. Soviet sports organizations and public opinion released a statement in which they deplore the tragedy and believe that the terrorist activities carried out during the Olympics are contrary to the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding between nations. Soviet athletes were determined to continue to support the ideals of the Olympic Games.¹⁷

Trybuna Robotnicza, 6 September 1972

For the first time in history, on Tuesday afternoon, 6 September 1972, the Olympics were discontinued as a result of the assassinations perpetrated by a Palestinian Commando group at the Israeli team's headquarters. The International Olympic Committee and the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games decided to suspend those events that were scheduled for Tuesday evening. At the same time, it was announced that on Wednesday at 10 a.m. a funeral ceremony would take place at the main Olympic Stadium with the participation of all contestants to commemorate the victims of the attack.¹⁸

According to the reports from correspondents accredited in Munich, early in the morning on Tuesday a group of armed Palestinian commandos of the small extremist organization Black September got into the Olympic village and forced

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ *Dramatic situation at the Olympics* (1972).

entered the building where part of the Israeli team lived. Under suspicious circumstances, one of the coaches and one of the weightlifters from the Israeli team died. The assassins barricaded themselves inside the building, in which they imprisoned five Israeli athletes and five accompanying persons as hostages. The commandos demanded the release of 230 Palestinian prisoners currently kept in Israel, with some of these prisoners having taken part in various actions organized by Black September. The assassins demand that these prisoners be taken to any Arab capital except Beirut and Amman, but not on Israeli airplanes. The moment the Palestinian prisoners would be in a safe place, Black September would be ready to negotiate with the West German government regarding the procedure of handing over Israeli hostages from the Olympic village and organizing safe departure of the commandos from the West German territory. The attackers demanded initially for their requests to be accepted by 12 noon, but then they extended the deadline several times. They warned that any attempt of the West German police to free hostages by force would end up with shooting Israeli Olympic team members. The negotiations with terrorists continued to take place. They were conducted by representatives of the West German authorities and the IOC. From the early morning hours, pavilion No. 33, in which the drama was taking place, was surrounded by a strong cordon of the Bavarian police. A similar cordon was formed around the Olympic Village. A few police armoured cars and a large group of police sharpshooters were taken to the scene. A few hours after the assassination, the Israeli cabinet met in Tel Aviv, and at the end of the meeting, Prime Minister Golda Meir called for the suspension of the Olympic Games until the hostages were released. She gave orders to Israeli athletes not to take

part in any competition at the moment. The Prime Minister of Israel did not mention anything about possible acceptance of the demands of the commandos, that is, the release of 230 Palestinian prisoners. In the afternoon there was also a meeting of the West German cabinet. Chancellor Willy Brandt appealed to all heads of state and governments of the Arab countries to do everything in their power and help in freeing members of the Israeli team. Brandt went to Munich to supervise negotiations with the commandos personally. There were already reports of the first reactions of leading politicians from around the world to the events taking place in the Olympic Village. The UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim appealed for the immediate release of the hostages. The attack carried out by the commandos was condemned by President Nixon, the West German government, the Dutch government, the Vatican, and the leaders of both US parties in the Senate. The Office of the Arab League in Bonn issued a statement condemning acts of terror committed by extremists from the Black September organization. The Palestine Liberation Organization, which represents the majority of the Palestinians, also condemned the Tuesday attack. The Polish head of Olympic team Rutkowski represented the deputy chairman of the West German Organizing Committee with regrets of the tragic incident and condemnation of its perpetrators. Here is the text of the statement made by the leadership of the Polish Olympic team: "With deep regret we faced the fact that on 5 September a tragic incident took place in the Olympic Village. Armed terrorists invaded the lodgings inhabited by the Olympians. Members of the Israeli team for the XX Olympic Games in Munich have died. The Olympic peace was disturbed. We condemn the acts of terror that

occurred. This crime undermines the ideas that gathered us in Munich”.¹⁹

In the evening, Chancellor Willy Brandt made a statement to the German television about the Tuesday tragedy. He said that the painful circumstances forced the organizers to stop the games. What has happened is a painful blow to the Olympic idea, which the terrorists have disgraced. The tragic incident caused serious damage to the FRG. Brandt said that attempts were made throughout the day to free the hostages, but all efforts to drive the terrorists away from the criminal intention failed so far. The Chancellor assured that the relevant authorities were in constant contact with the terrorists and that he himself was personally engaged. The question is also whether adequate security measures have been taken so that the tragedy does not occur. Brandt assured that this matter would be subject to a detailed examination, but one should not delude oneself that absolute protection could be found against desperate people. The Chancellor appealed to all governments to cooperate to prevent such incidents and expressed the personal view that the Games should be continued, because in his opinion, the extremists should not be allowed to impose their will on the whole world in such situations.²⁰

Conclusions

In light of the information presented above, taken straight from the newspapers of 1972, it can be concluded that the communist newspapers described the incident that took place

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem: 2.

between 5 and 6 September 1972 very reliably and in detail. The most widely read Polish newspapers such as *Trybuna Ludu* and *Trybuna Robotnicza* presented the so-called Munich massacre very professionally and there was no negative attitude towards the Israeli side. The only point that aroused my interest was that the Palestinian terrorists were called commandos. Perhaps in this way they did not want to offend the Palestinian side, which at that time was very much supported by the communist governments. Palestinians bought weapons from Poles, and were also trained by Polish services. The information about the attack was on the front pages of the newspapers, which cannot be said about the Russian newspapers. Unfortunately, in one of the most widely read Russian newspapers Pravda no mention of the tragedy of Munich could be found. A short note on the last page was carried in the widely read Izvestia daily. In comparison to Polish coverage, information in Russian newspapers was very limited, incomplete and did not fully reflect the actual situation. I think that the Russian side, the Soviet one, did not want to denigrate its allies, because in the end they were the ones who gave huge financial outlays to support the Arab states and the Palestinians in the fight against the state of Israel, and partly with the United States. A very interesting fact which I encountered when analysing information about the Munich massacre is the presence of the media near the place where the actual drama was taking place. Of course, this is a big mistake made by the organizers and the German authorities, because the broadcast was live, and the terrorists knew exactly what the German authorities were planning, which way the anti-terrorists were to get through and much more. I mentioned this in the previous chapters. Among many foreign television stations, journalists from East Germany did

not stand out. Well, the message from the East German television was of the best quality and most accurately showed how West German commandos tried to take back the hostages. Certainly, we will never know all the information on this subject, but one can only guess that the East German special services may have had some interest in it, and as we know they were subordinate to Moscow.

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