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Better Ways to Shame Russia Than Boycott

By Alexei Bayer

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Boycotting sporting events for political reasons is a pretty old notion. The civilized world didn't boycott the Berlin Olympics in 1936, and most people now think it should have rather than allow Adolf Hitler to showcase the Nazi regime. In 1980, the U.S. and many of its allies did boycott the Moscow Olympics, protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. That boycott followed on the heels of the 1976 no-show by a number of African countries in Montreal and preceded a tit-for-tat boycott by Moscow and most of its allies of the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984.

Ice hockey, in which the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the U.S. played out most frequently, saw its share of boycotts as well. The U.S. and Canada didn't show up at the World Hockey Championship held in Moscow in 1957 to protest another Soviet invasion — of Hungary — and the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia repaid the favor in 1962 in Colorado.

Now, a movement is gaining traction around the world to boycott next year's Winter Olympics

in Sochi because of a series of simultaneously draconian and idiotic laws recently passed in Russia, whose aim is to make LGBT persons second-class citizens. Predictably, proponents of the boycott recall the 1936 non-boycott. They point to eerie and unmistakable parallels between gays and lesbians in today's Russia and Jews in Germany in the mid-1930s. Boycott supporters remind us that many people outside Germany were not especially upset by Hitler's anti-Semitic laws, and some openly cheered them. Similarly, the extreme religious right around the world has been saluting Russia for dealing with this "sin."

The problem with boycotts is that they are remarkably ineffective. Soviet policy in Afghanistan was utterly unaffected by the U.S. boycott. Instead, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan had everything to do with the perseverance of Afghan resistance, which U.S. forces are now feeling first hand, and Stinger missiles supplied to them by the CIA.

For all the talk of keeping politics out of sports, head-to-head athletic confrontation works much better. Who now recalls the U.S. no-show in Moscow? But the victory by U.S. amateur hockey players over the mighty Soviets at the Lake Placid Olympics two months after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan became a legend and was immortalized by Hollywood. Similarly, the Czechoslovak hockey team could not refuse to play the Soviets after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, but its games against the Soviet Union became a national catharsis, with the spirit of resistance growing stronger with every victory on the ice.

What's more, U.S. black athlete Jesse Owens' gold in Berlin did more to expose the sham of Hitler's racial propaganda and embarrass racists back home than any boycott could have done.

Winter Olympics held in subtropics is a strange idea to start with, especially for a country covered in snow six months out of the year. Spending billions to build lavish facilities that will fall into disuse thereafter rivals the whimsy of such rulers as Bavaria's Mad King Ludwig and Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov. What President Vladimir Putin intended as a showcase of Russia's wealth and prowess instead elicits mockery as Exhibit One of nouveaux-riche excess and monstrous thievery. It is very much like the World University Games held in Kazan this summer. Russia fielded top-line champions against a motley assemblage of students and, predictably, its team won almost every medal in the competition. So if the rest of the world wants Russia to be put to shame, it should let the Sochi Olympics proceed unimpeded.

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