

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Analyzing a Historic Decision:

The Munich Olympic Massacre

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Submitted in fulfillment of

SRA 231 Decision Theory & Analysis

5/2/2014

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Purpose Statement:

This paper summarizes the events preceding and following the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and analyzes the decisions made by German officials that lead to the massacre.

BLUF:

On September 5, 1972 members of the Palestinian terrorist group Black September attacked eleven Israelis in the Olympic Village in Munich, West Germany. All eleven of the Israelis involved died, along with a German police officer and five members of Black September. During the attack members of Black September demanded the release of prisoners held in Israeli jails, as well as members of the German Red Army Faction. The lack of security implemented by German officials in an attempt to promote a friendly atmosphere made the attack possible. With little perimeter security, Black September was easily able to enter the Olympic Village unnoticed and gain access to Israeli dormitories. After the standoff, Israel responded by bombing several Palestinian bases killing hundreds. German officials arrested the living members of the Black September but ultimately released them when other members of their group hijacked Lufthansa Flight 615 and threatened to blow it up barring their release. The attack and subsequent activity of Black September and other similar groups led to vastly increased tensions in post war Eurasia. The event was one of the first widely televised terrorist attacks and news outlets covered it extensively. It brought security to the forefront and shed light on the instability of Europe and the Middle East. In the future, terrorist attacks would become much more violent and media would be more involved. The event marked the beginning of a new era of terrorism and international relations.

Background:

The 1972 Olympic Games were the first held in Germany since 1936 under Hitler's administration. West Germany planned to use the games to polish their image and show their willingness to cooperate peacefully with other nations. In the years preceding the Games, Germany encouraged international cooperation amongst athletes, especially with Israel. They shared training facilities, held scrimmage matches and promoted general cooperation (Schiller 189). The Opening Ceremony was a success, inspiring citizens of Israel who were able to spectate for the first time on television. The atmosphere of the games was one of camaraderie and collaboration, however many were skeptical of the newfound cooperation between countries that were at war just decades before (Munich Olympic Massacre).

Key Decision Event:

In an attempt to promote a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, the security at the 1972 Olympic Games was incredibly relaxed, especially in the Olympic Village. Athletes often entered and exited the village without presenting proper identification and security guards left many entrances entirely open. Also, the severely undertrained security personnel did receive training for anything more than basic crowd control and rowdiness (Wolff). This proved to be a stark departure from the 1936 Games under Hitler, and seemed very innocent, however it also presented a huge security flaw. The security decisions made by the Germans and members of the International Olympic Committee are what allowed Black September to easily enter the Olympic Village and attack the Israelis on the night of September 5, 1972.

Historic Event Timeline:

April 26, 1966: Munich wins the bid for the 1972 Olympic Games. It marks the first German games since the 1936 Games under Hitler. The Germans plan present a welcoming Games and even deem the games “The Happy Games”. They also decide to continue the trend of “happiness” by keeping security severely relaxed, even dressing security personnel in colorful uniforms to match the games attitude (Munich 11 Timeline).

Spring 1972: German officials hire police psychologist Georg Sieber. Sieber outlines security issues including one that would prove to be incredibly accurate. He predicted that Palestinian attackers could scale the fence, kill several Israelis and capture others and fly them elsewhere. These warnings, including the strangely accurate one suggested, go mostly ignored, leaving the village incredibly vulnerable to attack (Munich 11 Timeline).

August 1972: Officials in Munich receive word of a potential attack on the Israeli dormitories, but do nothing with this information. Later in the month, the head of the Israeli delegation, Shmuel Lenkin, worries about the Israelis and believe they may be in danger because of the lax security. Again, German officials do nothing to remedy these concerns (Munich 11 Timeline).

August 26, 1972: The Opening Ceremony is a major success. Everything is going well and the Olympic Village is full of thriving, friendly interaction as the Germans intended (Munich 11 Timeline).

September 4, 1972: Members of the Israel delegation attend a rendition of “Fiddler on the Roof” at a Munich playhouse. Nearby, members of Black September meet at a railway station to discuss the attack plan. Later that night they obtain weapons from lockers in the railway station (Munich 11 Timeline).

September 5, 1972:

4:00am: Members of Black September arrive outside of the Olympic Village and scale the fence near the Israelis housing. The dormitory they plan to attack is 31 Connollystrasse, which has five apartments all home to Israeli athletes and officials. The attackers first come upon wrestling coach Moshe Weinberg who resists them at first before leading them to the

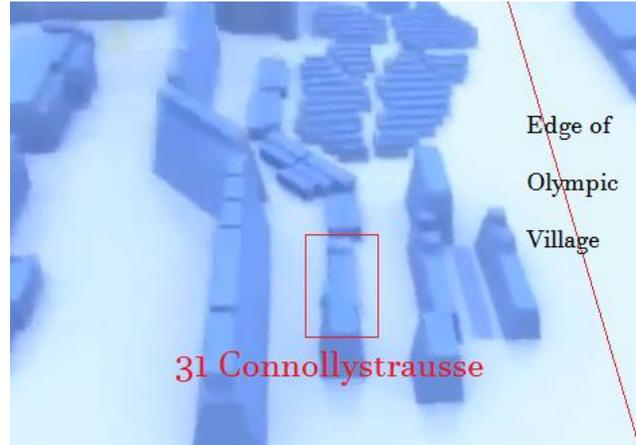


Figure 1 - Location of the Israeli dormitory (Munich Olympic Massacre)

other athletes. Upon arriving at the athlete's apartment, Weinberg makes a final effort to stop the attackers, knocking one out and stabbing another before the attackers kill him. During this skirmish, weightlifter Yossef Romano joins Weinberg and is fatally wounded (Munich 11 Timeline).

5:00am: Lenkin, who had voiced concern over security of the Israeli delegation find Weinberg's dead body and alerts the authorities who arrive on the scene, starting the standoff with the attackers (Munich 11 Timeline).

6:00am: The media hears of the story and begins to broadcast reports of the attack. It becomes a frenzy overnight and by the next day, it is at the forefront of global news (Munich 11 Timeline).

7:40am: The attackers make requests to free 236 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails. They set a deadline of 9:00am, hoping to end the standoff quickly and achieve their goal (Munich 11 Timeline).

9:00am: The deadline passes and the attackers delay it for several hours. The demands of the terrorists are continually negotiated and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir insists that the prisoners will not be released (Munich 11 Timeline).

4:30pm: Andre Spitzer, one of the hostages, speaks out a window to officials. He says that all but one of the hostages remain unharmed (Munich 11 Timeline).

4:50pm: Officials enter the building for the first time, they speak to the terrorists but make little progress. They feel that the situation is static and doubt that the terrorists will keep the hostages alive at the current rate (Munich 11 Timeline).

5:00pm: The Germans plan a secret attack, called Operation Sunshine to ambush the attackers. They call in volunteers with machine guns and dress them like athletes. This plan is unsuccessful though due to the live media coverage. The attackers are able to see the plans from inside the building on television, so the plan falls apart (Munich 11 Timeline).

5:46pm: The attackers demand transportation to Cairo, Egypt where they expect negotiations will go more smoothly. The Germans oblige their request and order a helicopter. Germans do not plan to let them leave the country with the hostages (Munich 11 Timeline).

10:30pm: The attackers and hostages travel by helicopter to Furstenfeldbruck, a German military airport. The Germans placed a plane on the runway with a decoy crew overpower and subdue the attackers. However, they decide this plan is not going to work and leave the plane empty. They instead rely on snipers to attempt to subdue the attackers. Upon arrival, German snipers kill two of the terrorists, along with one German police officer. After this exchange, shots cease and tensions are high (Munich 11 Timeline).

11:30pm: German reinforcements arrive and the Palestinians enact an offensive. They kill four of the hostages immediately and after a short exchange of fire, kill the remaining five. German

snipers are successful in killing three of the Palestinians, while they take the other three into custody (Munich 11 Timeline).

Midnight: A German government official, Conrad Ahlers, announces that all Israeli athletes are alive and the attackers are dead. This announcement is wrong and leads to much confusion (Munich 11 Timeline).

September 6, 1972:

3:24am: ABC reporter Jim McKay makes the now historic announcement, “When I was a kid my father used to say, ‘Our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized.’ Our worst fears have been realized.” With this announcement the real news that all eleven Israelis are dead spreads around the world (Munich 11 Timeline).

10:00am: An Olympic memorial mourns the loss of the Israeli athletes. All nations lower their flags to half mast, except for ten Arab nations that demand their flags remain at full mast.

Noon: The Games continue among much controversy. Many athletes and nations drop out of the Games citing the Games continuation as disrespectful. Later that day, in Germany’s soccer match against Hungary, a group of fans unfurled a banner reading “17 Dead, Already Forgotten?” in protest to the Games continuation (Munich 11 Timeline).

September 7, 1972: In response to the attacks, Israel ordered Operation Wrath of God, an operation to retaliate against the Palestinians. It included the bombing of Palestinian Liberation Organization bases in Syria and Lebanon, killing roughly 200 individuals. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir ordered the operation and it continued for years after the original attacks (Olympics Massacre).

October 29, 1972: While awaiting trial in Germany, the remaining members of Black September gain their freedom. This happens when another Palestinian terrorist group hijacks a Lufthansa

Flight. They threaten to crash the plane barring the release of members of Black September. German officials release the attackers, fearing any further violence (Munich 11 Timeline).

Event Analysis:

The attack at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games was a horrific, and easily avoidable tragedy. The actions committed by Black September were predictable, and preventable. Due to the horrific oversights in security, the Munich Massacre now serves as an example of the importance of security at large events. It has been referred to by Michael Hershman, security expert as “what not to do in every conceivable way” (Wolff).

Key Decision Analysis:

The decision to implement extremely lax security and ignore warnings from experts were what led to the massacre. When making these decisions, Germans focused too much on their image, and ignored the safety of visitors to the Olympic Village (Schiller 194). By focusing on their reputation, they ignored the issues at hand. Their negligence of current events and self-centered focus led this event. If they had implemented the security necessary at such a large event, the Games could have been free of tragedy.

When given the opportunity to host the Olympics, the Germans should have used more appropriate decision making strategies regarding security. They chose to employ the maximax decision making strategy when handling security. They gambled and hoped that the lax security would not be an issue, and everyone would have a carefree time. Unfortunately, maximax decisions are inherently risky and often fail entirely. A much better way of handling the security would have been to use an optimized strategy. This kind of decision would have weighed the importance of both security, and the atmosphere they desired. By making a more well informed and idealized decision, the Germans could have prevented this disaster, and still had an enjoyable

atmosphere. Some minor inconveniences may have occurred in regards to security, but they are hardly reason to disregard security measures entirely. The decisions made by German officials were irresponsible and did not factor in the risks associated with an international gathering, which lead to the massacre.

Effects Analysis:

The Munich Massacre was a turning point in international relations and marked the end of an era of innocence (Schiller 187). In response to the massacre, Gerald Seymour, a reporter for the Games said, “there was no way anything like that was in our thoughts” (Munich Olympic Massacre). This was the attitude of most people going into the Games and the attack has since effected the security of every major international gathering, being it the Olympics or any other gathering of nations. The Munich Olympic Games have proved to be a prime example of mishandling security. From 1972 on, there would never be another event with security as minimal.

The event also sparked even more conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, a relationship that was already extremely tense, and often violent. This massacre led to much more violence between the two peoples and drove a wedge between them even more, further isolating the Israelis (Schiller 207). The attack muddled the already confusing international climate at the time of the and strongly opposed the “happy” atmosphere the Germans were promoting. This attack proved that covering tensions with a façade of happiness and cooperation was impossible.

Significance Analysis:

The attack was an extremely significant event in post-war Europe. Since the inception of Israel in 1948, tensions amongst neighboring nations had been increasingly high. By trying to cover up the underlying global issues, the Germans played an innocent role in the entire event. They did not see the dark underside of international relations and instead focused on an unrealistic,

cooperative atmosphere. Since the event, nations have placed security at the forefront of their administrations and realized that to ignore vulnerabilities like the Germans did is not only a major mistake, but one that can very easy cost innocent people their lives (Wolff). In this way the massacre has helped to make people safer, but this comes with the loss of such a carefree and friendly attitude. Now, worst-case scenarios are always considered and security is almost never “relaxed” like it was in Munich. These trends have been successful in making the increasingly global world a safer place, but are still vulnerable as seen by more recent acts of terror.

Lessons Learned:

Historic: The massacre at the Munich Olympic Games has acted as a prime example of negligence in event planning and international relations. The massacre has taught nations to never ignore security professionals and always err on the side of caution. These important lessons, that unfortunately cost many lives to teach, have helped to make the international community a more secure place. In the years since the attack, security related fields have grown immensely and pursuits of terrorist groups have become much more aggressive. However, terrorist groups still do exist and are always quick to adapt to security implementations as they arise. The massacre taught the international community to work actively against terrorism and to gather as much intelligence as possible about these groups. Intelligence gathering, along with counter-terrorism operations have proved to be success in eradicating some terrorism, but new more widely dispersed groups still exist. The events leading up to the massacre showed the ignorance can be bliss, but it can also lead to disaster.

Personal: Researching this event has increased my appreciation for the need of security at large events like the Olympics. It has also made clear to me how easy it was for radical groups to

become violent in the post-war era. Personally, I feel that I will be more vigilant when securing myself physically and digitally. In today's times, securing one's digital information can be almost as important as securing yourself physically and many of the same principles carry over. When dealing with security, always try to consider the worst-case scenarios and do what you can to protect against them. Of course when doing this, there will always be some vulnerabilities, but by minimizing them you can keep yourself as safe as possible. I plan to reevaluate security controls that I place on my information and self, and ensure that those around me are as safe as possible. The lessons learned from the Munich Olympic Massacre remain relevant on both small and large scales and act as a testament to the increasing importance of security.

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