Remembering the Munich Olympics

Gene Eisen

Terrorists Strike

The 1972 Summer Olympics held in Munich, West Germany, were breezing along successfully for the first ten days. Then, tragedy struck in the early morning hours of September 5. The Palestinian Black September terrorists attacked eleven Israeli team members in their dormitory. After a struggle, the terrorist killed two Israelis, and nine Israelis were taken hostage.

West Germany issued a postal souvenir sheet, Scott B489a-d, on August 18, 1972. The sheet pictures the 1972 Olympic Games Village (Figure 1 red arrow). Shown are the men’s buildings in the section above the 40+20pf stamp. The third-row building at the extreme left end of the village housed the Israeli team. The group of buildings is shown directly north of the twin poles holding up the Sports Hall roof. It was these buildings where the terrorists broke in.

Negotiations

The Black September terrorists demanded the release of over 200 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons and two left-wing extremists in German prisons. German negotiators were willing to accept their demands, but Israel rejected them. Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir stated, “If we give in to them, then no Israeli anywhere in the world can feel that his life is safe.”

After further negotiations, the German and Israeli authorities agreed that two helicopters would be supplied to transfer the terrorists and hostages to a nearby NATO airbase to have access to an airplane to fly them to yet another destination.

German Rescue Attempt Fails

German police formulated a plan to ambush the terrorists and rescue the hostages at the airport. The rescue attempt was a complete failure from the start. First, the police snipers used in the operation had not received proper training as sharpshooters. Add to that, they were improperly located, too few, and lacked radios to communicate with each other and with the command post. The snipers were armed with assault rifles rather than sniper rifles, and their weapons lacked long-range scopes and night-vision capabilities. Second, the officers on the plane who were supposed to subdue the terrorists unanimously chose to abandon their post. Finally, the armored cars that were to have aided in the Israelis’ rescue were sent out too late and became snarled in traffic.

At this point, the terrorists smelled a trap and may have panicked. One terrorist tossed a grenade into one of the helicopters, killing all but one of the hostages on board, who later died due to smoke inhalation. A second terrorist sprayed the interior of the other helicopter with bullets, killing the remaining five Israelis. By 11:30 AM, the shooting had stopped. The terrorists killed eleven Israeli Olympic athletes, along with one German police officer and five terrorists.
Memorials to the Slain Israeli Olympians

A controversial decision was made by the Olympic committee to continue the Olympics after a 24-hour delay. A memorial service attended by 80,000 people was held on September 7 to pay tribute to the fallen Israeli athletes and the German police officer. B’nai B’rith issued a cachet envelope illustrating the Memorial Service on a United States first day cover of an airmail stamp issued for the Olympic games, depicting women’s fencing, Scott C109, November 4, 1983 (Figure 2).

To date, Israel has not issued commemorative stamps for the Israeli Olympians slain at the 1972 Olympics. A commemorative Jewish National Fund (JNF) (Figure 3) label was soon issued, which lists the names (in Hebrew, of course) of the eleven fallen Israeli athletes:

- David Berger,
- Yossef Gutfreund,
- Moshe Weinberg,
- Eleazar Halfin,
- Mark Slavin,
- Ze’ev Friedman,
- Yossef Romano,
- Kahat Shor,
- Andre Schpitzer,
- Amitzur Shapira,
- Yakov Springer

The JNF also overprinted remnants of the 1950 Third Maccabean Games in both red and black in memory of the Israelis killed in Munich (Figure 4).

In 1973, the Republic of Haiti issued two stamps commemorating the 1972 Munich Olympics on the Olympics’ opening day (Figure 5). By contrast, the second souvenir sheet (C390B) memorializes the Munich Olympic Massacre by depicting weight lifter David Berger, one of the eleven Israelis murdered by the terrorists (Figure 6).

In the millennial year 2000, several countries also issued philatelic souvenir sheets in memory of the Israelis slain in Munich, including Sierra Leone, Scott 2362, November 9, 2000 (Figure 7); The Gambia, Scott 2337, November 9, 2000 (Figure 8); Guyana, Scott 3541, Oct. 30, 2000 (Figure 9). All three souvenir sheets feature an Olympic runner carrying the Olympic torch. One stamp, Scott 2139e of the Grenada Grenadines 2000 Millennial souvenir sheet, Scott 2139 a-q, also memorializes the eleven slain Olympians (Figure 10). Additionally, three countries issued souvenir sheets with...
pictures of the slain Israelis: Sierra Leone, Scott 2361a-i), The Gambia, Scott 2336a-i; Guyana, Scott 3540a-i, but only the Sierra Leone issue is shown here (Figure 11).

Two lasting memorials, one in Tel Aviv, Israel, and one in Munich, stand to remind the world of the murder of the eleven Israeli Olympians and one German policeman. The German sculptor Fritz Koenig created the Tel Aviv statue, illustrated on the United States coverscape in Figure 12. The Germans unveiled in 2017 a long-delayed permanent memorial in the Olympic Park in Munich (Figure 13).

A Final Word

The immediate question raised after the Munich tragedy was, “Could it have been avoided?” Of course, we will never know the answer, but the German authorities could have taken some steps to have made a terrorist attack more difficult to carry out. For example, Munich police psychologist George Sieber had listed 26 terrorist scenarios, but the German authorities chose to ignore them. A key one that might have thwarted the path the terrorists used—the housing provided athletes living in the Olympic village should not be divided by nationality—was vetoed by the sports officials, so it was never implemented.

Munich organizers spent less than two million dollars on security. Also, security personnel around the Olympic village were unarmed. As already discussed, the armed police summoned to rescue the hostages were ill-prepared for this mission.

Years later, in 2012, the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel wrote the West authorities had a tip from a Palestinian informant three weeks before the Munich attack that the Palestinians were planning “an incident.” However, the authorities failed to act on that tip. Was this allegation true or false? We will never know.