

Polish Media Coverage of the Black September Attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics and Cold War Geopolitics

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Introduction

The 1972 Munich Olympics, held from August 26 to September 11, were meant to be West Germany's post-World War II introduction as a peaceful and gracious host on the world stage. Indeed, as the festivities began, *Der Spiegel* described these Olympics as a “present from the Germans to themselves.”¹ International media flocked to Munich, particularly television journalists, technicians, and producers tasked with broadcasting the games to one billion viewers around the world.² Ahead of the games, Polish media coverage focused on Munich being the city where Hitler got his political start, Munich's physical proximity to Dachau, and its spiritual proximity to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.³ It was not just Polish media that stressed the Dachau connection; at the 1966 International Olympic Committee [IOC] session at which Munich was selected as host, Poland's delegate remarked that “short distance” events in Munich could only refer to the distance between the concentration camp and gas chamber.⁴

Yet the games are most remembered today for the “Munich Massacre,” when commandos from the extremist Palestinian group Black September broke into the athletes' village, stormed the Israeli athletes' and coaches' flat. After initially killing two Israelis, they sought to exchange the remaining nine for 234 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons, and several ideological compatriots from other countries.⁵ Following a botched rescue operation by West German and Bavarian security forces at Furstenfeldbruck airport, 17 people lay dead: all 11 Israeli athletes and coaches taken hostage, five (out of eight) terrorists, and one Munich police officer.⁶ My project examines these events through the lens of Polish media and Cold War geopolitics.

Historical and Geopolitical Context

By 1972, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a constituent part of the broader Cold War geopolitical struggle. Following Israel's occupation of neighboring countries' territories after the Six Day War in 1967, all Soviet bloc countries except Romania broke diplomatic relations with Israel. At that time, *Radio Warszawa* blamed “extreme Israeli nationalist elements” for the war.⁷ *Trybuna Ludu* noted that “imperialist policies” had “again led to armed conflict. The Israeli government has once again embarked on a path that threatens the Middle East with dangerous

¹ Kay Schiller and Christopher Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 56.

² Eva Maria Gajek, “More than Munich 1972. Media, Emotions, and the Body in TV Broadcast of the 20th Summer Olympics,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 43, no. 2 (2018): 184. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26454286>.

³ Radio Free Europe (hereafter RFE), “Komunikat Nasłuchu Radiowego” (hereafter “KNR” September 3, 1972, 67. Open Society Archives, Budapest, Hungary (hereafter HU OSA) 300-50-16: Box 289, Folder 1; RFE, “KNR,” August 29, 1972, 29. HU OSA 300-50-16: Box 288, Folder 4; RFE “KNR,” August 31, 1972, 71-72. HU OSA 300-50-16: Box 288, Folder 4.

⁴ Schiller and Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁷ RFE, “KNR,” June 5, 1967, 45. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 193, Folder 2.

consequences, a path similar to that of the 1956 Suez aggression.”⁸ *Życie Warszawy*, another major newspaper, wrote that it was “impossible not to see the machinations of western American and British imperialism behind Israel’s back,” and that the “politics of strength, which finds barbaric expression in Vietnam, now tries to apply itself in the Middle East.”⁹

RFE/RL public opinion research from July 1967, a month after Poland broke relations with Israel, indicated that Polish media’s harsh criticism of Israel and support for Israel’s Arab neighbors did not correspond with majority public opinion. 58 percent of Polish respondents to the question of “Where do your sympathies lie in the Arab-Israeli conflict?” sympathized with Israel.¹⁰ Across Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish samples, regime supporters were far more likely to sympathize with the Arabs (62 percent) than regime opponents (three percent).¹¹ Such findings are anecdotally supported by the observation that after Israel’s victory in the Six Day War, there was a sense of nationalist pride that “our Jews beat the Russkies’ Arabs,” given that so many of Israel’s early citizens were of Polish origin.¹² Nevertheless, outlets such as *Radio Warszawa*, *Trybuna Ludu*, *Życie Warszawy*, and *Żołnierz Wolności* persistently highlighted Israeli aggression against Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian civilians and stressed that Israel’s expansionist and imperialist policies were the root cause of Middle East turmoil. By the time of the Munich Olympics, Poland’s media-consuming public had been exposed to years of negative portrayals of Israel. This was the context in which coverage of the Black September attack and its fallout took place, and the subject of my report.

Findings

I have divided my findings into three sections:

- 1) This section spans from the beginning of the attack on September 5 to September 8, when Israel began retaliatory airstrikes on Palestinian targets and supposed terrorist training sites in Lebanon and Syria. During these days, *Radio Warszawa* firmly condemned Black September’s “insane act” which made September 1972 a “Black September for the Palestinians.”¹³ While there was recognition that none of this would have happened without such repressive Israeli policies, Black September’s “barbarism” was unacceptable and ultimately harmed the just Palestinian cause.

Commentary in *Trybuna Ludu* on September 6 claimed that the “terrorist action” perpetrated by Black September “cannot be justified either by political reasons or by the dignity of a just cause.” That was why, according to this article, “the act of the assassins was condemned by the Arab countries and by the main representation of the Palestinians,

⁸ RFE, “KNR,” June 6, 1967, 40. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 193, Folder 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ RFE, “The Arab-Israeli Conflict and Public Opinion in Eastern Europe,” July 1967, 3. HU OSA 300-6-2, Box 2, Folder 3. According to this research, the numbers from the Czech/Slovak, Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian samples were nearly identical.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Jarosław Jarząbek and Marcin Szydzisz, “Beyond ‘Recognition’. The Polish Perspectives on Israeli and Palestinian National Identities: Preliminary Assumptions of Research,” *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 47, no. 2 (2018): 322. <https://www.dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2018211>.

¹³ RFE, “KNR,” September 5, 1972, 34. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 1; RFE, “KNR,” September 6, 1972, 36-37. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 1.

the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine [PLO].”¹⁴ In truth, however, Black September’s informal leader was a PLO commander, and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat’s covert support for the group allowed him to “[enhance] his credibility as a hard-liner within the organization” while maintaining a “façade of political respectability.”¹⁵ Furthermore, when the Black September operative Ali Hasan Salameh returned to Beirut from his East Berlin command post after the attack, Arafat greeted him and said he loved him like a son.¹⁶ Regardless, Polish coverage persisted in framing its criticism of Black September in the context of global public opinion, even that of Arab countries.¹⁷

- 2) The second section runs from the beginning of Israeli airstrikes to the Olympics’ end, a time in which the international community’s enormous attention to the 11 dead Israelis was contrasted by the minimal attention paid to the 66 people killed by Israeli bombs. “Lebanon doesn’t have as many television cameras, film lenses, microphones and journalists as are in Munich,” noted *Radio Warszawa*, and perhaps that was “why the murder of 66 Arabs by the Israeli air force was not a global sensation like the death of 11 Israelis in the Olympic village and Furstenfeldbruk airport.”¹⁸ Henryk Kollat, *Radio Warszawa*’s correspondent in West Germany, who was in Munich throughout the games, remarked at this point that “none of the commentators here has the courage to criticize Israel” for its aerial attacks on Palestinian refugees and innocent civilians in Lebanon and Syria.¹⁹ And even after the games, *Radio Warszawa II* noted that while “the world has not forgotten the eleven victims of the Munich drama...it also remembers the 66 victims of Israeli air attacks on Syria and Lebanon.”²⁰
- 3) The third and final section covers the end of the Olympics to the end of October 1972, when West German authorities exchanged the surviving Black September commando prisoners for a hijacked Lufthansa passenger jet and its passengers. Coverage in this period was characterized by suggestions that Israel was using “the tragic events in Munich...as a pretext for new armed attacks on Syria and Lebanon.”²¹ Similar suggestions came from other socialist countries with strong political ties to the Arab world, particularly Yugoslavia. Indeed, Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito even suggested that the Munich attacks were staged by Zionist groups, though his initial remarks about the attack on September 10 were more vague.²²

¹⁴ “Attack by Arab terrorists (Black September) on Israeli Olympic team in Munich,” *Archives Direct: Sources from The National Archives, UK*, Foreign Office Files for the Middle East, 1971-1974, FCO 17/1740, 61. https://www-archivesdirect-amdigital-co-uk.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/Documents/SearchDetails/FCO_17_1740#Snippets.

¹⁵ Schiller and Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, 194; Aaron J. Klein and Mitch Ginsburg, *Striking Back: The 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and Israel’s Deadly Response* (New York: Random House, 2007), 32.

¹⁶ Simon Reeve, *One Day in September: the Full Story of the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and the Israeli Revenge Operation “Wrath of God”* (New York: Arcade, 2011), 148.

¹⁷ RFE, “KNR,” September 6, 1972, 29. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 1.

¹⁸ RFE, “KNR,” September 9, 1972, 62. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ RFE, “KNR,” September 13, 1972, 57. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 2.

²¹ RFE, “KNR,” September 15, 1972, 41-42. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 3.

²² Schiller and Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, 194; Mirzad Dedić, “Tito je 1972. U Prijedoru govorio protiv terora, a 20 godina poslije iz kotlova mržnje isplivali su neljudi,”

Such suggestions can be found in the Polish case as well, though they were often more moderate. As early as September 9, Jacek Kalabinski, *Radio Warszawa*'s Middle East correspondent declared that Israel was using the pretext of the "Munich actions of groups of Palestinian terrorists" to bomb Palestinian refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon.²³ On September 11, the day the Olympics ended, *Radio Warszawa*'s "Przegląd Prasy" segment referenced *Słowo Powszechne*'s speculation that "perhaps the Israeli government knew in advance that the desperate fedayeen [i.e. the Black September operatives] would not hesitate to carry out their threats and figured the athletes' deaths into its political calculation, thus obtaining a convenient argument for action against the Arab countries."²⁴

After the Olympics, *Radio Warszawa* commentator Ryszard Stawicki noted that there was "no question that Israeli politicians have harnessed the Munich actions of Palestinian terrorists under the 'Black September' name as a pretext to hit refugee camps in Southern Lebanon, prompt a conflict between the Lebanese government and Palestinians, and destroy the Palestinian movement in this country [Lebanon]."²⁵ *Radio Warszawa*'s account of Israel using the Black September attack as pretext for attacks on Arab neighbors ultimately matched how the PLO portrayed its decision to leave parts of southern Lebanon following persistent Israeli air attacks; on October 3, *Radio Warszawa* reported that a PLO spokesman in Cairo said that his organization had come to an agreement with the Lebanese government to leave parts southern Lebanon "to deprive Israel of any sort of pretext for attacking that country."²⁶

Next Steps

Using the RFE/RL Monitoring of Polish Radio and Television collection to study how major Polish media outlets portrayed the Black September attack at the Munich Olympics, as well as the Six Day War in 1967 and Yom Kippur War in 1973, has been an excellent starting point for my research. Thus far, I have balanced archival research with secondary source research about Polish relations with Israel and its Arab neighbors during this time period, as well as the Munich Olympics and the history of Black September and how its actions in 1972 harkened the dawn of a new era of global terrorism. Going forward, I will focus my attention on how closely Polish media content was tied to foreign policy and the mechanisms by which high-level foreign policy objectives shaped media coverage of events such as the "Munich Massacre." I also plan to research US media coverage of the events more extensively, and compare these findings to what I have observed in Polish media.

In closing, I wish to express my gratitude to everyone in the OSA research room for making it such a compelling and pleasant research environment, even in these unpredictable pandemic conditions. My thanks as well to the Visegrad Fund for funding the Visegrad Scholarship program. I am very grateful that such programs exist, and look forward to recommending this

Dnevni avaz, May 28, 2016, [accessed November 4, 2021]. <https://avaz.ba/vijesti teme/238279/tito-je-1972-u-prijed-oru-govorioru-protiv-terora-a-20-godina-poslije-iz-kotlova-mrznje-isplivali-su-neljudi>;

²³ RFE, "KNR," September 9, 1972, 62. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 2.

²⁴ RFE, "KNR," September 11, 1972, 34. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 2.

²⁵ RFE, "KNR," September 22, 1972, 15-16. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 289, Folder 4.

²⁶ RFE, "KNR," October 3, 1972, 42. HU OSA 300-50-16, Box 290, Folder 2.

one to future researchers.

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