



Geopolitics, Genocide and the Olympic Games: Sochi 2014

Andrew Foxall¹

School of Geography and the Environment,
University of Oxford,
United Kingdom
andrew.foxall@ouce.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

This Commentary explores the geopolitics of the modern Olympic Games. It suggests that far from being non-political, as the Games are often portrayed by the International Olympic Committee, the Olympics are characterised throughout their modern history by various expressions of statecraft and stagecraft. Despite this problematic history, this Commentary questions why the 2014 Winter Olympic Games were awarded to Sochi, Russia and contextualises the argument in the Circassian ‘genocide’ of 1864.

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Except for specialists in the Caucasus, there are few people in the Western world (although more people in the Middle East) who remember who the Circassians were, where they came from or what happened to them. They are an almost forgotten people. You will find no place called ‘Circassia’ on any contemporary map. The nearest you will get to it, and then only should you happen to know that the Russian word for ‘Circassian’ (borrowed from the Turkish) is *cherkess*, will be the Karachai-Cherkess Autonomous Province in southern Russia...



Perhaps, however, you like poring over old maps, as I do. If so, take a look at a map of Russia dating from the early-nineteenth century, and you will find Circassia clearly marked – a country in the north-western Caucasus and along the north-eastern shore of the Black Sea, stretching southwards from the banks of the River Kuban, which at that time marked the southern boundary of the Russian empire.

(Shenfield, 1999, 149)

Although it is often denied by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Olympic Games *are* political and have long been so (see, for example, Espy, 1979; Hill, 1992). The Ancient Olympics (beginning in 776 BC) were only made possible due to a truce (*ekecheiria* in Greek, which means “holding back one’s hands”) being announced for seven days before until seven days after each Olympics festival. The truce, which allowed both competitors and spectators to travel safely to and from the festival, was inscribed on a bronze discus and displayed prominently at Olympia. During the truce, conflicts and wars were halted, armies and other military personnel were prohibited from entering Elis (and therefore from threatening the Games), and legal disputes and the carrying out of capital punishment were suspended (see, <http://www.olympictruce.org/>). With this in mind (as well as more than two decades of critical writing on geopolitics), this Commentary reflects on the geopolitics of the modern Olympic Games. In doing so, I draw particular attention to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia and recall the Circassian ‘genocide’ of 1864 (to which the epigraph refers).

While Chapter 5.3 of the Olympic Charter notes “No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in the Olympic areas”, the modern Olympic movement has had to contend with boycotts, conflicts, protests, terrorist attacks and wars. Indeed, Senn (1999, 2) has written that the revival of the Olympic Games by Baron Pierre de Coubertin had as much to do with “the sense of national shame he felt as a result of France’s inglorious defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871” as it did about the universal ideals that the Games are now said to embody and represent. Since their revival in 1896, the Olympics have become a focus for various displays of statecraft and stagecraft.

More often than not, such displays have caused controversies. At the 1908 Games in London, the US refused to dip their flag to the royal box during the Opening Ceremony as a protest against British imperialism in Ireland (Dyreson, 2008). The 1916 Games were cancelled due to World War One. The 1936 Games in Berlin were turned into a showcase for National Socialism (while overt displays of anti-Semitism were banned during the Games, only ‘Aryan’ athletes were allowed to represent Germany). Both the 1940 and 1944 Games were cancelled due to World War Two. The 1956 Games in Melbourne were marred by both the Suez Crisis, as France, Israel, and the UK invaded Egypt (in retaliation, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon all boycotted the Games), and the Soviet Union’s “Operation Whirlwind”, which quashed revolution in Hungary (in response, the Netherlands, Spain and

Switzerland boycotted the Games). In 1964, the IOC banned South Africa from participating in the Games because of its policy of apartheid (it did not return to the Games until 1992, two years after negotiations to end apartheid began). In 1968 in Mexico City, two American athletes – Tommie Smith and John Carlos – provided visual support for the Black Power movement in the US during the medal ceremony for the 200-meter race (both athletes subsequently received lifetime bans from the IOC for their actions). The 1972 Games in Munich were marked by violence as eight members of the Palestinian ‘Black September’ group took eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage (five Palestinians, the 11 Israelis, and a West German policeman were subsequently killed – see, Large, 2012). In 1976, over 30 countries (the majority from Africa) boycotted the Olympics because the IOC had refused to ban New Zealand, which had recently sent its national rugby team to a tournament in South Africa, from the Games. The 1980 Moscow Games were marked by a US-led boycott (62 countries followed suit) in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (see, Caraccioli et al., 2008), and the 1984 Games in Los Angeles were boycotted by the Soviet Union in retaliation. The 2008 Beijing Olympics were haunted by China’s human-rights record and its treatment of citizens (particularly those from Tibet and Uighur), and the 2010 Vancouver Olympics were contested by First Nations peoples.

Despite this history, it was still surprising that, at a time when Russia was conducting counter-terrorist operations [*kontr-terroristichesskie operatsiya*] in the North Caucasus, the IOC awarded the 2014 Winter Olympics to Sochi. When the IOC announced Sochi as the host of the Winter Olympics on 4 July 2007, Russia’s counter-terrorist operations in the North Caucasus had been raging for almost eight years. Subsequently, the operations were officially ended in April 2009.

For all the repeated assurances that the Olympics are ‘non-political’, I cannot share the view of Jacques Rogge (the President of the IOC, who also enjoys the title Count Rogge), Vladimir Putin (President of Russia), and the international community (whose silence, with the exception of Georgia², has been deafening) that Sochi is an ‘acceptable’ host of the Olympic Games. Why Russia, and why the North Caucasus? Since 1991, Russia had been to war twice in the North Caucasus, both times in Chechnya (1994-6 and 1999-2002). Russia’s aerial bombardment of Grozny, the Chechen capital, in the winter siege of 1994 was the heaviest aerial bombardment of an urban settlement in Europe since the Allied destruction of Dresden in World War Two, and is now held up as a case study of ‘urbicide’ (Alvarez, 2012). Why here, and why now, given Russia’s treatment of its citizens in the North Caucasus? According to *Freedom House* (2006), as many as 200,000 people have died from the effects of violence in the North Caucasus since 1994, the majority as the result of the actions of the Russian military. What about how Russia

² In November 2008 Georgia asked the IOC to move the 2014 Winter Olympics from Sochi, citing security reasons.

treats those who report on the North Caucasus? The rape, torture, and murder of journalists reporting from and on contemporary events in the North Caucasus – including, but not limited to, the 21 journalists who the ‘Committee to Protect Journalists’, a New York-based organisation, record that have been killed in Russia in retaliation for their work on the North Caucasus since 2000 – is well documented (CPJ 2012). Why did the IOC deem Sochi a better location for the Olympics than Salzburg (Austria) and Pyeongchang (South Korea)? Sochi, after all, has a humid sub-tropical climate and the average temperature in February (when the Olympics will be held) is + 9.9°C (49.8°F), well above freezing. In the words of Boris Nemtsov, Russian opposition politician, Sochi is “one of the only places in Russia where there is no snow in the winter” (Keating, 2010). What about the environment? Despite warnings (from, amongst other organisations, the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace) that construction of Olympic venues in the buffer area of the UNESCO protected Caucasus Biosphere Reserve and Sochi National Park would be harmful, the IOC approved the plans in 2007 (UNEP 2010). While, as Ferguson et al. (2011) have noted, uncertainty characterises the ‘legacy’ of most Winter Olympic Games, exactly what the legacy of Sochi will be in this context is a pertinent question.

Of course, similar questions of cost, security and suitability might be asked about other host cities of the Olympic Games (Broudehoux, 2007) and various mega-events (Pillay and Bass, 2008): for example, when London was awarded the 2012 Summer Olympics (at the 117th IOC Session in Singapore in July 2005) the UK (along with its allies) had recently invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the security operation at the 2012 Olympics was the biggest in peacetime Britain (the cost is reported to have exceeded £1bn and the figure of 17,000 armed forces personnel deployed at the Games was more than Britain had deployed in Afghanistan at the same time). Rather than discuss these issues however, I instead want to focus on the 2014 Olympics in Sochi.

Aside from the Russian authorities (who see hosting the Olympics as international recognition for the regime), we might ask who profits from the 2014 Olympics? While a number of scholars have noted that the “trickle-down” narratives of mega-events rarely benefit the local (or broader) population (for example, Harvey, 1989 and Ren, 2008), this is especially true in the case of the 1,000 or so families who have been forcibly relocated from their properties to make way for construction in Sochi (Moscow Times 2010) (see also Slavin, 2008). What about the ‘Olympic Law’ (passed by the State Duma in December 2007), which provides the legal framework for transforming Sochi into an Olympic city and, importantly, lays out the process governing land acquisition for the purpose of building Olympic facilities? In contravention of Russia's Land Code, the Law states that confiscation disputes would be resolved in court under abridged procedures that allow the state alone to set the price (Zarakhovich, 2008). At a time when land prices in Sochi were between \$100,000 to \$200,000 per 100m² (or *sotka*, Russia's standard unit of land), the Olympic Law effectively gave the Russian state the right

to pay just \$50 per 100m² of land. What about corruption? Russia is ranked 133rd place out of 176 in the ‘Corruption Perceptions Index’ published by *Transparency International* (see, <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2012/results/>) and it would be naïve to think that a certain proportion of the Olympic budget – Russia has budgeted over 327 billion rubles (approximately US\$ 10.85 billion) for the Sochi Olympics, which is approximately five times that for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver (US\$ 1.84bn) – will not be lost to the criminal underworld. Reflective of what Müller (2011) calls ‘state dirigisme’, *Olimpstroi* (the Olympic Construction company, which is also involved with coordinating and directing investment) is a state corporation. This effectively means that it is beyond the control of the Justice Ministry, State Registry, and tax and customs services and thus provides ample opportunities for money laundering (Moscow Times, 2008). The costs and waste that result from this are enormous. For example, a road being built from Sochi to the Olympic ‘Mountain Cluster’ (which includes the Biathlon and Ski Complex, Bobsleigh Track, Ski Centre and Ski Jump, as well as a Snowboard Park and Freestyle Centre) near Krasnaya Polyana will cost around \$140 million per kilometre to construct, which is more than double the usual cost for such construction by international standards (Nemtsov and Milov, 2009).

We should also ask who else might benefit from the focussing of global (or, at least, Western) attention on the North Caucasus? Arnold (2012) has drawn attention to the security threats in the region that pose a danger to the Games, not least radical Islam. Since the second Chechen war (1999-2002), there have been suggestions that the Caucasus Emirate (CE) – the primary source of Russia’s domestic insurgency – has close links to Al’Qaeda, and Doku Umarov, leader of the CE, has declared the North Caucasus part of the global jihad. Today, terrorist attacks are an almost daily occurrence in the region. To say it would be a surprise if militants were not planning attacks on the Games would be to understate the likelihood that they will (or are). In May 2012 it was reported that Russian and Abkhaz security services had seized a cache of weapons – including light arms, mines, shells, ammunition, anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles, ten kilos of TNT, flamethrowers, and a topographical map of Sochi – and arrested three men accused of being part of the CE and planning an attack at the Games (see, BBC 2012).

In his address to the IOC as part of Russia’s bid for the Olympics in July 2007, Putin (unusually speaking in English) argued that although Russia has a long history of hosting sporting events, “we have not yet had the honour to celebrate the Winter Olympics” (Putin 2007)³. The entire (geo)political understanding for the Olympic Games and the justification for hosting them might also be reduced to ‘celebration’. In this context, we might think about other events that can be ‘celebrated’ in 2014. How about the 150th anniversary of the exile of the Circassian

³ The full video of Putin’s speech is available on YouTube, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aNo3DxWaW4

nation by Russian Imperial forces in 1864, an event described by Shenfield (1999) as a “forgotten genocide” and Richmond (2009) as “the first modern genocide”⁴? The two events are much closer than they first appear; Krasnaya Polyana⁵, the location of the Olympic ‘Mountain Cluster’, is also the location of the Battle of Kbaada, which marked the final defeat of the Circassian nation by Tsarist forces in 1864. In the tracks of Maddrell and Sidaway’s (2010) “deathscapes”, there is no memorial or other space for mourning or remembrance in the landscape to show where Tsar Alexander II’s soldiers paraded to mark their victory over the Circassians. In fact, the parade ground where the army celebrated their victory is now buried under the heliport that will welcome elites to the 2014 Olympic skiing events. To add some perspective to this, allow me to quote from Bullough (2010: 8):

In what was the first modern genocide on European soil – fifty years before Turkey’s Armenians were butchered, ninety years before the holocaust – perhaps as many as 300,000 Circassians died from hunger, violence, drowning and disease when Russia expelled them from their lands on their final defeat in 1864.

For Bullough (2010: 9), what is most surprising is that:

... the world has responded to the slaughter in the mountains with blank indifference ... While the deliberate destructions of Turkey’s Armenians and Europe’s Jews are remembered and taught in schools as bleak warnings of humanity’s inhumanity, the Circassian genocide is not even known about in the land where it happened.⁶

I thought about Bullough’s critique when, on 21 May 2012, Circassians globally marked the 148th anniversary of their genocide.

Back to the questionable decision by the IOC to give the 2014 Olympic Games to Sochi and the long list of questions above. Although the IOC have rejected the requests of ‘NoSochi2014’ (the leading pro-Circassian movement) and others (notably, Georgia) to consider changing the venue of the 2014 Olympic Games, the Olympic Charter does allow for the Games to be withdrawn from a host city if it is in breach of its obligations. Point 4 of the Olympic Charter states that the objective of the Olympics is:

⁴ On 20 May 2011 Georgia became the first country to officially recognize the ‘Circassian Genocide’, see <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23472>

⁵ Krasnaya Polyana means ‘Red Glade’ in Russian, although it can also be translated as ‘Red Meadow’ or even ‘Red Valley’. It is believed that the ‘red’ part of the name refers to the blood of the Circassians spilt in the Battle of Kbaada in 1864.

⁶ On 18 May 1994, President Boris Yeltsin acknowledged that “[Circassian] resistance to the tsarist forces [in the 19th century] was legitimate”, but he did not recognize “the guilt of the tsarist government for the genocide”. Since then, successive governments in the Kremlin have refused to discuss the matter. See, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1341730.html>

to cooperate with the competent public or private organizations and authorities in the endeavor to place sport at the service of humanity and thereby to promote peace

Are the actions of the Russian state in the North Caucasus “at the service of humanity”? Or rather, how have they been rendered thus? Is it really possible that the IOC’s conceptualisation of “promoting peace” extends to war and uricide, genocide and rape, torture and murder?

In 1992 the IOC called on the international community to observe the tradition of *ekecheiria* anew, and asked that all hostilities cease during the Olympic Games and beyond. Through resolution 48/11 of 25 October 1993, the UN General Assembly urged Member States to observe the Olympic Truce from the seventh day before until the seventh day after each Games. By 2007, 180 countries had signed the Olympic Truce, including Russia (UN General Assembly 2007). This did not stop Russia going to war with Georgia in August 2008 and it will not stop Russia from celebrating the genocide of the Circassian nation in 1864.

Of course, every host city of the Olympic Games, or any other mega-event, operates within its own complex and contested geopolitical histories. Where Russia is concerned, however, there is something else. Not only has the government refused to discuss the Circassian ‘genocide’ in public or in private (and thereby allow the space necessary to critique and debate the association of place and memory), but it has also normalised the re-writing of history.

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