“Where are the Laughter and the Tears?”
Anthony Szczurek, Virginia Tech
anthos9@vt.edu


The 22\textsuperscript{nd} Olympic Winter games taking place this year in Sochi, Russia have been beset by controversy. Notwithstanding its massive cost overruns in a country in desperate need of massive public infrastructure investment after years of neglect (the current estimate for the final budget is US$51 billion, exceeding the cost of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing by US$7 billion), much has been made of Russia’s recently passed laws banning the propagation of “non-traditional sexual orientations.” In recent months, several NGOs have pushed for an outright boycott of the Games by states, their delegations, and global corporations to protest Russia’s dismal approach to LGBT rights. This campaign has been less than successful. While several heads of state and government have said they will not be attending the Games, none has explicitly stated that their respective absences are a form of protest of anything, let alone of Russia’s human rights record.\textsuperscript{1} It seems unlikely that any of the groups attempting to use the Games as a frame of protest against Russia’s government and its policies will be considered successful after the flame is extinguished.

As Philip A. D’Agati makes clear in his new book, *The Cold War and the 1984 Olympics: A Soviet-American Surrogate War*, the Olympics have been a fertile
arena for politics and protest since the resurrection of the Olympics in 1896, with some Games more overtly affected than others and the majority having decidedly mixed results. This review will begin by outlining D’Agati’s admirably detailed history of the Games and their evolution into politicized forums. However, D’Agati’s realist focus on statist “reason” and strategy leaves out the importance of understanding the place of emotion in international affairs.

Four Games have been outright cancelled owing to the ongoing First and Second World Wars, with the defeated states from each conflict being excluded for some years after their conclusion.\footnote{The threat of a widespread boycott successfully forced the Nazi government to rescind its ban on Jewish and Black athletes in the 1936 Summer Games in Berlin.} Beginning in 1968, South Africa and its athletes were banned from participating in any Games in response to its apartheid policies; it reappeared at the 1992 Summer Games in Barcelona after the end of white-only rule.\footnote{D’Agati considers each of these instances of protest or censure, either by governmental or non-governmental agents, aimed at certain policies of the hosting state or the participation of offending states within the Games. In his account, the Soviet boycott (or “non-participation” as the USSR termed it) of the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles was different from all of these other examples of politicized Games because it represented an example of an example of the surrogate war then existing between the two superpowers.} Contrary to the assumption that the boycott was simply retaliation for the American boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, D’Agati relegates this motivation to one of secondary importance. His argument is that the primary reason for the Soviet
boycott was because it served the state’s purpose in its ongoing surrogate war with
the United States, namely within an arena of conflict that allowed for “direct contest
between states in circumstances in which traditional concepts of war are either not
practical or not possible.” In other words, the Soviet Union was acting “rationally”,
seeking a line of action that would result in benefits that would outweigh the cost of
boycotting. In proffering such an argument, D’Agati is attempting to bolster the
rational choice framework that underlies realist dispositions in International
Relations theory, namely the primacy of the State in terms of both peaceful and
conflictual world affairs along with the tendency to divide actors and actions along a
rational/irrational dichotomy. While the book offers a coherent analysis of the
history of the issues leading up to the boycott, D’Agati ultimately does not make his
case namely because its theoretical framework leads to a neglect of the place of
emotion in international relations and the political in general.

For the Soviets, D’Agati claims, there were two overriding goals going into the
1984 Games. The first had to do with a relatively novel measure of competition
among cities and countries to be deemed host. As opposed to the pre-war years,
when cities had been simply designated as hosts (and often only begrudgingly
accepted) by the International Olympic Committee, cities and by default states
began to openly compete with each other for the honor of hosting by the early
1960s. This competition was most acute between the Soviet Union and the United
States and their respective allies. D’Agati argues that the Soviets were intent on
proving that the privately run, “capitalist” 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles
were deficient in comparison to the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow. The 1976
Summer Games, held in Montreal, were largely viewed as a financial failure, and
the Soviets looked forward to the 1980 Games to show that communism offered a much better system within which to organize the Games and ensure their success. The December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to the United States and sixty-one other states boycotting the 1980 Games, ending any hopes that the Games would be considered “the best ever.” D’Agati describes this as a denial of the Soviets’ opportunity to exhibit their organization and prowess as a political system worldwide; the second of their overriding goals. Thus in early 1984, despite many of the grievances submitted by the Soviet Olympic Organizing Committee to the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (including issues regarding security and freedom of movement for the entire Soviet delegation, including journalists) being ameliorated, the boycott still went ahead. It caused much less disruption than the Western boycott did in 1980 however since only fourteen states joined the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{vii}

In the end, D’Agati explains, the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Olympics was an act of rational, policy-consistent example of sabotage intended to ensure that the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were similarly marred by political strife as the 1980 Moscow Olympics had been. As he puts it:

Ultimately, it creates the perfect comparison of the Cold War: Who hosts a stronger Olympics? Is it the socialist, government-centered, government controlled Games of the superpower of the Eastern Bloc or is it the capitalist, nongovernmental, private-sector Games of the superpower of the Western Bloc?\textsuperscript{viii}

Returning briefly to the standard explanation of “retaliation” or “tit-for-tat,” D’Agati again dismisses it as playing anything but a minor role in reaching the final decision to boycott, and it is here that the limitations of this study are most acute.
The author continually makes clear that he considers retaliation, which he later compares to “petty bitterness,” an inadequate explanation of state actions. This view of politics, especially within the field of international studies, continues to remain dominant within the American political science academy (and therefore the world overall), which considers cost benefit analyses the best way to analyze the state as a political actor. Rather, any bitterness the leadership of the Soviet Union felt towards the United States for orchestrating the 1980 boycott was ultimately one factor among several to be taken into consideration once they decided on utilizing the 1984 Olympics as a surrogate battlefield in the larger Cold War. D’Agati considers analyses of these Games that insist on retaliation as the primary motivation for the boycott narrow and unsophisticated.

The end leaves the reader wondering why the consideration of emotion in explorations of the political should be thought of as simplistic. For example, let us consider the Soviet boycott in a different light. As D’Agati himself states several times, both the Soviet Union and the United States were engaged in various arenas of conflict intent on determining which form of the political would ultimately prove most lasting. Why? The leaders of each state obviously had material and strategic interests in continuing their respective ideological systems, but can we not go deeper than this? The reduction of politics to terms of rationality, irrationality, and cost benefit analyses excises any consideration of the individual’s standing within a larger political arena. If individuals derive at least part of their respective identities from their existence within the political realm (whether in opposition, alliance, deference, etc.) then political slights can be felt emotionally by the individual and group. If the leadership of the Soviet Union, many of whom we can assume
inherently believed their particular form of communism to be the best political form available, thought that they and their system had been unfairly denied the opportunity to prove their worth on the global stage, should not retaliation or bitterness be more closely considered?

If politics is understood this way, both the state and the individual are allowed a more expansive form of existence and therefore analysis. The ability of a scholar to analyze and critique the Soviet Union’s decision would not be confined merely to considering the state’s fulfillment of its “nature” as a rational actor, but expanded to reflect on an actor who felt bitterness after being slighted and who acted accordingly. This necessarily makes politics a much messier business, but simultaneously allows the analyst more avenues for understanding phenomena. In D’Agati’s analysis, the Soviet Union can neither be criticized nor adulated for its decision – it was simply following its nature: a potential carte blanche that excludes questions of morality from political analysis. In contrast, the inclusion of emotion in the political allows the state to be a fuller subject that is not simply fated to follow its given nature. Similarly, understanding the failure of the boycott movement towards the 2014 Winter Olympics to gain widespread traction cannot simply be attributed to states acting rationally. Doing so only allows one particular understanding of the various state and non-state actors, their respective values and clout, and the emotions involved, i.e. what the “political” entails in its entirety. In the end, while The Cold War and the 1984 Olympic Games should be acknowledged for offering a cogent account of why the relevant actors acted the way they did, political analysis should not be confined to narrow analysis that excludes other avenues of understanding.


iv Ibid., 44-46.
v Ibid., 19.
vi Ibid., 42-46.
vii Ibid., 81-89, 149-150.
viii Ibid., 154-155.