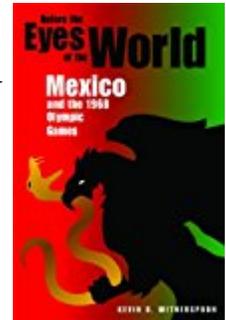


Kevin B. Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008. xi + 212 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-388-3.



Reviewed by John Sugden

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Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

If you wanted to write a short history of the twentieth century, you could do worse than focus on the Olympic Games and all that has swirled around this quadrennial festival of sport, culture, and controversy. Since its reincarnation in the twilight of European imperial ambition in Athens in 1896, every four years the modern Olympics has provided a nuanced snapshot of world power relations. Could anyone, for instance, who witnessed the demonstration of Nazi organization, prowess, and power at the 1936 Berlin Olympics harbor any doubt that the specter of fascism was a real threat to the existing world order? Likewise, when "Gimn Sovetskogo Soyuz," the anthem of the Soviet Union, and the raising of the Hammer and Sickle, began to rival the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the flourishing of the Stars and Stripes at the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, the world knew that the Cold War had found new expression through Olympic competition.

In this regard, *Before the Eyes of the World* is more than a book about sport and mega-event

management (although it definitely is about this too). It is also a window into the state of local and transnational political and economic relations at the end of one of the century's most turbulent and transformative decades. With excellent use of original, archival research, Witherspoon recounts how, against considerable odds, Mexico--a country that at the time was widely regarded as "third world" if not "third rate"--managed to secure the hosting rights to the 1968 summer Olympics, despite competition from two of the world's leading and most prosperous modern cities, Chicago and Paris. This opening section of the book should be compulsory reading for current and future municipal Olympic Games bidding committees as the author reveals how, with a mixture of humility, cunning, and opportune grandstanding, the Mexicans were able to win the contest to hold the Games. Only a few years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, a key to their success was the way in which they garnered votes by understanding and working to their advantage the complex political dynamic between the United States and the Soviet

Union and its impact on wider Latin American and emergent African allegiances.

The core of the book addresses two major themes, both of which were global in context and local in terms of framing and impacting upon the 1968 Olympics. The first focuses on domestic political unrest and student radicalism. The 1960s in general and 1968 in particular are seminal in the history of student radicalism and activism. In France, the government of Charles de Gaulle fell after sustained, student-led rioting in Paris. This came on the heels of the Prague Spring when student activists were at the forefront of a movement for democratic change in Czechoslovakia that temporarily led to the overthrow of the incumbent Communist government. In the United States, there was widespread unrest at university campuses across the country as students added their voices to the growing clamor to end their country's military involvement in Southeast Asia. So, in the build up to the Games, when in increasing numbers students took to the streets in Mexico City to protest against their government's social and economic policies, its totalitarian tendencies, and what they perceived as the waste of resources that were being lavished on the Olympics, President Diaz Ordaz had every right to be nervous. The Mexican government's heavy-handed response was also encouraged by the United States, which, at this point in its history, saw a Communist plot behind every popular movement for reform in Latin America. Matters came to a head on October 2 when, "before the eyes of the world" barely a week before the Games started, hundreds of student protesters were gunned down in cold blood by Mexican security forces in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlateloloco district of Mexico City. The world watched and did nothing as, shamefully, did the myopic Olympic mandarins, citing, just as they would four years later when Israeli athletes were massacred in Munich, "the Games must go on."^[1]

And go on they did, but, there was another time-bomb ticking at their heart, namely the explosive issue of race relations. Even before they started, the viability of the Games had been called into question when, responding to the decision of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to readmit apartheid-governed South Africa into the Olympic movement, thus allowing them to participate at Mexico, a succession of African and Communist-led nations threatened to boycott the Games. As Witherspoon explains in some detail, this was avoided at the eleventh hour when the IOC executive, albeit reluctantly, reversed its decision and South Africa remained excluded. But South Africa was only one battleground in the struggle for equal rights for people of color, the other was in the home of one of the IOC's longest standing members: the United States of America.

Today the image through which most people remember Mexico 1968 is neither Kip Keino doing a lap of honor after having defeated the legendary American Jim Ryun in the 1,500 meters, nor of Bob Beamon sailing through the air to shatter the Olympic and world long jump records. It is much more likely to be the bowed heads and black-gloved clenched fists of African American sprinters John Carlos and Tommy Smith at the medal ceremony after the final of the 200 meters. The civil rights movement and resistance to it in the United States were at their height in the late 1960s and, as the author explains, sport was caught up in this conflict. African American track and field athletes had been radicalized by decades of unfair treatment in domestic competitions and, in an era when sport mega-events were beginning to get significant media exposure, the 1968 Olympics was targeted by the most politically conscious athletes as a perfect event through which to showcase their grievances, particularly coming as it did only a few months after the assassination in Memphis of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Witherspoon does an excellent job of forensically examining these major themes, as well as

looking at other important issues of the times, such as amateurism, performance-enhancing drugs, and security, in doing so making clear the linkages between wider social and political influences and their practical impact on Mexico's Olympics. The book is very well researched and equally well written, managing as it does to weave material from archival and interview sources into an embodied documentary-style narrative. *Before the Eyes of the World* is a book that should appeal widely to Olympic and general sports historians and to those concerned with the political sociology of sport. It should also be of interest to the growing numbers of people studying sport mega-events and event management as well as those members of the general public who are simply interested in reading good historical narrative.

Note

[1]. Arnd Kruger, "The Unfinished Symphony. A History of the Olympic Games from Coubertin to Sameranch," in *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jim Riordan and Arnd Kruger (London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1999), 20.

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