

The 1940 Tokyo Games: The Missing Olympics: Japan, the Asian Olympics and the Olympic Movement

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The 1940 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games are a non-event, because they never happened. Promoted by Japanese organisations since the early 1930s, decided on by the IOC (International Olympic Committee) in 1936, and given up by the Japanese in 1938, they were soon forgotten, overshadowed by the war with China and the Second World War. When the Tokyo Olympics, the first ones in Asia, finally took place in 1964, few remembered and few cared to mention the unpleasant circumstances under which the previous attempt to hold the games there was conceived and abandoned. Sandra Collins exhumes this fascinating story and brings it back to life. Using a variety of sources, she describes the day-to-day developments which led to the selection of Tokyo for the 1940 Olympic Games, and later to Japan's decision to relinquish them. Although the reader knows how the story will end, the author manages to maintain suspense throughout the book. The main contribution of this monograph is the presentation of the various backgrounds against which this affair evolved. The rise and fall of the 1940 Olympiad project is described in the contexts of the Olympic movement, the political developments in Japan at that time, the international relations in East Asia, the war with China, the press and public opinion in Japan and abroad, and the Japanese and Western personalities that played a role in this episode. There are no villains or heroes in this narration. As the story develops, we see how great ideals, as often happens, become entangled in the web of national, organisational, and personal interests, and how important decisions are made without adequate understanding and with no way of predicting their results.

As Collins shows, the Japanese were eager to host the 1940 Olympic Games for both external and internal reasons. They hoped that staging these games would establish Japan's status as a first-rate modern power, an Asian empire, and leader of the non-Western world. Against growing international criticism of Japan's aggression on the continent, the Olympic Games were considered to be a form of 'people's diplomacy' that would generate foreign good will. The Tokyo Olympiad was to coincide with the 2,600th anniversary of the legendary establishment of the Japanese empire by Emperor Jimmu (*kigen*) in 660 BC, planned for 1940. The combination of these two splendid celebrations was expected to boost nationalism, enhance the prestige of the emperor, and mobilise the Japanese masses for national causes. Thus, from the beginning, the Tokyo Olympics carried a double message: They were to advance modernisation and internationalisation on the one hand, but also to foster tradition and national pride on the other.

The Olympic Games were, since their inception in 1894, a symbol of universal peace, fair play and global understanding through sport, but in fact they were seen as a white man's affair that was held only in Europe and the United States. The argument that the Japanese used, to promote Tokyo for the 1940 Olympics, was that only by staging the games in Japan, the most modern country of the non-Western world, would the Olympic movement become international. This was a powerful argument that appealed to many members of the Olympic organisation. Therefore, when the IOC voted, in July 1936, on the venue of the 1940 Olympiad, Tokyo's candidacy was supported not only by such Western countries as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, but also by China, India, Egypt, and Iran (pp. 74-5).

Japan earned the 1940 games also by the achievements of its athletes. In the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the Japanese won 35 medals, including seven gold medals, and Japan was ranked fifth, after the United States, Italy, France, and Sweden, ahead of Great Britain, Germany, and Australia. In the 1936 Berlin Olympiad, which took place shortly after Tokyo had been chosen for the 1940 games, Japanese athletes won 44 medals, including six gold medals (p. 10). These victories and world records won Japan the praise of the whole world. Collins makes the illuminating remark that 32 years after the Japanese novelist Natsume S?seki referred to himself in London as 'small, ugly and yellow', a Japanese athlete in the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles described himself as 'tall, powerful and seemingly white' (p. 37).

In their efforts to promote Tokyo, the Japanese resorted to unprecedented tactics. Japanese diplomats lobbied foreign governments, especially those of Italy and Great Britain, to persuade their Olympic committees to withdraw the candidacies of their cities from the race. In January 1935, the Japanese ambassador to Rome, Sugimura Y?tar?, who was also Japan's IOC member, met with Mussolini and convinced him to drop the candidacy of Rome for the 1940 Olympics, in exchange for Japan's support of Rome's candidacy for the 1944 games. This enraged the Italian National Olympic Committee, which possessed the right to make such decisions, but the committee had to abide by the will of the *Duce* (pp. 60-7).

Japan also used monetary incentives to promote its case. In December 1934, the Tokyo City Assembly allocated one million yen (half a million US dollars) to subsidise the travel of athletes and officials to the Tokyo Olympiad (p. 56). The president of the IOC, the Belgian Count Henry Baillet-Latour, was invited to Tokyo, on an all-expense paid trip, to inspect the city's sports facilities. He arrived in March 1936, shortly after the suppression of the attempted coup d'état of February 1936, but despite the troubled times he was wined and dined during the two and a half weeks that he spent in Japan, and was even received by the emperor. Baillet-Latour was greatly impressed by what he saw and heard and returned home as an enthusiastic supporter of the Tokyo games (pp. 67-70).

The IOC claimed that its decisions were based purely on sport considerations and had nothing to do with politics, but the selection of Berlin and Tokyo as the venues of the Olympic Games in 1936 and 1940 enabled Nazi Germany, and almost enabled militarist Japan, to use these games as a propaganda tool of their authoritarian and militaristic regimes. Avery Brundage, the president of the American Olympic Committee in 1936, rejected the demands of Jewish groups in his country to boycott Hitler's Olympiad, on the grounds that 'sports is above politics' (pp. 147, 149).

The choice of Tokyo, in July 1936, as the venue of the 1940 games caused a great sensation in Japan. The streets were decorated with Japanese and Olympic flags, fireworks were lit, congratulatory slogans were displayed, and commemorative stamps were issued to celebrate the occasion (p. 76). But it soon turned out that the Japanese could not make up their minds on important issues concerning the games. The first problem was the location of the Olympic Stadium. When Tokyo submitted its bid, it notified the IOC that the central stadium would be located in the Outer Gardens of the Meiji Shrine. When Baillet-Latour visited Tokyo, he was deeply impressed by the serene beauty of that site. But after Tokyo had been chosen, the Home Ministry and the Shrine Bureau objected to that plan, claiming that the boisterous stadium would disturb the sanctity of the gardens dedicated to the spirits of the Meiji Emperor and his wife. After a long debate, which dragged on for two years, the government decided, contrary to the wishes of the IOC president, to construct the central stadium in the Komazawa district of the capital (pp. 112-123).

Another controversy surrounded the route of the Olympic flame. The custom of bringing the fire from Olympia in Greece to the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games by relay, was started with the Berlin Olympics, at that time to symbolise that Nazi Germany was the successor of ancient Greece. This new tradition struck roots and has continued until today. The planners of the 1936 relay recommended that the 1940 relay, which would span 10,000 km, should be conducted by horse riders and runners and should follow the ancient Silk Road. But the Japanese did not like the idea of the Central Asian route which would cross China, and suggested instead that one of their warships carry the torch from Greece to Japan. Later, the Japanese proposed that the Olympic flame be carried by an airplane (called 'kamikaze') along a South Asian route. Within Japan the fire would be carried by relay from Mount Hyuga in Kyushu (where the legendary Ninigi-no-mikoto descended from heaven to rule Japan), through the Ise Shrines to Tokyo (pp. 124-132). Another problem was the emperor's role in the opening ceremony. According to the Olympic rules, the head of the host state officially opens the games. But the Japanese emperor at that time was considered to be too sacred to have his voice transmitted electronically by microphone, loudspeaker or radio (pp. 132-5).

Collins shows how difficult it was to transplant the Western traditions and practices of the Olympic Games into the political and cultural context of pre-war Japan, and how difficult it was for the Japanese to decide how to present their 'Asian' traditions and values to the Western world through the Olympic Games. Obtaining consensus on these issues in pre-war Japan was almost an impossible goal, with the military, the bureaucracy, the Olympic Committee, and the public pulling in different directions.

Under these circumstances it became questionable whether the 1940 Tokyo Olympic Games would ever take off. But what finally sealed their fate was the expanding war in China, which had broken out in July 1937. At first, the Japanese hoped that the hostilities would end in a short time and they would be able to stage the Olympic Games as scheduled. But as the war situation intensified and required more and more lives and materiel, the prospects of the games started to look dim. The financial allocations for the Olympiad were gradually curtailed, and voices were heard that it was inappropriate to host such a festive event at a time when Japanese young men were dying on the battlefields. In March 1938, Army Minister Sugiyama Hajime declared that the Olympic Games interfered with the 'successful conclusion of the China Incident'. Two months later, Welfare Minister Kido Kichiro, the cabinet minister responsible for the games, informed the Diet that the government had decided to cancel the Tokyo Olympiad (pp. 151, 161-162). Although there had been earlier calls in the United States and Britain to boycott the Tokyo Olympics, in protest of Japan's aggression in China, the cancellation of the games was made by the Japanese themselves. The IOC president Baillet-Latour insisted until the last moment that the games should be held as scheduled, explaining that he

opposed the boycott of Tokyo 'with the same arguments I used to fight the Jewish campaign in 1936' (p. 157).

The cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics did not bring about the cancellation of the 2,600th anniversary of the foundation of the empire. On the contrary, relieved from the need to host a multitude of Western athletes and to perform problematic Western ceremonies, the Japanese celebrated the *kigen* of 1940 on a grand scale in a solemn and traditional way. As part of the celebrations, Tokyo hosted the East Asian Games, in which 700 athletes from Japan, Manchukuo, occupied China, Thailand, the Philippines, and Hawaii participated. A 'sacred fire', brought by relay from Kashihara Shrine (dedicated to Emperor Jimmu) in Nara Prefecture, ignited the flame at the Meiji Shrine Outer Gardens, where the central ceremony took place (pp. 179-180). Meanwhile, the IOC had chosen Helsinki to host the 1940 Olympic Games, but the Second World War, which broke out in September 1939, led to the cancellation of both the 1940 and 1944 Olympiads.

After the war, the Olympic Games were resumed, with London hosting them in 1948, Helsinki in 1952, and Melbourne in 1956. In May 1952, shortly after the end of the Allied Occupation of Japan, the governor of Tokyo submitted the candidacy of his city for the 1960 summer games. But Rome, which had competed with Tokyo for the 1940 Olympics in the past, won. In 1958 Tokyo hosted, with remarkable success, the third Asian Games, proving how well it was prepared to host international sporting events. In 1959, Tokyo's candidacy was submitted again for the 1964 Olympics and this time it won. The bid was supported by the IOC president, Avery Brundage, who had succeeded Baillet-Latour and who had been, like him, an enthusiastic supporter of the 1940 Tokyo games (p. 182). The 1964 Tokyo Olympiad was an astonishing success, showing the whole world how successfully Japan had modernised and democratised. The Olympic flame was carried from Athens to Kagoshima by a Japan Airlines (JAL) plane, which stopped on its way in Istanbul, Beirut, Tehran, Lahore, New Delhi, Calcutta, Rangoon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Hong Kong, and Taipei. In Kagoshima, the flame was separated into four flames which advanced to Tokyo by relay along four routes, passing the capitals of all prefectures. The flames were reunited in front of the imperial palace into one torch, which was carried from there, to light the Olympic Cauldron at the Olympic Stadium at the Meiji Shrine Outer Gardens, by Sakai Yoshinori, who was born in Hiroshima on the day that the atomic bomb was dropped. The Shōwa Emperor announced the opening of the Olympic Games into a microphone, with no objection from the conservatives (p. 184).

The second time that the Olympic Games were held in Asia was in Seoul in 1988, and the third time will be in Beijing in 2008. Collins thinks that the historical precedent for the Seoul and Beijing Olympics was not the 1964 Olympiad in Tokyo, but rather the aborted 1940 Tokyo Olympiad. She points out that like Japan in 1940, but unlike Japan in 1964, South Korea in 1988 and China in 2008 were authoritarian Asian countries which wished to strengthen their regimes and improve their international standing by demonstrating their modernity (p. 186). Collins alleges that when the mayor of Beijing, Liu Qi, announced that the 2008 Olympic Games would 'promote economic and social progress ... promote the exchange of the Great Chinese culture with other cultures ... [and] mark a major step forward in the spread of Olympic ideals', he was mimicking the rhetoric of the campaign to promote the 1940 Tokyo games (p. 187).

The book is well-written, with charts, cartoons, and black and white photographs. Yet, it is not clear why the author, or the editor, decided to present the chapters as independent essays, with their own lists of references. As a result, there is some overlapping on the one hand and some lacunae on the other. The most important topic which I found missing was the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The Berlin Olympiad is remembered in Japan and Korea because of the Korean athlete Sohn Kee-Chung (Son Kitei in Japanese), who won the marathon race as a member of the Japanese team. Another Korean, Nam Sung-Yong, won the bronze medal of that marathon, also representing Japan. In 1936 they were regarded as Japanese, today they are regarded as Koreans. At the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Sohn Kee-Chung, at the advanced age of 76, carried the Olympic torch into the stadium, as a representative of Korean athletic achievements. This whole story is not mentioned in the book.

Another problem is the haphazard spelling of Japanese names. In transcribing Japanese names into English, one can either ignore the long vowels, as some authors have done, and not use macrons, or one can, as many

scholars nowadays do, indicate the long vowels by macrons. This book follows a strange middle way, sometimes using macrons, sometimes attaching them partially, and sometimes avoiding them altogether. Thus, Kido K?ichi and K?no Ichir? appear throughout the book without the macrons, while Kan? Jigor? appears sometimes with macrons, sometimes without them, sometimes as Senator (?) Kano (p. 52, caption), and sometimes as Kan? Jigar? (p. 92). In addition, Niniginomikoto on p. 127 becomes Nihigi-no-mikoto on the following page, and Kido's *Nikki* (diary) becomes Nikko in the references on p. 176. A little more editorial attention would have avoided these mistakes and inconsistencies. But these are minor defects. The book is recommended reading to anyone interested in modern Japanese history or the history of the Olympic Games.

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