

# ***GREAT DISASTERS***

## **The Munich Olympics Massacre**

It was meant to be a coming together of nations, in peace, to celebrate sporting excellence. For the athletes attending, it was the pinnacle of their achievements, a moment to be proud of. For some, it held even more meaning. It was the first Olympic Games to be held in Germany since 1936, when it had been under the auspices of the Nazi regime. Now, stepping into the arena, an Israeli team held their flag high.

Eleven of them would not return alive.

I'm Kari Fay, and this is Great Disasters.

The theme of the 1972 Summer Olympics was an optimistic one; the official motto was "Glückliche Spiele" or The Happy Games, and the logo was a bright blue sun. The West German government was keen to present their new democratic Germany well, and the Olympics seemed like the perfect opportunity to do so.

In contrast to the militaristic 1936 Games, which were festooned with swastikas and presided over by Hitler himself, these would be bright, open and carefree. Their security personnel would be discreet, and they would subtly deal with drunkenness or ticket fraud, without disrupting the joyous atmosphere. When they were dispatched to deal with a congregation of Maoist supporters in the Olympic Park, they dispersed the crowd by giving them candy. They allowed people to come and go somewhat freely; athletes later reported that it was easy for anybody to walk into the Olympic Village, so long as they were dressed like athletes. The athletes themselves took liberties with security arrangements, often scaling the fences around the village rather than walk the long way around to the gates.

Unfortunately, the optimism displayed by the organisers and their laissez faire approach to security were not exactly suited to the political situation at large.

Tensions between Israel and its neighbouring Arab countries had been persistent for decades. Only five years before, Israel had successfully seized control of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights in the Six-Day War. This was a highly significant conflict. It meant that Jews were now able to visit the Old City of Jerusalem and pray at the Western Wall, one of their holiest sites, for the first time since 1948. And the ease and precision with which Israel achieved these victories demonstrated that they were willing and able to flex their strategic muscles, and shift the regional balance of power.

It also resulted in the displacement of huge civilian populations, with some three hundred thousand Palestinians fleeing the West Bank and Gaza to take refuge in Jordan, bringing unrest with them.

Following the war, Israel had flourished, its economy growing and its people euphoric in the afterglow of military success. But in

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Arab nations, where Jews found themselves in the minority, anti-semitism was growing.

The Black September Organisation was founded in 1970, two years before the Munich Olympics. After the Palestinian Liberation Organisation or PLO was expelled from Jordan, they assassinated the Jordanian prime minister, Wasfi al-Tal, and attempted to assassinate Jordan's ambassador to London. In early 1972, they had claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks on industrial assets which were associated with Israel but located in the Netherlands and West Germany.

So, it's somewhat surprising that German organisers would invite an Israeli team to their games without at least some attention to their security. Head of the Israeli delegation, Shmuel Lalkin, expressed fears before the games began; not only was there an absence of armed security personnel who would be able to respond to a significant threat to his team, but they were to be lodged in a relatively isolated and accessible part of the Olympic Village, close to a gate. He was assured by West German authorities that appropriate security measures would be taken.

At 4:30 on the morning of the 5th of September, it became apparent that whatever measures had been put in place were not enough.

As the athletes slept after an enjoyable night out at the theatre, their lodgings were invaded by eight members of Black September, wearing tracksuits and carrying duffel bags heaving with assault rifles, pistols and grenades. They had scaled the fence with the unwitting assistance of a group of legitimate athletes, possibly either Americans or Canadians, who had been out drinking and had no idea of the intentions of these strangers. They also had stolen keys with which to enter the apartments at 31 Connollystrasse used by the Israeli team; two of them had reportedly worked in some capacity in the Olympic Village, using this opportunity to scout out the location and prepare for the attack.

A faint scratching noise at the door of Apartment 1 woke wrestling referee Yossef Gutfreund from his sleep. As he went to check it out, the door opened, and he saw masked men with guns on the other side. He threw himself against the door and shouted; although he couldn't stop the intruders getting in, this gave Tuvia Sokolovsky, the weightlifting coach, time to break a window and escape. Wrestling coach Moshe Weinberg tried to fight the gunmen, but he was shot through the cheek. At gunpoint, he was then directed to lead the gunmen to the rest of the team.

He led them past Apartment 2, claiming falsely that the residents there were not Israelis, and into Apartment 3. There, six more team members were surprised in their sleep, and taken back to Apartment 1.

Weinberg may have chosen to lead the gunmen to Apartment 3 in hopes of staging an escape; the athletes there were wrestlers and weightlifters, strong and able men. As they were marched back to the

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coaches' apartment, he attacked his captors. Despite the wounds he had already sustained, he was able to knock one intruder unconscious, slash at another with a fruit knife, and give wrestler Gad Tsohari the chance to escape through the underground parking garage. However, for his efforts, Weinberg was shot to death.

Once inside the apartment, weightlifter Yossef Romano also attacked the hostage takers. He was a veteran of the Six-Day War, champion of the light and middleweight Israeli weightlifting divisions for nine years, and a father of three children. He was due to fly home a day later, following an injury to his knee. He slashed one of the gunmen in the face with a paring knife and grabbed the AK-47 from him, but was fatally shot by the other gunmen.

The remaining nine hostages were tied up and, according to reports only made public in 2015, forced to watch as their captors castrated Romano's body, leaving it at their feet as a warning. They were beaten and terrorised into submission.

The hostages were Yossef Gutfreund, sharpshooting coach Kehat Shorr, track and field coach Amitzur Shapira, fencing master Andre Spitzer, weightlifting judge Yakov Springer, wrestlers Eliezer Halfin and Mark Slavin, and weightlifters David Berger and Ze'ev Friedman.

28 year old law graduate David Berger was actually from Cleveland, Ohio. He hadn't qualified for the American wrestling team, but because he was Jewish he was eligible for the Israeli team. Although he knew he was unlikely to win a medal, he considered competing in the Olympics to be "the absolute ultimate he could achieve".

Andre Spitzer was a new father, his baby daughter having been born only five weeks earlier.

At 18 years old, Mark Slavin was the youngest hostage.

The alarm had already been raised. In Apartment 2, racewalker Shaul Ladany, who had survived the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp as a child, was awoken by the noise outside. After listening at the door and seeing the bloodstains outside, he chose to escape through a rear window and run across the lawn, banging on the door of an apartment occupied by the American team to wake them and call the police.

From Apartment 1, the Black September operatives had a clear view of the lawn; Ladany was lucky. The other occupants of Apartment 2 - two sharpshooters, two fencers, two team doctors and Shmuel Lalkin - remained hidden there for the time being. They were able to escape later on.

Using the codename "Issa", the leader of the Black September team issued their demands. They demanded the release of 234 Palestinian and non-Arab prisoners held in Israel, as well as the release of two German insurgents held in German jails. To back up their demands, they threw Weinberg's body out onto the sidewalk.

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The response from Israeli authorities was absolute. They would not negotiate with terrorists. The prisoners would not be released.

This decision was not immediately passed on to the hostage takers; instead the German negotiators bluffed them for several hours, claiming the demands were still under consideration as the gunmen threatened again and again to kill more hostages. They were offered an unlimited amount of money by the Germans. They refused. Their answer was reportedly, "money means nothing to us; our lives mean nothing to us".

Astonishingly, while the negotiations were carrying on, whilst eight heavily armed terrorists sat in Apartment 1 with their hostages, the Olympic Games carried on. It was twelve hours after the initial attack that pressure on the International Olympic Committee forced a suspension. They would resume the Games quickly once the incident was concluded, after a suspension of just 24 hours.

Negotiators demanded that they be allowed to see the hostages, to ascertain that they were still alive. Andre Spitzer, who spoke fluent German, and Kehat Shorr were brought at gunpoint to a window of the second floor apartment. They had a short conversation with German officials. It was brought to an abrupt end when Spitzer, attempting to answer a question, was clubbed in the head with the butt of an AK-47 and dragged away.

This all happened in front of the cameras of the international press.

The cameras were also watching when a squad of German policemen were dispatched at around 4:30 pm. Wearing incongruously bright tracksuits, they took up positions around the building, preparing to enter from the roof and through ventilation shafts. Before they were ready, however, a snag in their plan became apparent. The terrorists knew they were coming. At one point, one of the gunmen peered out of a balcony door towards the policemen, positioned less than twenty feet away.

In preparing for the assault, the police had neglected the fact that the apartment had a television set, and they had not ordered the media to pull back; "Issa" and his team were watching everything they did live on the news. He threatened to kill two more hostages, and the policemen withdrew.

Two German officials were allowed into the apartment to see the hostages and speak directly with their captors. They spoke later of the moving dignity with which the Israelis held themselves, and said that they had seemed resigned to their fate.

At around 6pm, the Palestinians issued a new demand. They would agree to be transported to Cairo, provided that the Germans gave strict guarantees for their safety.

It was arranged for a bus to transfer the Palestinians and their hostages to two military helicopters, which would then take them to

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Fürstenfeldbruck, a NATO airbase. There, a Boeing 727 jet would await them for the flight to Egypt.

The police did not actually plan to let the plane take off, though. Aside from any other considerations, the Egyptians had no desire to get involved in a hostage crisis. Instead, a rescue at the airport was planned.

Aboard the jet, sixteen German police dressed as flight crew waited. The plan was for "Issa" and his deputy to come aboard to inspect the plane while the hostages and other captors waited for the all-clear. The police would overpower them as they boarded. Meanwhile, snipers were positioned at strategic points around the airport.

Again, the plan laid by the police would unravel.

"Issa" and his deputy boarded the jet and found it completely empty. The police who had been stationed inside had voted to abandon their position, considering it a suicide mission, and left. Realising that they had walked into a trap, the two terrorists ran back to the helicopters, where their men were holding the German pilots at gunpoint.

One of the snipers tried to shoot Issa as he ran for cover, hoping to leave the terrorists leaderless. In poor lighting, he missed, shooting the deputy "Tony" in the thigh instead.

Crossfire between the kidnapers and the police ensued, but it was disorganised.

Just past midnight, sensing the failure of their plan, the kidnapers turned on their captives. They fired upon the hostages in the eastern helicopter at point blank range, then tossed a grenade inside.

What happened at the western helicopter has been disputed; the initial investigation by the German police indicated a possibility that the hostages inside had actually been shot by their own men, in the confusion. However, another report states that it was one of the kidnapers, raking the hostages with machine gun fire from the door.

What is absolutely heartbreaking is the fact that tv news teams, who had been covering the incident with some fervour, initially reported that the rescue had been successful; that all the athletes were alive. It was more than three hours later that the true facts emerged. Jim McKay, broadcasting for ABC, broke the news.

"We just got the final word ..." he said, as he received the information over his earpiece. "you know, when I was a kid, my father used to say "Our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized." Our worst fears have been realized tonight. They've now said that there were eleven hostages. Two were killed in their rooms yesterday morning, nine were killed at the airport tonight. They're all gone."

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Of the eight Black September gunmen, five were killed; their bodies were delivered to Libya, where they were buried with full military honours. The surviving three were arrested and held for trial.

A German officer was also killed in the crossfire.

Unlike a natural disaster, like an earthquake or a tornado, this was a deliberately planned event. Unraveling how it happened and how it could have been prevented is therefore somewhat different. Instead of trying to forecast the movement of the earth or the air, this was a case of looking into the hearts and minds of people. And, even when distorted by hatred and extremism, people are pretty predictable.

So predictable, in fact, that this very situation had been presented to the organisers of the Olympics as one of twenty six "worst-case" scenarios their security should prepare for.

They had commissioned these scenarios from police psychologist Georg Sieber, but for some reason failed to act on the advice their expert gave them. Instead of planning for the worst case scenarios they had been offered, they apparently decided to cross their fingers and hope for the best, setting their expectations to match the security they had planned instead of vice versa. The security budget was just two million dollars. By contrast, four years later, the security bill for the Montreal Olympics would run up to a hundred million dollars, not including the cost of enlisting the Canadian forces to keep order.

The lax security allowed Black September into the Olympic Village, but the mistakes didn't end there. The West German police were simply not prepared to deal with a hostage situation of this kind, and made their own mistakes. Foremost, they made the mistake of allowing the cameras of TV news crews practically unfettered access. Every move they made outside was shown live, and the gunmen inside were watching.

That doesn't mean that their initial rescue attempt would have been successful if the cameras hadn't been there, however. The team they assembled to assault the apartment and free the hostages were not operatives specialised in this kind of assault; they were ordinary cops off the street.

The next mistake occurred as the gunmen and their hostages were transferred to the helicopters. When German officials had been allowed into the apartment, they had been asked to count the number of gunmen. They counted only four or five, and the plans for the rescue at Fürstenfeldbruck had been based on this. Generally at least two snipers for each known target are used; once two had been dealt with on the plane they expected only two or three targets for the snipers.

As the group was transferred by bus to the helicopters, it was clear that there were in fact eight gunmen, but either this was not

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relayed to those in command, or they failed to account for it. They made no change to their plans.

The operation at Fürstenfeldbruck would thus rely heavily on the ability of just five snipers to take out the eight Black September gunmen effectively. However, again, they were not specialists. They had no sniper training and had only standard issue assault rifles, with no optics or night vision ability. One of these officers, in the subsequent investigation, would plainly state "I am of the opinion that I am not a sharpshooter."

So, five officers who weren't snipers were expected to take out eight gunmen in low light as they got out of the helicopters. This was already a tall order, but it got worse. The helicopter pilots had been instructed to land with their sides facing the tower where the snipers were stationed. Instead, they landed head on, meaning that the officers had no clear view of the gunmen or their hostages. In fact, some were shooting towards other police positions.

Poor communication meant nobody was aware that the team aboard the jet had left, so the police were plunged into disarray as the plan fell apart. They called for armoured personnel carriers to come in and break the deadlock, but they hadn't planned for this in advance and they were held up in traffic.

Further communication issues led to mistaken announcements that the athletes had survived.

All of these mistakes combined to create a tragedy that stunned the world, turning the Olympics of Peace into the Olympics of Terror.

The disaster prompted West German authorities to reassess their ability to respond to such situations. Their police forces were clearly not trained adequately for what they had faced here. Although their military would have had operatives with the right training for both an assault on the apartment and the operation at Fürstenfeldbruck, they were forbidden by federal law to undertake operations on German soil as a legacy of the Second World War. As a result, they composed a new special unit of the police. Based on the counter terrorism expertise of the British SAS and Israeli Special Operations, GSG-9 would go on to earn a reputation as an elite force against terrorism.

When the 1972 Games resumed, it was without the remaining Israeli athletes, who withdrew alongside teams and individual athletes from several other nations. A memorial service was held at the stadium, with the flags of the Olympics and the competing nations lowered to half mast. Ten Arab nations protested at having their flags lowered to honour Israeli athletes, and they were promptly raised again.

The massacre at the Munich Olympics did not mark the end of the Palestinian-Israeli debate, which continues to this day. There have been many more deaths since then, on both sides, and the issue is still highly contentious.

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However, four years after the massacre, another Israeli team entered the arena for the 1976 Montreal Olympics, their flag held high and adorned with a black ribbon in memory of the fallen.

Great Disasters is written, researched and produced by me, Kari Fay. For more information, sources and further reading, check out the Great Disasters blog at [greatdisasterspodcast.wordpress.com](http://greatdisasterspodcast.wordpress.com), or if you'd like to start a conversation, you can find the Great Disasters Podcast on Facebook and on Twitter @great\_disasters. If you'd like to support the Great Disasters Podcast, you can become a patreon and earn unique rewards at [patreon.com/greatdisasters](http://patreon.com/greatdisasters).

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