

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #28

The 20<sup>th</sup> Summer Olympic Games were held in Munich, Germany, in 1972. Tensions ran high at these Olympics, because they were the first Olympic games held in Germany since the Nazis hosted them in 1936. The Israeli athletes and their trainers were especially nervous. Many had family members who had been murdered during the Holocaust or were themselves Holocaust survivors.

The first few days of the Olympic Games went smoothly. On September 4<sup>th</sup> the Israeli team spent the evening out, seeing the play, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Then they went back to the Olympic Village to sleep. A little after 4 a.m. on September 5<sup>th</sup>, as the Israeli athletes slept, eight members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization terrorist group, Black September, jumped over the six-foot high fence that encircled the Olympic Village.

The terrorists headed straight for 31 Connollystrasse, the building where the Israeli contingent was staying. Around 4:30 a.m. the terrorists entered the building. They rounded up the occupants of apartment 1 and, then, apartment 3. Several of the Israelis fought back. Two of them were killed. A couple of others were able to escape out windows. Nine were taken hostage.

By 5:10 a.m. the police had been alerted, and news of the attack had spread around the world. The terrorists then dropped a list of their demands out the window. They wanted 234 prisoners released from Israeli prisons and two from German prisons by 9 a.m.

Negotiators were able to extend the deadline to noon, then to 1 p.m., then to 3 p.m., then to 5 p.m. However, the terrorists refused to back down on their demands. Meanwhile, Israel refused to release the prisoners. A confrontation became inevitable.

At 5 p.m. the terrorists realized that their demands were not going to be met. They asked for two airplanes to fly both the terrorists and the hostages to Cairo, Egypt – hoping that a new locale would help get their demands met. The German officials agreed but realized that they could not let the terrorists leave Germany. Desperate to end the standoff, the Germans organized Operation Sunshine, which was a plan to storm the apartment building. The terrorists discovered the plan by watching television. The Germans then planned to attack the terrorists on their way to the airport, but again the Palestinians found out their plans.

Close to 10:30 p.m. the terrorists and hostages were transported to the Furstenfeldbruck military airport by two helicopters. The Germans had decided to confront the terrorists at the airport and had snipers waiting for them. Once on the ground, the terrorists realized that a trap had been set. Snipers started shooting at them, and the Palestinians returned the fire. Two terrorists and one policeman were killed. Then a stalemate developed. The Germans requested armored cars and waited for over an hour for them to arrive.

When the armored cars appeared, the terrorists knew that the end had come. One of the Palestinians jumped into a helicopter and shot four of the hostages and then threw a grenade. Another terrorist hopped into the other helicopter and used his machine gun to kill the remaining five hostages. The German snipers and armored cars killed three more terrorists in this huge second round of gunfire. Three terrorists survived the attack and were taken into custody. Altogether, eleven members of the Israeli Olympic Team were brutally killed on September 5, 1972.

Less than two months later, the three remaining terrorists were released by the German government after two other Black September members hijacked a plane and threatened to blow it up unless the three were released.

It is no secret that the German authorities' handling of the massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics was characterized by bumbling and cover-ups. But new documents reveal that officials concealed even more – and more blatant – errors than previously thought. Indeed, there were several warnings prior to the Games that an attack was imminent.

Previously classified documents from investigative officials, embassy dispatches, and cabinet protocols have been released by the German Chancellery, Foreign Office as well as state and federal intelligence agencies to *Der Spiegel*, a German weekly news magazine published in Hamburg with a weekly circulation of more than one million. These primary sources reveal the lengths to which officials went to hide their mistakes.

Already on September 7<sup>th</sup>, just one day after the memorial ceremony for the victims took place in Munich's Olympic Stadium, a Foreign Ministry official told a special sitting of the federal cabinet what would ultimately become the maxim for both Bavarian and West German officials. A protocol for the meeting reads: "Mutual incriminations must be avoided. Also, no self-criticism."

Just how closely this advice was followed can be seen in documentation from both the German federal government and the Bavarian state government, which falsely described the "precision" with which the terrorists carried out their attack. In reality, officials knew that the Black September members were actually so poorly prepared that they even had trouble finding hotel rooms in Munich before the attack.

On the day of the attack, the Palestinians were even known to have gone right past the apartments of the Israelis in the Olympic village, encountering athletes from Hong Kong on an upper level of the building instead. An "analytic evaluation" of the attack by the Munich criminal police later explicitly determined that the terrorists had "conducted no precise reconnaissance" ahead of time.

But none of these details was revealed to the public. The fact that Bavarian state prosecutors in Munich were pursuing an investigation against police president Manfred Schreiber and his chief of operation on suspicion of negligent manslaughter also was not mentioned in the document.

Concrete warnings of a potential attack also went unmentioned, despite the fact that they were so clear that their dismissal remains difficult to comprehend. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1972, a German embassy officer in Beirut, Lebanon, heard that “an incident would be staged by the Palestinian side during the Olympic Games in Munich.” Four days later, the German Foreign Office forwarded the warning to the state intelligence agency in Bavaria, along with the recommendation to “take all possible available security measures” against such an attack.

Security agencies did not even register warnings that appeared in the press. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, three days ahead of the deadly hostage-taking, the Italian publication, *Gente*, wrote that terrorists from Black September were planning a “sensational act during the Olympic Games.” Only later – two days after the bloodbath in Munich – was the warning put on record through a tip-off from the Hamburg criminal police.

The documents show that responsible officials seemed to have attempted to erase any evidence of their failures to prevent the attack. A few days afterwards, a chief police commissioner seized information concerning 26 potential crisis scenarios for the Munich Olympics, which had been prepared by a police psychologist to aid in preparing a security concept for the Games. One of the scenarios involved an attack by Palestinian terrorists at the Olympic Village.

When the Bavarian state intelligence agency inquired after the materials, police officials acknowledged that they had been created and discussed during preparatory seminars ahead of the Olympics. But those same police officials indicated that a written record was “not available.” Those documents are still missing today.

Following the massacre, the Israeli government organized a retaliation against Black September, called Operation Wrath of God, or Operation Bayonet. This was a covert operation directed by the Mossad, the national intelligence agency of Israel, to assassinate the individuals suspected of being involved in the 1972 Munich massacre. Authorized by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in the autumn of 1972, this operation is believed to have continued for over twenty years, during which time at least 25 people connected with the PLO were assassinated, ostensibly by Operation Wrath of God.