

“Welcome, Ali, Please go Home”: Muhammad Ali as Diplomat and African Debates on the 1980 Moscow Olympic Boycott

James Alexander Ivey 

Abstract: To rally support within Africa for America’s boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games, President Carter sent Muhammad Ali as his personal diplomat to Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, and Senegal in an attempt to gain political and popular support for the boycott. The mission had limited success, but it inspired a public forum across the continent for criticisms of American foreign policy toward Africa. By analyzing these discussions, primarily within the press, Ivey shows how America was interpreted in Africa and how the issues of the Cold War were considered of secondary importance to the more immediate struggle against apartheid and independent foreign policy.

Résumé: Pour rallier le soutien en Afrique au boycott américain des Jeux Olympiques de Moscou, le président Carter a envoyé Muhammad Ali comme diplomate personnel en Tanzanie, au Kenya, au Nigeria, au Libéria et au Sénégal dans le but d’obtenir un soutien politique et populaire pour le boycott. La mission a eu un succès limité, mais elle a inspiré un forum public à travers le continent pour les critiques de la politique étrangère américaine envers l’Afrique. En analysant ces discussions, principalement dans la presse, Ivey montre comment l’Amérique a été interprétée en Afrique et comment les questions de la guerre froide ont été considérées comme secondaires

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par rapport à la lutte la plus immédiate contre l'apartheid et la politique étrangère indépendante.

Resumo: Com vista a obter o apoio entre os países africanos para o boicote norte-americano aos Jogos Olímpicos de Moscovo, o presidente Jimmy Carter enviou Muhammad Ali como seu representante diplomático pessoal até à Tanzânia, ao Quênia, à Nigéria, à Libéria e ao Senegal, numa tentativa de conquistar apoios políticos e populares para o boicote. A missão teve reduzido sucesso, mas deu origem a um fórum de discussão alargado a todo o continente de crítica à política externa dos EUA relativamente a África. Ao analisar estes debates, sobretudo na imprensa, Ivey demonstra de que modo os Estados Unidos eram encarados em África e que os temas da Guerra Fria eram considerados de importância secundária face às lutas mais prementes contra o *apartheid* e a independência da política externa.

Key Words: sport; diplomacy; boycott; human rights; apartheid; non-alignment

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Introduction

The *Punch* opinion column from February 6, 1980, summed up the reaction of several African countries to Muhammad Ali's diplomatic visit: "Welcome, Ali, please go home." (*Punch* 1980a). For a brief week, from February 3 to 10, Muhammad Ali, the former world heavyweight boxing champion, acted as President Jimmy Carter's official envoy to Africa. Carter sent the pugilist on a mission to raise support for the 1980 Moscow Olympic boycott in Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, and Senegal. Cancelling the last half of his goodwill tour of India, Ali set off on a government jet with a State Department official to face down politicians and reporters in a diplomatic fistfight that would quickly turn ugly.

Rather than fly back to the United States to be briefed on the issues, Ali chose to travel straight to Tanzania and into trouble. Due to Tanzania's long-held non-alignment foreign policy, the country was unlikely to boycott the Olympic Games if asked by one superpower or the other, but Ali was supposed to try and change some minds while he was there. President Julius Nyerere made his point about his state's non-alignment policy by refusing to meet the boxer. Things got worse as Ali stumbled over questions on the Montreal boycott, when twenty-nine countries boycotted the Olympics in protest over New Zealand's rugby tour of apartheid South Africa, and on American policy in Africa, and he was forced to repeatedly deny that he was Carter's puppet or an Uncle Tom. However, the trip enjoyed at least some success, with cheering crowds greeting Ali at the airport and lining the streets, hoping for a glimpse of the mythical figure. This reception forced one Tanzanian sports official to comment, "He didn't score a knockout but perhaps he won on points" (*Daily News* 1980a).

An easier visit to Kenya followed. Ali met with President Daniel arap Moi, with whom he got along well, and his mission earned its first success before the boxer had even landed in Nairobi. Kenya had already announced its intention to boycott the Olympic Games, unless the location was changed, the day before Ali's arrival. Kenya's close alignment with the West likely informed this choice, though Moi and Kenyan Olympic Association spokespersons stated it was an independent decision in response to the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan (Warsama 1980). This decision made Ali's two-day stay much easier and gave him a chance to be himself. Ali joked with Moi for cameramen, met with the Kenyan Olympic Association, spent time at the US Cultural Center with local Muslim leaders, and, while on safari, "stopped twice and charged out onto the African plain to chase eland and zebra" (*Daily Nation* 1980a). The trip afforded Ali positive publicity and gave him a chance to address earlier statements he had made in Tanzania questioning Carter's policies and accusations that he was "a whipping boy" for the President.

Nigeria, the next stop on Ali's itinerary, brought new troubles. Before he left Nairobi, State Department officials believed that Ali had a meeting scheduled with President Shehu Shagari and other ministers, but this meeting was cancelled before the plane touched down in Lagos. Ali was frustrated; the boxer had attended Shagari's inauguration in October 1979 and was described in the newspaper *Punch* as "a friend of the government," but during this diplomatic mission he was *persona non grata* (Blow 1980). Lannon Walker, one of the State Department officials accompanying Ali, recounted how, rather than just accepting the setback, the Champ decided to create a public spectacle in the middle of Lagos: "As we pulled into Tinubu Square, Ali jumped out and began to shadow box with passers-by, of which there were hundreds. Soon he was recognized, and the growing crowd began to chant: 'Ali! Ali!'" (Walker 2016). Despite Ali's popularity, his attempted diplomacy encountered stiff opposition in Nigeria. The government opposed being dragged into the boycott and claimed, as Tanzania had done, that its policy of non-alignment made it impossible for the country to take sides.

Liberia and Senegal provided an easy end to Ali's tour. During a brief stopover in Monrovia, Ali formed a bond with President William Tolbert over their religious devotion, though they were not of the same religion. Liberia's long-standing ties to the United States made Ali's mission there easier, and Tolbert had pre-emptively announced Liberia's intention to boycott the Olympics, unless the Games were moved from Moscow, just as Moi had done in Kenya.¹ Senegal, under President Léopold Senghor, maintained that sports and politics would never mix, which had meant that the west African nation was one of two countries on the continent to remain in Montreal in 1976. Senghor's stance simplified Ali's mission in a way, since there was no hope for the diplomat to persuade Senghor to change his mind. In Dakar, the national newspaper *La Soleil* reported that Ali was well received and performed a boxing exhibition for "a huge crowd...[that] braved the rigor of time and the price of the tickets to see and touch the one who remains the idol of the masses" (Stephen 1980). Dakar was the final stop of the mission,

which ended with a late-night flight to Washington. On February 11 at the White House, Ali reported his findings to Carter.

Ali's tour ended up having little impact on any of the countries that he visited. Kenya and Liberia had decided to boycott the Games before the boxer's arrival. Senegal maintained its longstanding commitment of political non-interference in sport by refusing to join the boycott. Nigeria and Tanzania both cited their non-alignment foreign policies and acted accordingly by not meeting with Ali or taking part in the American-led Olympic boycott. Therefore, Ali did not generate any serious political discussion on the question of whether to boycott the Games. Instead, something else happened. Ali catalyzed a continent-wide discussion on the nature of the Cold War and American foreign policy toward Africa.

Newspapers and Public Debate

Through newspapers from Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal, this article seeks to understand the ways in which journalists and readers in those countries used Muhammad Ali's tour of Africa to discuss their states' positions within the Cold War.² Within articles, editorials, and letters from the public, writers across sub-Saharan Africa exchanged opinions on the matters that concerned them most, primarily America's lack of support for the anti-apartheid struggle and discussions over the merits of non-alignment after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

This study relies heavily on newspapers from the countries that Muhammad Ali visited during his tour. These papers, across the continent, generally reflected their government's positions in their articles. For instance, Tanzania's *Daily News* was a nationalized newspaper that was uncritical of its government's policies; *La Soleil* in Senegal similarly held back from criticizing Senghor's government. In Kenya, the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* refrained from criticizing the government's policies through much of the post-independence period, which covered the forty-year uninterrupted rule of the Kenyan African National Union. Among the countries under consideration, the only country where there were a variety of opinions from newspapers was Nigeria. However, even there, with some elements of an independent press existing in the form of *Punch*, for instance, the newspapers largely sided with Shagari's non-alignment position. The articles and editorials covering the Moscow boycott movement nationally and internationally favored the government's position across the continent uniformly.

Even though journalists were largely hesitant to criticize their government's positions on major domestic issues, letters sent to newspapers and published on the issue of the Moscow boycott reflected a wide range of opinions, some critical of the pro- or anti-boycott position taken by the national governments. The letters exposed the diversity of opinions held within each country about the reasoning for the boycott, and they allow us to understand how readers viewed their country's actions as well as those of other countries. In most newspapers, opinions from readers were published

along with other letters, integrating the issue of the Olympics into other domestic discussions. The *Daily Nation* took it a step further and published a dedicated “Mailbox” containing seven letters each for and against the boycott (*Daily Nation* 1980c). These boycott letters provide insight into the concerns of readers and show a vigorous debate within countries, not just about the boycott but also about other domestic and foreign issues, using the boycott as a pretext. The letters similarly provide a good facsimile of domestic debate on the boycott issue as well as the Cold War and American foreign policy.

However, it is difficult to know much about the authors of these letters. The newspapers published the name and location of each writer, when this information was available. From this we can make assumptions about their ethnic or cultural group and which community’s views they may have represented. Beyond this, it is difficult to find much specific information about the authors. This article presents the available information relating to the identity of the writers. But the main focus of this study is to demonstrate the various ways in which local readers took Muhammad Ali’s tour and the Moscow Olympic boycott as an opportunity to express opinions on American foreign policy and their nations’ positions within the Cold War.

Africa and Cold War Diplomacy

In previous works examining Ali’s mission to Africa, the boxer’s failure as a diplomat has been the central focus (see Ezra 2016; Sammons 1988; Hulme 1990; and Hauser 1997). The boisterous press conferences, criticism of Carter, and Ali’s admission of his own lack of knowledge all were cited as reasons that Ali’s mission to Africa was a failure. Nicholas Evan Sarantakes summarized the tour by stating, “Ali had no reason to feel proud. He changed no policies on his trip. Instead, he managed to generate a good deal of ridicule. Some of it was aimed at him but much more was focused on Carter” (2011:118). However, the focus on Ali as diplomat has two significant drawbacks. It sees the tour only from the perspective of the United States government and the embarrassment that Ali caused to it.³ It also ignores the Cold War context that made it much more challenging for Ali to make his case. This article focuses on the local reactions to Ali’s tour and the ways in which he was understood. It also addresses the ways in which the Cold War and prior failures of American foreign policy within Africa influenced public attitudes toward the Moscow 1980 Olympic boycott.

American foreign policy toward Africa throughout the Cold War hampered Ali on his mission and became a main talking point for journalists and letter writers. During the early Cold War, Africa remained largely ignored by America in favor of Europe and East Asia. Odd Arne Westad states that “African revolutions and the decolonization that accompanied them were low on the American list of foreign affairs,” and it would not be until détente and the 1970s that America would turn toward the African continent in its fight against communism (2007:131). Ali’s tour took place at a time when Carter espoused his “more moral foreign policy...to emphasize human rights

and what he saw as American ideological principles" in his battle for hearts and minds across Africa (Westad 2007:248). This newfound interest was only due to the increased Soviet and Cuban support given to Marxist liberation groups. The crises in Angola, Mozambique, and between Ethiopia and Somalia brought America and the Cold War into Africa during the 1970s, just in time for Ali to campaign for the Moscow Boycott in 1980. But American interest in Africa was often viewed as misguided, based as it was on supporting South Africa rather than human rights and liberation movements.

While America understood Africa from a Cold War perspective, Beth Elise Whitaker and John F. Clark have argued that the Cold War similarly "had a strong 'framing' effect" on many African states' domestic and foreign policies. Despite this Cold War framing, African elites sought to maintain their autonomy from either superpower. Whitaker and Clark have argued that the Cold War was less about how "the superpowers imposed their will on Africa's newly independent weak states; rather, African leaders sought to use one or the other superpower for their own purposes" (2018:49). The Moscow boycott decision follows these lines. Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, and Senegal were being courted by the United States to join in an international boycott movement. However, it seemed to them that they were being courted in an insulting fashion by a boxer in the guise of an emissary. While African states sought to present themselves as independent countries worthy of respect on the world stage, the selection of Ali "was viewed as a patronizing gesture rather than as a negotiation between sovereign nations" (Thomas 2012:169). American foreign policy toward Africa regularly appeared as an afterthought to other regions during the Cold War, and many African leaders and journalists felt that, particularly in 1980. The selection of Ali may also have inspired more of a discussion and criticism of the United States due to this general ill-feeling toward his appointment.

1976 Montreal Olympics

America's foreign policy was a common source of complaints in articles and letters written about Muhammad Ali's mission and the Moscow boycott. One issue that rankled readers was the American hypocrisy of calling for a political boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games, when four years earlier at Montreal the United States had castigated African countries for mixing politics and sports after twenty-nine countries, mostly from Africa, walked out in the largest coordinated boycott of a Games (before Moscow). The boycott protested the inclusion of New Zealand at the Games while the New Zealand rugby team were on a tour of apartheid South Africa. The International Olympic Committee's position was that rugby was not an Olympic sport, and so there was no cause to punish the New Zealand Olympic Committee, but this was not enough for many African nations. After the opening ceremony, the only African countries remaining to participate were Senegal and Côte D'Ivoire.

The legacy of Montreal impeded Ali's attempts to mobilize support for the Moscow boycott. At each press conference, a journalist would ask a simple question: why should African countries support the American boycott when America criticized the African one four years earlier? This difficult question was made increasingly complicated by Ali's ignorance on the subject. In Dar es Salaam, Ali claimed not to know anything about the Montreal boycott, prompting one Nigerian correspondent to question whether "President Carter's 'plenipotentiary' knows his onions" (*New Nigerian* 1980a). But the central issue was not Ali's ignorance; the issue was why African countries should go along with America's boycott after having received no support four years earlier for their own boycott. A reporter for the Nigerian newspaper *Punch* complained that "when African nations decided to boycott the Olympics because of the presence of New Zealand notorious for her sporting ties with apartheid regime, the very same United States accused Africa of trying to distort[sic] the aims and spirit of the Games by introducing politics into sport. Now it is African[sic] turn to teach the US a lesson in sport and politics" (*Punch* 1980b).

A. N. Njengah Muiganu of Kitale sent a letter to the *Daily Nation* that encapsulated the issue of Montreal within the Moscow Boycott debate. Njengah Muiganu argued that the boycott exemplified Western hypocrisy: "In the past Western countries have been opening their mouths wide whenever African countries opted to boycott Olympics, or the Commonwealth Games due to these countries economics, sports and social links with the apartheid South African regime. Indeed, this is politics imposed upon sports but what happens when US, Canada, Britain and Egypt want to boycott the Moscow Olympics due to Russian aggression over Afghanistan?" For Njengah Muiganu, the only way for the West to gain African support on issues like this was *quid pro quo*. "Next time when African countries want to boycott games, US and Canada should overwhelmingly support them" (Nuengah Muigani 1980).

Other readers argued that the Montreal and Moscow boycotts were dissimilar and should be treated as such; Montreal was an African issue and Moscow was a Cold War one. Those writing to the *Daily Nation* repeatedly used this argument in letters against the Moscow boycott. Chomnjor S. K., writing home to Kenya from Indiana University, claimed the Montreal boycott had been acceptable because it "was in the name of so-called African unity;" he did not support African action on Moscow because it was tied up in Cold War politics. Similarly, L.K. arap Wai believed that "the 1976 boycott was logical because an African issue was involved. Not so with the Afghanistan issue," because Afghanistan had little to do with Africa and did not merit the same response (*Daily Nation* 1980c). Even though African countries had boycotted the Montreal Olympics and had blended politics with sport before, this did not mean that readers in Kenya saw the sports boycott as an acceptable diplomatic tool on this occasion. Montreal had been part of the anti-apartheid crusade, whereas the Moscow boycott did not elicit the same enthusiasm among many readers, as it was not directly related to Africa.

The situation with the Montreal Olympics also led to larger discussions about America's continued support of apartheid South Africa. This was a key reason cited by many readers and journalists as to why countries in sub-Saharan Africa should not support the Moscow boycott. Tanzania's *Daily News* complained that "if the Western countries had at least shown some understanding of the African argument in 1976, our use of the Olympics for peaceful protest against the barbarian Boers in the South, at least we would not be questioning their wisdom of involving the Olympics now in super power politics" (Daily News 1980a). President Nyerere criticized the United States for having "in the past refused to support Africa's appeals for a boycott of South Africa for its racist policies" and now asking for Tanzanian assistance (Daily News 1980b). American criticism of the Montreal boycott provided opponents of Ali and Carter's appeal an excellent reason not to support the Moscow boycott. Montreal was also tied into the anti-apartheid struggle by politicians such as Julius Nyerere, and by journalists and letter writers eager to demonstrate the hypocrisy of American foreign policy. But it was not all one way, and the local/global struggle for human rights would be a major point of contention between journalists and letter writers in newspapers, particularly in Kenya.

Human Rights

To convince African countries to boycott the Moscow Olympics, the issue of human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and Afghanistan was advanced and emphasized. However, this issue proved difficult to frame persuasively, given the concurrent issue of apartheid South Africa. While Ali spoke about the plight of Afghans, and American and European critics highlighted the struggles of *refuseniks* and political dissidents, these issues contrasted with continued Western support for the white South African government that denied basic human rights to the black population within its borders. But even given this disparity, human rights concerns were a major point of contention for those writing about the Moscow boycott and engaging in a public debate through their letters.

When Ali discussed human rights during his tour, he focused on what was occurring in Afghanistan. At his first press conference in Tanzania, Ali was asked "whether he was offended by the Soviet Union on religious grounds... [Ali] said it was not a question of being offended religiously, but rather a question of one's freedom" (Daily News 1980a). However, Ali defined freedom spiritually: "I think communism is against freedom of religion. I was in Russia. I was in China. And from what I saw I wouldn't want to live that way. So I am against what is happening in [Afghanistan]." He would expand upon this in Nigeria when he declared, "I am here because the Russians are shooting Afghani muslims. I am fighting for the freedom of the muslims" (Daily Graphic 1980). Ali campaigned for the right to practice one's religion freely, and he saw his role as protecting the Islamic people.

In the case of human rights, Afghanistan was a hard sell. Ali campaigned on the belief that the countries he visited should feel solidarity with the Afghan people, but for many journalists and readers there were much more pressing questions closer to home. In Lagos, Ali was implored “to go home and tell United States government [that] what is happening in South Africa and Zimbabwe bothers Africans more than events in Afghanistan, a country which most of them hadn’t heard of before” (*Daily Graphic* 1980). Pat Okon, writing for the *Chronicle* in Nigeria, wondered whether “Muhammad Ali’s mission...is to convince us that Russian troops in Afghanistan should concern us more than racist troops in Zimbabwe?” (Okon 1980:6). Central Asia was not as concerning to the commentators as what was occurring across southern Africa.

The Afghanistan approach struggled to win support; Ali was accused of caring more for Muslims and America than he did for other Africans. Because of this, Ali tried to pivot during his tour to include criticisms of South Africa and to parlay his ambassadorial role into acting as an emissary from the African people to Carter. Early on in his tour, Ali recognized that apartheid was “a more pressing issue than the Afghan situation” to those he was talking to. He promised a group assembled in Lagos that “I will drive it home to Jimmy Carter that these people are not bothered in the least whether the Olympics Games are held. What they are concerned about is the total liberation of Africa” (*Sunday Standard* 1980). Ali went even further on other occasions, declaring, “To me, South Africa is worse than Russia. They kill my brothers daily, trade in them and subject them to all sorts of inhuman torture...America is guilty of taking sides with apartheid in South Africa and even is still maintaining trade ties with the enemies of humanity” (Afolabi & Hassan 1980:1).

Ali eventually positioned himself in opposition to both apartheid and Soviet abuses, emphasizing them both in his remaining press conferences. However, for many the American campaign against human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and Afghanistan rang hollow. Senegalese journalist Bara Diouf wrote in his coverage of Ali’s tour that America had not fulfilled its “obligations as leader of the free world. It cannot allow itself to tolerate the suffocation of freedoms and human rights in South Africa or Latin America and be angry because they are violated in Afghanistan” (Diouf 1980). America’s vacillating policy toward human rights angered all sides, and this anger showed itself within the complicated debate over human rights reasons that were proposed for supporting or ignoring the boycott of the Moscow Olympics.

But there were also some, particularly within Kenya, who demanded a boycott of the Olympics on human rights grounds alone. Harold Browning’s letter to the *Daily Nation* stated clearly that the USSR “has surely forfeited the right and privilege to host the Olympic Games” due to “her lamentable and disgusting performance in human rights, making an absolute mockery of the so-called Helsinki Agreement” (Browning 1980). Browning was not alone in this view. Benson Abelle, also writing to the *Daily Nation*, believed that the

question of Moscow's right to host should have been resolved when "Mr. David Owen voiced his timely concern about the violation of human rights" in the USSR (*Daily Nation* 1980c). David Owen, the British Foreign Secretary, had suggested a possible boycott back in 1978 during the Shcharansky show trial. While both letters indicate that the Western position on human rights resonated with some, this may have been influenced by racial differences, given the name of the authors, though there is no way to know for certain. These letters form a minority of those sent to Kenyan newspapers, and most letters referencing human rights issues showed no interest in the Helsinki Accords. The majority were more concerned with comparisons to the situation in South Africa.

A common complaint for those citing human rights within their articles and letters was that these rights should not be contingent on geopolitics. Many authors argued that the United States only cared for Afghan and Soviet rights because of the Cold War, whereas glaring human rights issues in South Africa could be overlooked out of strategic necessity. Alus Wetle Tyodem of Zaria, in his letter to the *Nigeria Standard*, argued "that as long as her [US's] interests are protected in that part of Africa... [and] it does not constitute a threat to world peace" then Carter could accept "15 million Africans denied their basic fundamental human rights" in South Africa (Tyodem 1980). Similarly, Mohammed Hamza, writing to the same paper, argued that the West was hypocritical in its "pursuit of justice." Any move by the Soviet Union was dismissed as "an opportunity for expansion and extending the Kremlin's ideology," and any attempt by Africans to pursue their rights "means nothing to America and her Western allies." Hamza considered it ridiculous that the West was willing to champion human rights in Central Asia while ignoring apartheid in South Africa. He concluded his letter by stating, "Africans were only humans...destined to have no RIGHTS" (Hamza 1980). Abbe Richard, writing to Tanzania's *Daily News*, criticized Carter's selective approach to human rights, stating, "When a human being is oppressed, it does not matter where he is or the composition of his colour. The fact is that they suffer equally." Richard wondered why Carter fought for the rights of Afghans but ignored black South Africans; was it "just because Afghans are not black?" (Richard 1980).

However, there were many readers who argued for boycotting the Moscow Olympics on human rights grounds, despite American support of South Africa. D.J. Shah, writing to the *Standard*, wanted to know why African states showed support for one another on human rights issues but were reluctant to support other countries. "It now appears," he wrote, "that these African countries have no feelings to people outside of Black Africa...The oppressed people of Afghanistan are after all human beings like Africans...As far as I can see, some of the African countries are either selfish or timid" (Shah 1980). Shah wrote to both the *Standard* and the *Daily Nation* to express his opposition to the Moscow Olympics on human rights grounds. Hafiz M. Indrees, writing to the *Daily Nation*, expressed outrage at any attempt to send a team to the Games, asking why athletes would want "to visit the land of

international cheats, murderers and intriguers i.e. Soviet Russia” (Indrees 1980). A letter by S. Muchiru continued Shah and Indrees’ criticisms by accusing the Soviet Union of “indiscriminately torturing, killing, and executing innocent and defenceless children and women in Afghanistan” (Muchiru 1980). In Kenyan newspapers, possibly due to its Arab and Muslim populations, letters were more focused on the threat to the lives and rights of Afghans than in other countries.

While some authors in Kenya were focused on the Afghan issue, there were many journalists in Nigeria who cited their indifference to Afghanistan or labelled it a tactic to distract attention from South Africa. The editor of the *New Nigerian* offered “moral support in [Afghanistan’s] struggle against Soviet imperialism,” but also criticized the “the pious rantings of Western leaders” on human rights since they had not raised the same concern for South Africans (*New Nigerian* 1980b). Obiota Ekanem, writing for the *Chronicle*, argued that America and the West pursued policies that “had allways[sic] been clothed in hypocrisy[sic] to deceive the third world to take sides with them in the name of fundamental human rights, right of self determination, non interference in internal affairs, détente and other sugar coated phraseologies” (Ekanem 1980). And in *Punch*, Tunde Obadina criticized those in Africa who argued the need to protest for Afghanistan, writing “One cannot but wonder what it is about the African personality that causes us to view events outside of Africa with greater seriousness than those unfolding inside the continent” (Obadina 1980).

This form of criticism was not just limited to Nigeria; similar letters appeared in Kenyan papers. “Worried” Samson Anyonge wrote to the *Daily Nation* to ask how when “America has ties with apartheid government of South Africa...can Kenya support such a nation if it is fighting for human dignity?” (*Daily Nation* 1980c). A second point for Samson was, “Did Kenya castigate Amin for the evils he did to the Ugandans? Then how was Kenya pulled into the Afghanistan issue?” In the cases of Anyonge and the journalists from Nigeria, the issue was that American, and Kenyan, human rights policy was inconsistent and influenced more by Cold War concerns than by actual belief in human rights themselves.⁴ The real human rights issues were in South Africa, and there the United States had not proven itself to be a champion of human rights.

The argument around human rights showed the failure of American foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa through its continued support of apartheid South Africa. In the discussions over the human rights implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its crackdown on dissidents, debates within newspapers in Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania largely focused on the inconsistent pursuit of human rights by the United States. Though there were supporters who wrote in to express their outrage at Soviet actions at home and abroad, these voices were largely limited and formed a minority. Most readers were not interested in a human rights debacle thousands of miles away when millions of South Africans were being maltreated by an American-backed regime.

The Cold War and Non-Alignment

While South Africa dominated the discussions concerning human rights, another argument raged about the place of African states within the Cold War's bipolar structure. Through much of the early Cold War, Africa had managed to largely escape the concerns of the two superpowers. But by the period of détente and the 1970s, the continent was firmly enmeshed in the conflict. One early way to avoid the Cold War had been to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which had been founded in Belgrade in 1961. NAM was created to allow countries, many of which gained independence during the Cold War, a third way out of the bipolar division of the world. But being a member of the Non-Aligned Movement did not preclude cooperation with one superpower or another on local or regional issues; the decision of when, how, and how closely to cooperate was largely up to the states themselves rather than the superpowers (Whitaker & Clark 2018:47–49). In this way, the decision of whether to go to the Moscow Olympics was largely perceived as a choice on how closely to cooperate with America in the boycott rather than as a rejection of the USSR after its invasion of Afghanistan.

The principle of non-alignment was held sacred by many of the states that Ali visited. Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania all proclaimed their fidelity to the policy of non-alignment, but Kenya ended up joining the boycott while the other two participated in the Olympics. For Nigerian politicians, non-alignment meant deliberately remaining separate from either superpower bloc. Lannon Walker noted in his recollections that Nigeria was "not at all on the same wavelength as we were on almost every issue, and certainly not on the question of the Moscow Olympics" (2016:46). Non-alignment in the Nigerian case meant proving its independence from the United States in this matter, especially since the United States was asking Nigeria to join the boycott. Coinciding with Ali's visit was a bill in the Nigerian Senate condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This was reportedly struck down for being "pro-American in tone," which could be viewed as taking a side on the issue (Teniola 1980). Journalist Obiota Ekanem in the *Chronicle* stated that nonalignment meant that Nigeria "should not be bullied or intimidated to take any side in the issue," and that "Africans should resolve...never to allow themselves to be used in the superpower politics" (Ekanem 1980). While Ekanem's final statement suggested an even hand between West and East, his article slighted the repeated attempts by "America, Britain and their Western allies...to deceive the third world." The editor of *Punch* wrote that while Ali's arrival in Lagos was exciting, it would not change minds on the issue of Moscow: "We sympathise with the Afghanistan people but we refuse to see the issue through the American periscope" (*Punch* 1980a). Nonalignment, in the Nigerian case, meant separation from the West rather than alignment with the East.

Interestingly, to rationalize the position of non-alignment to the Nigerian population, politicians and journalists used a range of sporting metaphors to describe what they meant by Nigeria's position of non-alignment.

Senator Obi Wali declared that Nigeria should not be “a football of the world power politics,” kicked between the superpowers, rather than deciding its own path (Teniola 1980:16). Sports reporter Owo Blow of *Punch* demanded that the government choose its own policy rather than allow “itself to be jabbed into submission” by Ali and the American government (Blow 1980:15). Using perhaps the most obscure sports metaphor, the editor of the *New Nigerian* argued that Nigerians “must not allow ourselves to be played on their draught boards. If we cherish our independence and integrity, then we must damn this stupid boycott” (*New Nigerian* 1980b). The position of non-alignment meant choosing a path between the superpowers, and this was repeated endlessly within the Nigerian press. However, the rationale of not being played by one side or the other meant that Nigerian reactions to Ali’s presence forced the country to consider America as interfering in its independent foreign policy and rejecting that proposed course.

In Kenya, the concept of non-alignment was understood differently. For one commentator, President Moi’s foreign policy was “based on two absolutely unshakable principles...described as non-alignment and the territorial integrity of all nations” (*Daily Nation* 1980b). Afghanistan was thus an issue on two levels—it had had its territory violated, but it was also a non-aligned country, so the Soviet Union’s invasion was argued to be an attack on the whole movement. M. J. Owino, writing to the *Daily Nation*, was frustrated that the United States was pressing Kenya to join an international boycott in support of Afghanistan; in Owino’s opinion, the boycott movement should have been “spearheaded by either the Non-aligned Movement or the Islamic Congress” rather than by a superpower; this made it a Cold War incident rather than a NAM issue (*Daily Nation* 1980c). The editor of the *Daily Nation* asked in his column why any non-aligned, but particularly African, state would want to go to the Moscow Olympics “when Russians have virtually colonised Afghanistan” while the rest of the world stood by and watched (*Daily Nation* 1980b). The issue of whether or not to boycott was framed within the context of non-alignment by the government as well as by journalists and readers in Kenya.

Alongside these articles and letters were voices which disagreed with the government’s interpretation of non-alignment. Some writers viewed the situation much as their counterparts in Nigeria did. Oppositional letters to the *Daily Nation* frequently cited the superpower rivalry as having no concern for Kenya. L. K. arap Wai claimed that “the Afghanistan issue is an American-Afghanistan-Russian worry. What difference does it make to African countries if Russia moves out and America takes over?...Remember also that the US is fighting solely for its own interests, but it has a way of involving the rest of the world” (*Daily Nation* 1980c). Jacob Kiplagat Sambu wrote to the *Daily Nation* to complain that non-alignment meant not interfering in any state’s affairs: “We are no better than Soviets since we have interfered with internal affairs of Afghanistan [by boycotting]” (*Daily Nation* 1980c). It could also be argued that boycotting was interfering in the affairs of the Soviet Union, which could be seen as aligning with the United States even if that were not

the intention, and would move Kenya further from its policy of non-alignment.

Criticisms of Kenya's concept of non-alignment were not limited to Kenyan citizens frustrated with their government's decision. Journalists and letter writers across sub-Saharan Africa questioned whether Kenya could even claim to be a non-aligned state, given its historic close connections to America and Britain. President Moi, who had assumed power after the death of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, in 1978, had continued in Kenyatta's footsteps and maintained a close alignment with the West (Kanin 2019:142). In February 1980, in the aftermath of the Afghanistan invasion, Moi had traveled to Washington and followed that visit by meeting Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl on his way home. These connections undermined Kenya's claims to independent action in the eyes of many other countries. The Nigerian *Chronicle's* Pat Okon joked that Kenya "has been playing host to America's Third Fleet for such a long time now that it is actually beginning to see itself as part of America (Okon 1980:6). The *Times of Zambia* also linked US arms sales to Kenya as evidence that Moi was incapable of being a true Third World leader and that declaring Kenya to be a non-aligned country was hypocritical (*Times of Zambia* 1980). Kenyans, themselves, were said to be circumspect since they had apparently developed a taste for American goods, especially in Nairobi. All of this was cited as evidence in Nigeria and Zambia that Kenya should not be considered as non-aligned.

Accusations that Kenya was not in fact non-aligned and was instead an American stooge on the continent did not sit well with many letter writers to the *Daily Nation* and *Standard*. Sunil M. Porecha, writing to the *Nation* in the week after Ali departed, expressed his frustration about how some countries were "screaming their heads off against US and her so called 'imperialistic motives'" but were doing so "fully aware that US aid to their countries would not stop" (Porecha 1980:7). In Porecha's eyes, this was simply "diplomatic hypocrisy" and proved that these countries were not as non-aligned as they claimed. D.J. Shah, in his letter to the *Standard*, was confused as to why "when people in Uganda used to disappear, these countries made a lot of noise" but when the issue of Afghanistan is raised, there was no action (Shah 1980:5). For Shah, the only explanation could be that "some of the African countries are either selfish or timid" rather than non-aligned. Their human rights credentials should be questioned, when they refused to stand up to the Soviet Union but were so willing to criticize America, as had been seen before. Shah also suggested it was ridiculous for people to criticize Kenya's claim to non-alignment because it had links to America, when the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1980 was Fidel Castro "a wolf in sheep skin (skin supplied by the Russians.)"

Within this debate on non-alignment, there were those who argued that non-alignment did not matter in this situation at all. In Nigeria, journalist Tunde Obadina suggested that "action taken recently by the Russians was strictly an exercise in maintaining the status quo," since "for the past three years Afghanistan has been under Soviet influence" (Obadina 1980:4). This

opinion was not limited to anti-American, Nigerian reporters. Jacob Kiplagat Sambu, from Nyeri, Kenya, claimed that it was “unfair” to boycott the Games over the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, since “Afghans themselves invited Soviets and they are the ones to ask them to leave when they want” (*Daily Nation* 1980c). Birindwa Sibocha reckoned the American boycott was a ploy intended to “stop thousands of youths from capitalist and Third World countries from going to Moscow and witness the success of the Soviet people for the last 62 years” (Sibocha 1980:5). In these cases, non-alignment meant avoiding the struggle completely. For Sambu and Sibocha, Kenya had no reason to oppose the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, even questioning if it were an invasion at all; they claimed that Kenya needed to exercise its autonomy with respect to the United States rather than being dragged into the conflict.

The Cold War in Africa was also cited by public figures as a major reason to reject American advances and either overlook or forgive Soviet action in Afghanistan. Amon Yeni Sakaba of *New Nigeria* stated that it was necessary that “we should look at the country that gives us aid without conditions or strings attached; our friend is that country that assists us in liberation struggle against colonialism,” the Soviet Union (Sakaba 1980:6). Sakaba noted that the USSR aided Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, while acting as “a genuine friend of the oppressed peoples of the world,” which America did not. Even among those who supported the boycott, such as Duncan Mulei from Machakos, near Nairobi, Soviet support for the Third World was still pertinent: “America has on countless occasions shown not to be a genuine friend to the Third World countries, particularly Africa, while the Russians have been helping the people of Africa from foreign domination and colonial yoke” (Mulei 1980:7). The decision on whether or not to boycott needed to take into consideration this difference in the level of assistance provided.

Interestingly, the *Daily News* readers in Tanzania were given a lecture on not only appreciating the Soviet Union’s assistance to Africa’s various liberation movements but also on not allowing themselves to be beholden to that help. Abbe Richard’s letter asked why the Soviet Union should be trusted in this matter more than America? “The world has learnt not to trust these super powers for they change like a chameleon...Did [the USSR] support the African countries in their boycott of the Montreal Olympics?” (Richard 1980:9). The USSR, Richard argued, acted in its own interests, without regard for Tanzania or any “African” cause. However, for those trying to decide which side of the boycott argument they came down on, the Soviet Union’s long support of anti-colonial movements was seen by many as reason enough to support the Games rather than boycotting them. America, in contrast, had the weaker record in supporting African liberation movements and supported the oppressive regime in Pretoria. All of these arguments were used against the boycott argument by journalists and authors.

The policy of non-alignment was used to justify the positions taken by each African state on the Moscow boycott. For those justifying their boycott position, the invasion of a Third World country was enough of a reason to

boycott the Games. Those who favored participating in the Olympics similarly cited the policy of non-alignment as including not siding with America. This covered the Nigerian position, which was expressed through anti-American sentiment. Even in the case of Senegal, which intended to go to Moscow regardless of the morality of the boycott, non-alignment featured in arguments for participation. François Bob, Senegalese Minister for Sport, explained that Senegal did "not want to submit to any ideological block" as non-alignment dictated and stressed that its willingness to go to Moscow did not mean acceptance of the invasion of Afghanistan (Bob 1980:10). Maintaining the perception of independence within a Cold War battleground was important to each country Ali visited. Justifying the decision to boycott or not through the doctrine of non-alignment was central to this independence. In his letter to the *Nation*, G. Oduour Ongwen, summed up public frustration with being stuck in the Cold War struggle and begged leaders to "make up their minds and tell us their positions and not just sit and wait for Muhammad Ali's and Soviet emissaries" to tell them what to do (Ongwen 1980:7).

Conclusion

Having returned late to Washington on February 10, Ali met President Carter at the White House the next morning. Alongside the obligatory photo-op of the President with his emissary, there was a courtesy meeting between the two men. Ali handed over his report on what he had seen and learned during the previous week. The report, limited to thirteen pages, outlined Ali's belief that the mission had been a success, in spite of its limitations, but it also contained his conviction that American policy needed to radically change if the White House ever hoped to win popular support in Africa.

Summing up his travels, Ali wrote, "I can't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. The issue of human rights for the people of Afghanistan, a people far from Africa, has been raised for public discussion...Each and every person that I spoke with, or who read the press, heard the radio, or saw the television...is aware of the depth of our concern and our determination to do something about it. I believe we have opened a debate in Africa" (Ali Mission Report 1980). The debates within newspapers and between public figures would indicate that Ali was correct. There was indeed an open discussion within Africa on the issues surrounding the boycott; however, this public debate was never going to be enough to mitigate the effects of decades worth of poor policy decisions regarding issues that affected the continent, especially on the issue of race relations in South Africa.

This brief vignette in 1980 created, as Ali indicated, an opportunity for debate on the place of Africa in the world, the links between sports and politics, human rights violations, the place of African states within the Cold War framework, and the concept of non-alignment. All of this was discussed in public arenas and published in newspapers in the weeks surrounding Muhammad Ali's tour of Africa. The discussion was not what Ali, or the American government, had intended to result from his trip. Ali traveled to

five African countries to campaign for the Moscow Olympic boycott; instead of rallying support for the US position, his tour sparked a debate on the failures of American policy within and toward Africa. What this analysis shows, through these articles and letters from newspapers in Nigeria, Kenya, Senegal, and Tanzania, is that the debate within these countries on the Moscow boycott and the place of these countries within it showed a range of opinions and understandings of the event and its meaning in the world. While Ali's tour may have engendered considerable criticism of the former boxer, it also provided a valuable forum through which to criticize the United States and to question national policies. The tour provoked a continental discussion on how African countries should respond to the changing Cold War environment and their ability to assert their own agency through their participation (or non-participation) in sport.

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Notes

1. Tolbert was overthrown a month later (April 12, 1980) in a coup d'état. The new government of Samuel Doe would reverse Liberia's boycott position, send a team to Moscow, and then withdraw it after the opening ceremony.
2. Liberia has been omitted from this project because of a lack of newspapers available reflecting the time of research. The British Library collections did not have any surviving newspapers for Liberia for this time period.
3. There are two main articles sympathetic to Ali's position: Lannon Walker 2016; and Stephen Wenn and Jeffrey Wenn 1993.
4. For flexibility of Carter's human rights policy in 1980 Boycott campaign, see Eaton 2016.