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U.S. must boycott the Winter Olympics

Article by: Ellen J. Kennedy

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The 1936 Olympics were held in Berlin, Germany, at a time when Jews and other minorities were excluded from most areas of public life. The extermination of Jews in death camps such as Auschwitz was still a long way off, but reports of Jewish athletes being persecuted were well-known.

There were calls for the United States and other Western countries to boycott the Berlin Olympics, but it never happened.

Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee, opposed a boycott, despite support from many influential individuals and organizations.

After a visit to Germany, Brundage stated publicly that German Jewish athletes were being treated fairly and that the Games should go on as planned — despite the fact that Germany would not allow a single Jew to participate on German teams.

Forty-nine teams from around the world competed in Berlin, more than in any previous Olympics. The Nazis used the Games to present an image of a peaceful, tolerant Germany.

By rejecting a boycott, the United States and other democracies failed to take a stand that might have strengthened international resistance to Nazi tyranny.

And now, 77 years later, there is a parallel with the 2014 Winter Olympics to be held in Sochi, Russia.

Russia has passed shocking new laws criminalizing gay “propaganda” and gay behavior. The “propaganda” legislation was passed by a unanimous parliament. The independent Levada Center found that almost half of Russians believe gays should not have the same rights as heterosexuals.

Although Russian officials insist that people with “nontraditional sexual orientation” are not banned from competing in the Games, the government asserts that there will be consequences for anyone who publicly advocates or demonstrates homosexuality. Those penalties include fines, imprisonment and deportation.

The International Olympic Committee has assured athletes that they will be safe at the Games, but the Russian declaration has sparked boycott movements in Canada, the United States and beyond.

The Nazis persecuted gays, too. Between 1933 and 1945, the police arrested an estimated 100,000 men as homosexuals. Most of the 50,000 men sentenced by the courts spent time in prisons, and between 5,000 and 15,000 were interned in concentration camps.

Russia’s new laws give a green light for hate and aggression against that country’s LGBT community. In recent months there have been attacks and violent murders of gays, including 23-year-old Vladislav Tornovoy, whose killers raped him with beer bottles and killed him by smashing his head. One of the two men arrested in connection with the murder confessed to killing Tornovoy because he was gay.

Although the United States failed to take a stand in 1936, there was a U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the United States was ultimately joined in that boycott by countries including Japan, West Germany, China, the Philippines, Argentina and Canada.

If Russia’s laws today targeted Jews, as the Nazi laws did in Germany in 1936, I hope we would support a boycott. But is



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there any difference between targeting Jews and targeting gays? We don't often get a second chance to do what's right. We have a second chance with the Sochi Olympics.

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