

This Day in History... March 11, 1980

Olympic Stamps Removed from Sale

On March 11, 1980, the USPS removed all the stamps it had issued for the upcoming Summer Olympics in Moscow from sale as part of an American boycott of the games. According to the USPS, this was the first time they removed stamps from sale for political reasons since the Civil War.

In late December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and began nearly 10 years of fighting between the Soviets and the Afghan mujahideen. The invasion was sparked by a Soviet desire to keep communist leaders in power in Afghanistan. In response, US President Jimmy Carter denounced the Soviet Union's actions and gave a State of the Union address to America promising to keep Middle East oil supplies safe from Soviet influence.

Carter also imposed economic sanctions, a trade embargo, and led a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Eventually, 65 other countries joined in the boycott as well. In spite of this, athletes from some of those nations still participated, playing under the Olympic Flag.



Stamp issued on September 5, 1979, in Olympia, Washington.



These stamps were issued on September 28, 1979, in Los Angeles, California.

Prior to the Soviet invasion, the USPS issued six stamps and four postal stationery items in anticipation of the games. These stamps had already hit a snag before they were issued. The USPS was unable to get permission from the International Olympic Committee to picture the Olympic rings. Instead, the stamps issued for these games had overlapping stars in a similar arrangement to the rings.

After President Carter announced the boycott and other actions, USPS Postmaster General William F. Bolger announced that stamps would be removed from sale on March 11, 1980. Reportedly, that was the first time US stamps were removed from sale for political reasons since the Civil War.

Bolger said the stamps would likely be destroyed if the US didn't participate in the games and said that "support of national policy took precedence." He also said that "should there be a change in the situation at some future date we will reassess our position. Until then, the materials commemorating the Summer Olympics will be held in storage."

This sudden removal caused quite a stir, quickly driving up demand for the stamps. Dealers were paying up to seven times the face value of the stamps. One congressman was investigated for using his connections to purchase thousands of the recalled stamps.

The games ended on August 3, and the following day, the USPS suddenly made all the stamps available through the Philatelic Bureau. They stated it was to honor "the fine men and women of the US Olympic team who [had] sacrificed months and years of training."



Stamp issued on November 1, 1979, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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