



THE 1940 AND 1964 TOKYO OLYMPIC GAMES: OLYMPIC REFLECTIONS OF JAPAN'S TRANSFORMATION IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to examine the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games through a comparative historical perspective in order to reveal how Japan's transformation within the international system was reflected in the Olympic Games. The study was conducted using a comparative historical research design within the qualitative research paradigm. Data were collected through document analysis, with primary sources including the Report of the Organizing Committee on Its Work for the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo Until the Relinquishment, the Official Report of the Games of the XVIII Olympiad Tokyo 1964, and the minutes of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Sessions held between 1932 and 1938 and in 1959. In addition, findings were interpreted through comparative historical analysis and thematic analysis based on verified academic literature. The findings demonstrate that the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project failed not because of organizational inadequacies but rather as a consequence of the international political developments of the period. Furthermore, the study establishes that Japan's withdrawal from hosting the 1940 Olympic Games and the eventual cancellation of the Games of the XII Olympiad were not the same historical event. The findings also suggest that the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games should be understood not only as a symbol of Japan's post-war economic recovery but also as the revival of an Olympic vision that had been interrupted in 1940 and reactivated under fundamentally different international circumstances. In conclusion, this study offers a new comparative historical and document-based interpretation of Olympic history by examining the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games as parts of an integrated Olympic process reflecting Japan's transformation within the international system.

Keywords: Tokyo, Olympic Games, Olympic History, Mega Sporting Events

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1. Introduction

The modern Olympic Games are widely regarded not only as international sporting events but also as important platforms through which host countries project their political, economic, and cultural transformations to the international community. Since the revival of the modern Olympic Movement, the Games have functioned not merely as competitions among athletes but also as global events through which states express their national identities, enhance their international prestige, and present themselves to the world (MacAloon, 1981; Guttman, 1992). Consequently, the historical development of the Olympic Games constitutes an important field of inquiry not only for sports history but also for international relations, public diplomacy, and the study of state modernization.

The impact of mega sporting events on host countries has long attracted scholarly attention within the fields of sport history and sport management. In particular, the influence of the Olympic Games on international visibility, economic development, urban transformation, and national prestige has been examined from various disciplinary perspectives. Roche (2000) argues that mega-events are not merely sporting competitions but also important instruments through which host nations enhance their international recognition and reconstruct their national identities. This perspective suggests that the Olympic Games should be understood not only in terms of their sporting dimension but also in relation to their political, economic, and social consequences.

Within this context, Tokyo represents one of the most remarkable cases in modern Olympic history. The city was initially selected to host the 1940 Summer Olympic Games; however, Japan's withdrawal from hosting, followed by the outbreak of the Second World War, prevented the Games from taking place. Approximately twenty-four years later, Tokyo successfully hosted the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, becoming one of the most significant symbols of Japan's post-war reintegration into the international community (Collins, 2007).

A review of the literature on the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games indicates that previous studies have largely developed along two separate lines of inquiry. The first body of research focuses on the 1940 Olympic Project, examining Japan's bid process, organizational preparations, and the reasons why the Games were never held (Collins, 2007). The second body of literature primarily investigates the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games within the framework of post-war reconstruction, economic growth, and organizational success (Guttman, 1992). Nevertheless, studies that comparatively examine the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games as two complementary stages of Japan's transformation within the international system remain limited.

This gap represents an important deficiency in the Olympic history literature. Tokyo's selection as the host city for the Olympic Games in both 1940 and 1964 cannot simply be interpreted as two separate bids by the same city. Rather, these two Olympic projects provide a unique historical case for understanding Japan's changing position within the international system, the transformation of state policies, and the evolution of

the Olympic Movement. While the 1940 Olympic Project reflected Imperial Japan's aspiration to enhance its international visibility, the 1964 Olympic Games symbolized the post-war nation's reintegration into the international community and the emergence of a renewed national identity. Accordingly, examining these two Olympic projects together contributes not only to Japanese sports history but also to a broader understanding of the role of the Olympic Games within international politics and public diplomacy.

The purpose of this study is to examine the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games from a comparative perspective in order to reveal how Japan's transformation within the international system was reflected in Olympic organization. Specifically, the study investigates both the historical continuity and the differences between the unrealized 1940 Olympic Project and the successfully organized 1964 Olympic Games. Unlike previous studies, this research conceptualizes the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games not as two independent events but as two interconnected Olympic projects reflecting the transformation of Japan's international identity. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to Olympic history by providing a comparative historical perspective and by reassessing Japan's international transformation through the lens of the Olympic Games.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study was designed as a comparative historical study within the qualitative research paradigm. Comparative historical research enables the examination of similarities and differences between events occurring in different historical periods, thereby facilitating the explanation of institutional, political, and social transformations (George & Bennett, 2005). In this study, the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games were comparatively analyzed with particular emphasis on Japan's changing position within the international system and its evolving role in the Olympic Movement.

2.2. Data Sources

The data for this study consisted of both primary and secondary written sources. The primary sources included the official organizational reports of the Tokyo 1940 and Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games, together with the relevant session minutes of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). These documents constitute the core dataset of the study because they contain official records concerning the bidding processes, host city selection, organizational preparations, decision-making procedures, and the implementation of the Olympic Games.

The secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed books and scholarly articles on Olympic history, Japanese sport policy, mega sporting events, and international relations. These publications were used to contextualize the findings derived from the primary sources, compare them with the existing literature, and establish the theoretical framework of the study.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through document analysis. Document analysis is a qualitative research method that involves the systematic examination, evaluation, and interpretation of written documents relevant to a particular research topic (Bowen, 2009). In accordance with this approach, the selected primary and secondary sources were systematically reviewed, and sections containing information relevant to the research questions were identified and recorded. The collected data were subsequently organized according to chronological sequence, thematic consistency, and their relevance to the objectives of the study in preparation for analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a comparative historical analysis approach. This approach facilitates the systematic comparison and interpretation of historical events and processes that occurred during different periods by identifying their similarities and differences (George & Bennett, 2005). The analysis began with the chronological organization of the data, after which meaningful patterns relevant to the research questions were identified to establish the study's thematic framework.

The themes were developed by drawing upon Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Within this framework, the identified themes were comparatively examined and interpreted in their historical context in order to reveal the continuity and transformation between the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games.

2.5. Limitations

This study is limited to the available official documents and verifiable academic literature concerning the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Only data derived from published official reports, IOC archival documents, and peer-reviewed academic publications were included in the analysis. Information obtained from unverifiable secondary sources or historically questionable materials was deliberately excluded. This methodological approach was adopted to enhance the historical validity and scientific reliability of the study.

3. Results

3.1. The Emergence of the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project

Tokyo's bid to host the Games of the XII Olympiad emerged as the result of Japan's long-term efforts to strengthen its presence within the international Olympic Movement. According to the official report prepared by the Organizing Committee, the first proposal to bring the Olympic Games to Tokyo was put forward by Dr. Tadaoki Yamamoto in June 1930. This proposal quickly gained the support of Japanese sporting organizations and local authorities (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

The first official step in the bidding process was taken on 28 October 1931, when the Tokyo City Council approved a resolution inviting the Olympic Games to Tokyo. Following this decision, a preparatory committee was established to coordinate the city's candidacy, and international promotional activities were initiated in close cooperation with the Japanese Olympic Committee (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

One of the most influential figures in Japan's Olympic bid was Professor Jigoro Kano, a member of the International Olympic Committee. Acting on behalf of the Japanese Olympic Committee, Kano conducted extensive diplomatic negotiations to promote Tokyo's candidacy within the IOC. Together with Dr. Seiichi Kishi, Chairman of the Organizing Committee, he coordinated the international campaign supporting Tokyo's bid. The official report states that Tokyo's candidacy was formally presented during the IOC Session held in Los Angeles in 1932 and that the Japanese government officially endorsed the bid (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

Several cities competed for the right to host the 1940 Olympic Games, including Rome, Barcelona, Helsinki, Budapest, Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Dublin, and a Canadian candidate city. As the selection process progressed, however, many candidate cities withdrew their bids. By the time of the IOC Session held in Berlin in 1936, only Tokyo and Helsinki remained in contention. In the final vote, Tokyo defeated Helsinki by 36 votes to 27, securing the right to host the Games of the XII Olympiad (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

Following the awarding of the Games, organizational preparations accelerated considerably. The Organizing Committee established several specialized subcommittees responsible for the competition programme, sports venues, transportation, accommodation, finance, and international relations. At the same time, negotiations with the international sports federations commenced regarding the technical arrangements for the Games. According to the official report, all preparations were conducted in accordance with the Olympic Charter and were regularly reported to the International Olympic Committee (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

During the IOC Sessions held in Warsaw (1937) and Cairo (1938), the competition programme and technical regulations prepared by the Tokyo Organizing Committee were examined in detail. Although the IOC proposed several technical modifications concerning specific sports, it resolved that the organizational preparations should continue as planned (International Olympic Committee, 1937; International Olympic Committee, 1938). These decisions indicate that international preparations for the Tokyo Olympic Games continued without interruption until 1938.

Overall, the emergence of the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project demonstrates that the city's Olympic bid resulted from long-term strategic planning supported by close institutional cooperation among the Japanese Olympic Committee, the Tokyo municipal government, and the national government. The official documents further indicate that,

prior to the cancellation of the project, organizational preparations had progressed substantially and that Tokyo had already begun establishing the institutional capacity required to host the Olympic Games (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

3.2. The Termination of the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project

After Tokyo had been awarded the right to host the 1940 Summer Olympic Games, organizational preparations continued as planned. The Organizing Committee proceeded with preparations concerning sports venues, the competition programme, transportation, accommodation, and technical arrangements. Throughout this period, regular communication was maintained with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the progress of the preparations was reviewed during successive IOC Sessions (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

However, the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 significantly affected Japan's economic resources and public policy priorities, raising concerns regarding the sustainability of the Olympic project. As the war continued, public resources were increasingly redirected toward military needs, while restrictions on construction materials made it progressively more difficult to continue preparations for the Games (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

In response to these developments, the Japanese government decided in July 1938 to withdraw from hosting the Olympic Games. This decision was officially communicated to the International Olympic Committee through the Japanese Olympic Committee, thereby formally relinquishing Tokyo's right to host the 1940 Summer Olympic Games (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

Following Japan's withdrawal, the IOC addressed the issue of selecting a new host city during its 38th Session in Cairo in 1938. After deliberation, the IOC reassigned the 1940 Summer Olympic Games to Helsinki, one of the original candidate cities (International Olympic Committee, 1938). This decision clearly demonstrates that Japan's withdrawal did not result in the immediate cancellation of the Games. Rather, the IOC sought to preserve the Olympic Games by initiating an alternative host selection process.

Nevertheless, the rapidly deteriorating political situation in Europe and the outbreak of the Second World War prevented Helsinki from completing its preparations. As a result, the Games of the XII Olympiad were ultimately cancelled only after Tokyo had withdrawn and Helsinki had subsequently become unable to stage the Games because of the war (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940; International Olympic Committee, 1938).

The official report prepared by the Organizing Committee provides a detailed account of the preparations undertaken before Japan's withdrawal, including the planning of sports venues, the establishment of the organizational structure, and the coordination of international activities. These records indicate that substantial progress

had been achieved before the project was abandoned (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project had already developed considerable institutional and organizational capacity during the preparation phase. Its failure to materialize resulted not from deficiencies in planning or administration but from international political developments that prevented the project from progressing beyond the preparatory stage.

3.3. The 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games

Tokyo's successful bid to host the 1964 Summer Olympic Games marked a significant milestone in Japan's post-war reintegration into the international Olympic Movement. During its 55th Session held in Munich, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) selected Tokyo as the host city for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad. Consequently, following the unrealized 1940 Olympic Project, Tokyo was granted the right to host the Olympic Games for the second time (International Olympic Committee, 1959).

Following the award of the Games, organizational preparations officially commenced throughout Japan. The Organizing Committee implemented an extensive programme involving the construction and renovation of sports venues, the modernization of transportation infrastructure, the expansion of accommodation capacity, the improvement of communication systems, and comprehensive technical planning for the competitions. Throughout the preparation period, close coordination was maintained among national government agencies, local authorities, and sports organizations, while all organizational activities were carried out in accordance with the technical standards established by the IOC (Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, 1966).

The Games of the XVIII Olympiad were held in Tokyo from 10 to 24 October 1964. More than 5,000 athletes representing 93 countries participated in the Games, competing in 163 medal events across 19 sports (Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, 1966).

According to the Official Report, existing sports facilities were extensively renovated, new competition venues were constructed, and transportation and communication infrastructure were substantially upgraded to meet the organizational requirements of the Games. Specialized committees were established to oversee competition scheduling, officiating, athlete services, medical services, security, media operations, and international coordination, ensuring the efficient management of all aspects of the event (Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, 1966). Beyond the sporting competitions themselves, the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games introduced several innovations that represented important milestones in the history of the Olympic Movement. The Official Report emphasizes that the Games reached an unprecedented global audience through international television broadcasting, made extensive use of satellite communication technology, and introduced electronic timing

systems across numerous sporting events (Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, 1966).

Following the conclusion of the Games, the Official Report concluded that all competitions had been conducted according to the planned schedule, that the organizational and technical operations had been successfully implemented, and that the Games of the XVIII Olympiad had fully complied with the standards established by the International Olympic Committee (Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, 1966).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games are more appropriately understood not as two independent sporting events but as two interconnected Olympic projects reflecting Japan's transformation within the international system. The official report of the Organizing Committee demonstrates that the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project was implemented through a comprehensive planning process extending from the initial bid to Japan's withdrawal from hosting (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940). This finding supports Collins's (2007) argument that the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project should not merely be regarded as an unrealized sporting event but as an important component of Japan's broader strategy for international representation. According to Collins (2007), Tokyo's candidacy represented a concrete expression of Japan's efforts to secure a more visible position within the predominantly Western-centered Olympic Movement.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the distinction between Japan's withdrawal from hosting the 1940 Olympic Games and the eventual cancellation of the Games of the XII Olympiad. IOC records demonstrate that, following Japan's withdrawal in July 1938, the Games were reassigned to Helsinki and were cancelled only after the outbreak and escalation of the Second World War in Europe made their organization impossible (International Olympic Committee, 1938; Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940). In much of the existing literature, these two developments are often presented as a single historical event, thereby overlooking an important chronological distinction. Collins (2007) likewise emphasizes that the IOC's efforts to preserve the Olympic Games until 1938 deserve as much scholarly attention as the inevitable consequences of the war itself. In this respect, the findings of the present study contribute to a more nuanced historical interpretation by integrating official archival documents with the existing academic literature.

An examination of the preparation process for the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project further demonstrates that the project's failure cannot be attributed to institutional or organizational shortcomings. The official report documents that preparations concerning sports venues, transportation planning, organizational committees, and international coordination continued until the decision to withdraw was announced (Organizing Committee of the XIIth Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo, 1940). These findings are

consistent with Collins's (2007) interpretation that Japan's Olympic bid formed part of a broader strategy aimed at strengthening its international legitimacy. Consequently, the failure of the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project should be understood primarily as a consequence of international political circumstances rather than deficiencies in organizational capacity.

The findings relating to the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games present a markedly different historical context. The Official Report demonstrates that extensive preparations were undertaken in areas including sports infrastructure, transportation, communication systems, technological innovation, athlete services, and event management (Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, 1966). Guttman (1992) identifies the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games as one of the defining milestones in modern Olympic history, emphasizing that their technological innovations and organizational practices exerted a lasting influence on subsequent Olympic Games. The findings of the present study similarly indicate that the 1964 Games represented not only a successful sporting event but also a major stage in the evolution of modern Olympic organizational standards.

MacAloon (1981) conceptualizes the Olympic Games as symbolic cultural performances through which nations construct and communicate their identities to an international audience. The Tokyo case illustrates this perspective in two distinct historical contexts. Whereas the 1940 Olympic Project reflected Imperial Japan's aspiration to enhance its international visibility, the 1964 Olympic Games symbolized post-war Japan's reintegration into the international community and the presentation of a renewed national identity. This interpretation is also consistent with Collins's (2007) argument that Japan's Olympic policy should be understood not solely as a matter of sport policy but as an integral component of the country's broader strategy of international representation.

The findings of this study are likewise consistent with the theoretical literature on mega sporting events. According to Roche (2000), mega-events function as instruments through which host nations enhance their international visibility, strengthen national prestige, and redefine themselves within the global community. The Tokyo experience supports this perspective while also demonstrating that organizational capacity alone is insufficient to ensure the successful delivery of a mega sporting event. The contrasting outcomes of two Olympic projects undertaken by the same city—one ultimately unrealized and the other successfully completed—highlight the decisive influence of the international political environment on the sustainability of mega sporting events.

5. Recommendations

Future research may extend the comparative historical approach used in this study to other Olympic Games affected by war, political crises, boycotts, or major geopolitical transformations. Greater use of primary archival sources, including IOC records, governmental documents, contemporary newspapers, and diplomatic materials, may

provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between mega sporting events and international politics. From a practical perspective, the contrasting experiences of Tokyo 1940 and Tokyo 1964 highlight the importance of incorporating political stability, international relations, crisis management, and institutional coordination into the planning of mega sporting events. Further studies may also examine how Olympic hosting contributes to national identity, international image, and public diplomacy under changing historical circumstances.

6. Conclusion

This study comparatively examined the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games in order to explore how Japan's transformation within the international system was reflected through the Olympic Movement. Based on official organizational reports, IOC archival records, and verified academic literature, the findings demonstrate that these two Olympic projects should be understood as interconnected stages of a broader historical process rather than as isolated sporting events.

The findings reveal that the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project progressed through a comprehensive and systematic organizational process until Japan formally relinquished its hosting rights in July 1938. Contrary to a common assumption in parts of the existing literature, Japan's withdrawal from hosting did not constitute the cancellation of the Games of the XII Olympiad. Instead, following Japan's withdrawal, the International Olympic Committee reassigned the Games to Helsinki, and the Games were ultimately cancelled only after the outbreak and escalation of the Second World War made their organization impossible. This chronological distinction represents one of the principal historical contributions of the present study.

The study further demonstrates that the failure of the Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project cannot be attributed to organizational or institutional deficiencies. Rather, official archival evidence indicates that the project had achieved a substantial level of organizational development before international political circumstances rendered its continuation impossible. Consequently, the unrealized Tokyo 1940 Olympic Project should be interpreted primarily as a victim of geopolitical developments rather than as an unsuccessful organizational initiative.

In contrast, the successful organization of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games reflected Japan's post-war reconstruction, renewed international legitimacy, and growing organizational capacity. Beyond their sporting significance, the 1964 Games represented Japan's re-emergence as an active and respected member of the international community while also establishing new standards in Olympic organization through technological innovation and modern event management.

Taken together, the comparative analysis presented in this study contributes to the literature by proposing that the Tokyo Olympic experience should be interpreted as a continuous historical process extending from the unrealized 1940 Olympic Project to the successful staging of the 1964 Games. This perspective provides a more comprehensive

understanding of the relationship between mega sporting events, international politics, and national transformation, while also highlighting the value of integrating official archival sources into Olympic history research.

Future research may extend this comparative perspective by examining other Olympic host cities whose Games were affected by war, political crises, or major geopolitical transformations. Such studies would further enhance our understanding of the dynamic relationship between international politics and the Olympic Movement across different historical contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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