

Cultural Comment  
The New Yorker

# Japan's Olympic-Sized Problem

*The government's inept response to the coronavirus pandemic has led to widespread discontent about hosting the Games.*

**By Matt Alt**

May 16, 2021



*Many Japanese citizens oppose the government's plan to hold the Tokyo Olympics despite a coronavirus surge and lagging immunization rates. Photograph by Yuichi Yamazaki / Getty*

Japan has a long and complicated relationship with the Olympics. Tokyo's successful bid for the 1940 Summer Games was the first such campaign by a non-Western nation, but Japan's invasion of China in 1937 compelled the government to forfeit its hard-won hosting privileges to the runner-up city of Helsinki. (The Games were eventually cancelled altogether, after the outbreak of the Second World War.) The 1964 Summer Olympics, in Tokyo, represented a triumphant comeback for a country that in wartime defeat had fallen to the status of a "fourth-rate nation," as General Douglas MacArthur put it just days after Japan's surrender. Now, in 2021, the Tokyo Olympics teeter on the brink once again. The cause, this time, isn't war or geopolitics. It is the collective voice of Japanese citizens, energized in their demands that the Games be cancelled.

Their problem isn't with the Olympics per se, although local commentators have decried the vast sums being spent on the efforts—the equivalent of some \$15.4 billion, double the amount that Tokyo's organizers claimed would be needed when they won the bid, in

2013. Rather, the Olympics have become a symbol of the Japanese government's inept response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Despite the government's having procured more than three hundred million vaccine doses from foreign manufacturers—the largest amount of any country in Asia—a combination of logistical blunders, regulatory hurdles, and lack of manpower for administering shots has conspired to keep the vast majority out of the arms of citizens. Immunizations for the nation's nearly five million frontline health-care workers began in February, but less than a third of this group has been fully vaccinated. And efforts to vaccinate the population at large began only in April, with citizens sixty-five and older; as of May 13th, only forty-five thousand senior citizens had completed both doses of the Pfizer regimen. (Due to bureaucratic red tape, Pfizer remains the only vaccine currently approved for use in Japan.) Infections continue to rage in major cities—the nation experienced more deaths from covid-19 in the first four months of 2021 than it did in all of 2020, and, as a percentage of the population, the death rate in Osaka is

currently outstripping that of India. Yet there remains no official timetable for when those under sixty-five will begin to receive shots. The situation led the Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, to extend through the remainder of the month a state of emergency that had been expected to end on May 11th.

The government's insistence on holding the Olympics in spite of it all has led to widespread discontent in Japan. Originally scheduled for the summer of 2020, the Games were postponed for a year; in March, with the nation's borders still locked down to nonresidents, the government announced that the events would have to proceed without overseas spectators. Suga has sworn that he is committed to a "safe and secure Olympics," but in practice has done little to inspire confidence. The announcement that he had procured vaccines for the visiting athletes and their entourages sparked questions, still unanswered, about the safety of thousands of unvaccinated Japanese volunteers. Then, in April, six Olympic officials came down with covid-19 while overseeing the running of the torch in Kagoshima. (In a cruel irony, several seem to have caught it while holding

up signs encouraging social distancing among the spectators.) Organizers' subsequent requests for hundreds of doctors and nurses to volunteer at the Games, even as hospital facilities in several major cities are nearing their breaking points, have drawn sharp rebukes from health-care professionals. Recent surveys show that a majority of citizens want the Games either stopped or postponed again; meanwhile, an online petition calling for their cancellation garnered three hundred and fifty thousand signatures.

Suga has promised to accelerate the pace of vaccinations to a million a day, but has articulated little in the way of concrete plans, couching his vision in terms of broad "aims." During a recent press conference, the vaccine czar Taro Kono admitted that municipal vaccine-reservation hotlines had been overwhelmed, but requested that "people refrain from issuing complaints."

They have not refrained. On Tuesday, the publisher Takarajimasha took out two-page color ads in several national newspapers. Above a vintage black-and-white

photograph of schoolchildren being drilled with makeshift weapons in the desperate last days of the Second World War, a crimson rendering of a coronavirus hovers in a grotesque parody of Japan's national flag. The tagline reads, "No vaccines. No medicine. Do you expect us to fight with bamboo spears? If things keep up like this, we'll be killed by politics."

To date, the 1940 Games remain Japan's only forfeited Olympics, but they are joined by a famous failure from fantasy. The 1988 anime film "Akira," directed by Katsuhiro Otomo and based on his manga series of the same name, is set in a post-apocalyptic "Neo-Tokyo" of 2019. The promise of a glimmering skyline filled with futuristic skyscrapers is quickly betrayed by violence unfolding in the streets below, where hapless citizens are menaced by vicious biker gangs, militarized police, political extremists, money-grubbing politicians, bizarre millennial cults, and military-engineered killer psychics. The climax takes place in an Olympic stadium that is still under construction. The sign out front marks a hundred and forty-seven days remaining until the

opening ceremony, exhorting, “Let’s all pull together to make this a success.” But visible beneath this cheerful slogan is a spray-painted graffito: “*Chuushi da chuushi*” —“Cancel it, cancel!” or, in a more prosaic translation, “Just stop it.”

As of this writing, there are far fewer than a hundred and forty-seven days left until the real-life Olympics, and, as opening day approaches, the lines between fact and fantasy are blurring. Japanese netizens were quick to note the connection between “Akira” and the events unfolding in the real world. Student protesters at Kyoto University erected a simulacrum of the Akira billboard in February of 2020, and, over the course of the year, the phrase “Just stop it” emerged as a rallying cry for those opposed to holding the Games. At street protests in March, participants marched through the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo behind a banner festooned with the phrase in English and Japanese. On May 9th, more than a hundred protesters marched outside of Tokyo’s National Stadium with similar signs.

Throughout the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, increasingly sophisticated forms of anime and manga

nourished the Japanese student-protest movement, in much the same way that folk rock embodied the spirit of American antiwar activism. For decades, this remained a local phenomenon, but, as anime has grown from a subculture into a major international export, this has begun to happen abroad as well. In recent years, anime characters have been pressed into service by aggrieved groups across the political spectrum, ranging from the acolytes of Donald Trump to those fighting for democracy in the streets of Hong Kong and Thailand. One could say that the Tokyo Olympic protesters' use of anime imagery represents a return to roots.

At the climax of "Akira," the film's protagonist, Kaneda, and his foil, Tetsuo, a biker buddy transformed into an enormous amoeba-like creature, destroy the Olympic stadium while Neo-Tokyo's citizens riot in the streets. In present-day Tokyo, things have not reached this crescendo of chaos. The protests have been orderly, focussed on the matter at hand, and refreshingly without digressions into nationalism or xenophobia. But the numerous and serious concerns about the government's response to the pandemic remain. Prominent voices have



begun speaking out. “If it’s putting people at risk, and if it’s making people very uncomfortable, then it definitely should be a discussion” as to whether the Games should be held, the tennis star Naomi Osaka said. The C.E.O. of Rakuten, Japan’s domestic e-commerce giant, was more blunt in an interview with CNN, declaring the Games a “suicide mission.” It is unclear whether Tokyo will play host to the Summer Olympics as planned, or if the event will fade into memory alongside the phantom Games of 1940. But, however it plays out, chances are that history will frame this period in much the same terms as that epic animated conflict from “Akira”: furious Japanese citizens battling a mutating foe, against the backdrop of an Olympics that nobody save politicians seems to want.