

The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions

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In today's world, commitment to the Olympic Games and Olympism by the nations that made up the old Soviet Union is in doubt. The chances for commitment are compromised by an atmosphere featuring chronic political and economic crisis. The period of perestroika (March, 1985-August, 1991) is at an end. The Soviet Union no longer officially exists; it has disintegrated into a dozen or more autonomous and highly nationalistic states, most of them formally part of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Mass starvation threatens, crime rates rise, and the ethnic conflicts or civil wars now in progress are likely to engulf all and everything for the foreseeable future.

It is against such a background that the changing Russian attitude to the Olympic Games has to be understood. But it is also an opportune moment to examine and review the history of Soviet involvement with the Olympic movement. After all, in terms of winning medals, the USSR, as well as other communist countries, particularly the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), have played an outstanding role in the post-World War II history of the Olympic Games.

Historical Background

Russia was one of the dozen founding members of the modern Olympic movement, represented at the June 1894 Paris meeting by General A.D. Butovsky. All the same, no Russian National Olympic Committee (NOC) came into being for another 17 years, and no Russian team competed at the Olympics until 1908. After sending a team to the 1912 Games in Stockholm, it would be another 40 years before Russians competed once more at the Olympic Games.¹ After the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Soviet leadership initially ignored "bourgeois" sports organizations and competitions, especially the Olympic Games which were characterized as designed to "deflect workers from the class struggle and to train them for new imperialist wars."² In any case, there was strong pressure within Soviet Russia during the 1920s against the development of organized competitive sports in the new proletarian state. Exactly what the new pattern would be was uncertain, but few thinkers felt that it should be governed by the types of sports and regulations embodied in the Olympic Games, which were thought to reflect the social distinctions and privileges current in Western society.

For the most part, as long as the USSR remained isolated and weak internationally, foreign sports relations were restricted to worker sports

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organizations and reflected the policy of the Communist International (Comintern) and its subsidiary, Red Sport International.³

Following World War II, Soviet military power had penetrated into Central and Eastern Europe, radically altering the balance of power in Europe and the world. Within the space of the four immediate postwar years, ten Soviet-aligned states came into being. In the circumstances of international friction or "Cold War," and of the existence of two "hostile" camps and rival military blocs confronting one another in a divided Europe, sport became an obvious arena for international competition, for "defeating" one's ideological opponent.

In the USSR, domestic sport was now thought strong enough to take on the world: victories over "bourgeois" states would demonstrate the vitality of the Soviet system. Thus, in the mood of nationalistic fervour that accompanied a great military victory, Soviet sport was to take the offensive and, in the words of a Party resolution on sport in 1949, all sports committees were: "to spread sport to every corner of the land, to raise the level of skill and, on that basis, to help Soviet athletes win world supremacy in major sports in the immediate future."⁴

It became evident that if the USSR were to compete internationally, it would have to join existing international federations and comply with their regulations. The appearance, at least, had to be given that athletes complied with the definition of an "amateur." Thus, in July 1947, the government issued a special resolution in which it reversed its earlier prescription of monetary rewards and now declared that the only awards to be made for national and world records were to be gold and silver medals and badges.⁵

The stage was now set for international qualification, the expansion of all Olympic sports, the setting up of special sports talent schools and, in some cases (eg. ice hockey), starting the sport from scratch. In the immediate postwar years, therefore, Soviet sports federations affiliated to nearly all the major international sports bodies and Soviet athletes were competing regularly at home and abroad against foreign "bourgeois" opposition, as well as in competitions between the ten "Soviet-aligned" states.

In the West, too, it was felt by most governments and sports governing bodies that it was valuable and expedient to have sporting contacts with the USSR and other East European countries, both as an expression of the formal victors' unity that survived the war, and as a relatively harmless means of keeping certain options open for a more cooperative future (as in other cultural exchanges).

Once the decision was taken in the USSR to take on the best in the world, political attitudes to Soviet sports performance changed in both capitalist and communist states, none more so than within the USSR itself. As the immediate postwar Chairman of the government Committee on Physical Culture and Sport, Nikolai Romanov, recalls in his memoirs:

Once we decided to take part in foreign competitions, we were forced to guarantee victory, otherwise the "free" bourgeois press would fling mud at the whole nation as well as our athletes. That actually did happen. To gain permission to go to international tournaments I had to send a special note to Stalin guaranteeing victory.⁶

As the Cold War got underway and the domestic political climate was suffering a new “hothouse effect” (the regime launched a new wide-ranging purge, this time against what it termed “rootless cosmopolitans” (Jews) and those who “kowtowed before foreign culture”), doubts began to be cast on whether Soviet sport could mount the sort of all-around challenge that would secure Olympic victory.

It was at this juncture that a rumour spread (perhaps not without foundation) that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had invited Soviet athletes to the 1948 London Games. This was certainly met with some acclaim among sports enthusiasts, particularly at the prestigious Stalin Institute of Physical Culture and the Army Physical Training College. Within a few days, however, an official riposte appeared in the weekly *Fizicheskaya kultura i sport* under the heading “What is happening behind the Olympic scenes?” It reiterated Soviet opposition to Olympism on the grounds that the Olympics were run by capitalists and aristocrats, that workers had little chance of competing, that racial discrimination against Jews and Blacks had occurred in Berlin in 1936 and would be applied against East Europeans who, in any case, might well be corrupted and recruited as spies. Subsequently, the government denounced the IOC. More sinisterly, several student-athletes were expelled from the above-mentioned institutions, their principals (S.M. Frumin of the Stalin Institute and General Kalpus of the Army College) were arrested and tried as spies in the pay of foreign intelligence, and subsequently shot in 1950—as were “many sports officials and PE lecturers.”⁷ A number of (mainly Jewish) sports scientists and medics were accused of “anti-patriotic,” “anti-scientific” and “cosmopolitan” deviations, and arrested; they included such eminent figures as D.A. Kradman, A.D. Novikov, Ye. Yu. Zelikson and I.M. Sarkizov-Serazini.⁸

Following the unexpected defeat of Soviet speed-skaters in the European Championships held at Stockholm in 1948, the sports minister Romanov was immediately sacked and replaced by the security force deputy chief Apollonov — partly to put the “fear of God” (or Stalin) into Soviet athletes, and partly to bring better discipline and organization to the sports movement at a time when athletes were venturing into the international arena. As compensation to athletes for not going to the 1948 Olympics, a more “controllable” event—a worker Olympics — was proposed for all the states of Eastern Europe.

The IOC and the USSR

Suspicion and hostility in regard to the USSR existed among some members of the IOC, particularly its leading lights — J. Sigfrid Edstrom, Avery Brundage and Colonel P.W. Scharroo. Edstrom had closely observed the Moscow Dinamo soccer team that toured Sweden in the summer of 1947. He reported in a letter sent on 28 October 1947 to members of the IOC Executive Commission:

The team and a number of reserves are engaged by the state which pays them their annual salary. They are in continuous training for eight months of each year, training every day. They are fed well, have very few pleasures in life except playing football, they smoke very little and do not touch alcohol . . . This verifies what I have heard before, that the organisation of athletes in Russia is carried on by the state.⁹

Some two weeks later, Edstrom received a report from Executive Committee member Colonel P.W. Scharroo on the subject of Soviet sport. The letter's style barely concealed the author's distaste for communism and the USSR:

In Soviet Russia physical culture is obligatory for the whole populace... the government uses it to increase the military and economic strength of the Russians... No national federations can conform to the rules of the international federations. It is also impossible to create an Olympic Committee independent of the government... Any (Russian) IOC member would only be a pawn, bound hand and foot by the government. In Russia nobody is free and independent. Individuals are only numbers in the state.¹⁰

Despite the tendentious tone, Scharroo evidently had a fairly clear picture of Soviet sporting reality: the training camps, full-time employment in sport, government remuneration and control, the importance of national prestige through sport, and bonuses for record setting and international victories. Scharroo's statement that "Athletes who do not attain their peak performances in international competitions and other events are severely punished"¹¹ was regarded with some doubt at the time, yet Romanov's memoirs seem to confirm the view: "Responsibility for the final result was high, and the consequences of defeat were very serious."¹² The conclusion was clear: that Soviet athletes "do not conform to the amateur laws of the IOC and cannot take part in the Olympic games."¹³

Having received copies of Edstrom's and Scharroo's letters, the man shortly to take over from Edstrom as IOC President, Avery Brundage, immediately responded. In a letter to Edstrom, Brundage admitted he had been "lukewarm about the attempts to induce the Russians to participate in the Olympic Games." He recalled the affront to the Olympic movement when the USSR had arranged parallel Worker Games in 1932 and 1936. "Even without the Russians," he continued, "every appearance of delegates from satellite (sic) countries since the war has been marred by political discussion. It looks as though we are in for a bitter struggle to maintain our freedom."¹⁴

In the end, the Soviet leadership decided to send only a small group of observers to the 1948 London Games. Its task was: "To seek an answer to the question; would we win if we were to enter the Olympic community and take part in the 1952 Games? The best friend of Soviet physical culturists was not interested in who was running or jumping what; for him victory was proof of 'my country being strong and obedient to me.' Any failure would discredit the system — i.e., sport had become a weapon of big-time politics."¹⁵

Having then "survived" London with nothing more than a token Soviet presence in the stands, the IOC began to prepare for Helsinki in 1952. The summer Games were to be staged, it must be noted, in a country bordering the USSR, in fact, one once part of the Russian empire. By late 1949, it was becoming clear that the Soviet leadership had again done an about face, and was now planning to go to Helsinki. The IOC found itself on the horns of a dilemma. The IOC leaders knew well that Soviet athletes did not conform to the amateur Olympic rules in terms of employment and remuneration, yet they had received assurances from the USSR that practices had changed to enable athletes to qualify.

It was a situation that IOC Vice-President, Avery Brundage, described as “loaded with dynamite.” In a December 1950 letter to Edstrom, Brundage cautioned that “the IOC is going to be at the centre of the explosion when it develops if we are not careful.” Brundage could not resist a Cold War cliché: “According to Communist philosophy, every person and everything is subservient to the State.” Nonetheless, Brundage’s conclusion was consistent with his past assessments: “If we conform to fundamental Olympic principles and follow our rules and regulations we cannot possibly recognize any Communist Olympic committee.”¹⁶

Four months later, the IOC recognized the USSR Olympic Committee. Recognition came in response to the following telegram from Sobolev, Secretary of the newly-formed USSR Olympic Committee:

We inform you that an Olympic Committee was created in the URSS (sic). This Olympic Committee examined the Rules of the IOC and declares them accepted. The Olympic Committee of URSS requires its admission to the IOC.¹⁷

Despite the terse tone of the telegram, at least it was devoid of the sort of demands contained in previous Soviet applications to join amateur sports federations, namely, that Russian be an official language, a Soviet representative join the Executive Committee, Fascist Spain be excluded from membership.

The USSR and IOC

What caused the Soviet about face after its implacable opposition to the Olympic movement? One may conjecture on the following:

- i) Stalin was 70 in 1949; all his life he had been a staunch opponent of Soviet participation in the Olympics.¹⁸ In the last few years of his life (he died in early 1953), however, he was losing his grip on policy-making;
- ii) With the worker sports movement in abeyance and the remnants in the hands of “revisionists,” there were few friends left to play with. Even the “allies” in Eastern Europe had turned down the offer to take part in a Worker Olympics to run parallel with the Helsinki Olympics; in fact, several of them had had long and happy relations with the IOC before the war;
- iii) By 1949 the USSR had developed its own atomic bomb, thereby breaking the US monopoly. This gave it a measure of security and confidence, and a desire to promote a policy of peaceful coexistence in which sport was to play an important part;
- iv) By the early 1950s, after a period of “test” victories in several sports (notably weightlifting, wrestling, soccer and track and field), Soviet leaders evidently thought the USSR was ready to take on the world’s best in the broad range of Olympic sports. After all, Soviet athletes had been in intensive training, precisely

with the 1952 Olympics in mind, ever since the 1948 London Games (they were not to be ready for the Winter Games until 1956). How successful that preparation had been was later demonstrated by the Soviet Olympic debut.

If the Soviet abrupt change of policy towards the Olympics was mystifying to some, the IOC *démarche* was nothing short of astonishing. Brundage, gathering momentum as a spokesman for the IOC, even before he became president in 1952, explained what to him was little more than a “surrender.” In a statement following the IOC meeting in Vienna in early May 1951, Brundage reminisced on the issue:

When the IOC received the application for recognition from the USSR Olympic Committee, it found itself in a dilemma. Many members believed there was no amateurism, nor respect for the Olympic Code behind the Iron Curtain. They felt that rules and regulations would not be followed and that there would not be any means of ascertaining whether or not they were complied with . . . Others felt that if Russian youth became acquainted with the Olympic Code of fair play and good sportsmanship, benefits might accrue, not only to the participants, but also to the rest of the world. If the application for recognition was denied, it was apparent that there would be a noisy communist outburst against the Committee which would be charged with violating its own regulation against introducing politics into sport. After considerable discussion, recognition was granted.¹⁹

One awkward precedent that may have influenced the IOC was the recommended full recognition given to the West German Olympic Committee by the IOC Executive Board (despite vigorous British opposition) at its Lausanne meeting a year previously, in 1950. Just before the Vienna meeting, however, East Germany also applied for recognition. At the same time, early in 1951, other East European applications for IOC recognition arrived. Following the Soviet example, all were accompanied by the (false) claim that their nation abided by the IOC charter. In all cases, Master of Sport (i.e., professional) athletes and above received either officer sinecures in the armed forces or security services (Dinamo), “studentships” for as long as their active career in sport lasted, or a factory job without the necessity of ever going to work other than on payday. In today’s condition of glasnost and beyond, all this is admitted in the USSR.

East Versus West Rivalry Begins

What else could the IOC have done? As Brundage put it bluntly:

It is difficult, of course, under present conditions to tell what takes place behind the Iron Curtain, but the feeling of the majority was that we should accept their (Soviet) declaration and assume that the Olympic rules are being followed until we learn to the contrary.²⁰

In fact, it was to take another thirty five years before information “to the contrary” was officially given in the USSR; by that time communist nations had come to dominate both winter and summer Olympics, and the Soviet Union had become the most successful all-around sporting nation in Olympic history.

Brundage, ever the pragmatist, at least had the prescience to realize the significance of the confrontation between East and West as he looked ahead to Helsinki: “Since for the first time these games will provide a direct comparison between our boys and girls and those from the Communist world, it is essential that we send our best and strongest team.”²¹ The best, of course, was never quite good enough, as the record makes it quite clear that athletes from communist nations, especially those from the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic, achieved an abundance of Olympic honors since 1952. Since it made its debut at the Summer Olympics in Helsinki in 1952, and the Winter Olympics at Cortina d’Ampezzo in 1956, the USSR has “won” every Olympics, summer and winter, for which it has entered, with the sole exception of 1968, and the winters of 1980 and 1984. It won a quarter of all medals at the Seoul Olympics in 1988, and is the most versatile nation in Olympic history, competing in all summer and winter sports, and winning medals in twenty one of the twenty three sports represented at the 1988 Olympics. Table 1 shows medals won by the top six Olympic teams, 1952-1988, illustrating the Soviet supremacy, but also showing that communist states provided two of the top three nations in the Summer Olympics since 1968 (save 1984 when they provided two of the top four, despite an almost complete communist boycott of the Los Angeles Games) and in the Winter Games since 1972.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that sport is virtually the only area (apart from space conquest) in which the USSR has been able to demonstrate superiority over the world’s most advanced capitalist nations.

The Modern Olympic Games have been wrought by myriad problems and crises since the IOC opened the door to the USSR in May 1951. We have witnessed a number of boycotts and drug scandals, two communist Olympic hosts (Yugoslavia and the USSR), open professionalism, the upsurge of the Afro-Asian challenge, the expulsion and readmittance of South Africa, just to name some of the most vexing. The entry of the USSR to the Olympic movement is now a mere footnote to Olympic history. It was not a very savory episode for either side, with political prejudice and ignorance displayed by some IOC members, and blatant deceit and hypocrisy by the Soviet leadership. Yet who is to say that common sense did not prevail in welcoming the communist nations into the Olympic family, or even that the principles of Olympism did not ultimately prove stronger than national prejudices and political creeds?

Rejection of the Sports Supremacy Policy

Paradoxically, the sporting success of East European nations in the Olympic Games, particularly of the USSR and GDR, increasingly undermined the ideological basis of the sports supremacy policy as perceived by the populations of those countries. Some foreigners may have been impressed by the efficient sports system behind the success; some overseas fans may well have been inspired by the possibilities evidently opened up by socialism. But at home there were many who were sceptical of, even hostile to the world domination policy, especially through

Summer Olympics						Winter Olympics				
Year and venues of Olympic Games	National Olympic Teams	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total	National Olympic Teams	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1952 Helsinki (S) Oslo (W)	USA	40	19	17	76	Norway	7	3	6	16
	USSR	22	30	19	71	USA	4	6	1	11
	Hungary	16	10	16	42	Finland	3	4	2	9
	Sweden	12	13	10	35	Austria	2	4	2	8
	West Germany	0	7	17	24	West Germany	3	2	2	7
	Finland	6	3	13	22	Sweden	0	0	4	4
1956 Melbourne (S) Cortina d'Ampezzo (W)	USSR	37	29	32	98	USSR	7	3	6	16
	USA	32	25	17	74	Austria	4	3	4	11
	Austria	13	8	14	35	Sweden	2	4	4	10
	Germany	6	13	7	26	Finland	3	3	1	7
	Hungary	9	10	7	26	USA	2	3	2	7
	Great Britain	6	7	11	24	Switzerland	3	2	1	6
1960 Rome (S) Squaw Valley (W)	USSR	43	29	31	103	USSR	7	5	9	21
	USA	34	21	16	71	USA	3	4	3	10
	Germany	12	19	11	42	Germany	4	3	1	8
	Italy	13	10	13	36	Finland	2	3	3	8
	Hungary	6	8	7	21	Sweden	3	2	2	7
	Poland	4	6	11	21	Norway	3	3	0	6
1964 Tokyo (S) Innsbruck (W)	USSR	30	31	35	96	USSR	11	8	6	25
	USA	36	26	28	90	Norway	3	6	6	15
	Germany	10	22	18	50	Austria	4	5	3	12
	Japan	16	5	8	29	Finland	3	4	3	10
	Italy	10	10	7	27	Germany	3	2	3	8
	Hungary	10	7	5	22	Sweden	3	3	1	7
1968 Mexico City (S) Grenoble (W)	USA	45	28	34	107	Norway	6	6	2	14
	USSR	29	32	30	91	USSR	5	5	3	13
	Hungary	10	10	12	32	Austria	3	4	4	11
	GDR	9	9	7	25	Sweden	3	3	3	9
	Japan	11	7	7	25	Holland	3	3	3	9
	West Germany	5	10	10	25	France	4	2	2	8

1972 Munich (S)	USSR	50	27	22	99	USSR	8	5	3	16
	USA	33	31	30	94	GDR	4	3	7	14
	GDR	20	23	23	66	Norway	2	5	5	12
	West Germany	13	11	16	40	Switzerland	4	3	3	10
	Hungary	6	13	16	35	Holland	4	2	2	9
Sapporo (W)	Japan	13	8	8	29	West Germany	3	1	1	5
1976 Montreal (S)	USSR	49	41	35	125	USSR	13	6	8	27
	USA	34	35	25	94	GDR	7	5	7	19
	GDR	40	25	25	90	USA	3	3	4	10
	West Germany	10	12	17	39	West Germany	2	5	3	10
	Romania	4	9	14	27	Finland	2	4	1	7
Innsbruck (W)	Poland	7	6	13	26	Austria	2	2	2	6
1980 Moscow (S)	USSR	80	69	46	195	GDR	9	7	1	23
	GDR	47	31	42	126	USSR	10	6	6	22
	Bulgaria	8	16	17	41	USA	6	4	2	12
	Poland	3	14	15	32	Norway	1	3	6	10
	Hungary	7	10	15	32	Finland	1	5	3	9
Lake Placid (W)	Romania	6	6	13	25	Austria	3	3	2	8
1984 Los Angeles (S)	USA	83	61	31	175	USSR	6	10	9	25
	West Germany	17	19	23	59	GDR	9	9	6	24
	Romania	20	16	17	53	Finland	4	3	6	13
	Canada	10	18	16	44	Norway	3	2	4	9
	China	15	8	9	32	USA	4	4	0	8
Sarajevo (W)	Italy	14	0	12	26	Sweden	4	2	2	8
1988 Seoul (S)	USSR	55	31	46	132	USSR	11	9	9	29
	GDR	37	35	30	102	GDR	9	10	6	25
	USA	36	31	27	94	Switzerland	5	5	5	15
	West Germany	11	14	15	40	Austria	3	5	2	10
	South Korea	12	10	11	33	Finland	4	1	2	7
Calgary (W)	Hungary	11	6	6	23	Sweden	4	0	2	6

Table 1: Medals Won by Top Six Olympic Teams, 1952-1988

the Olympic Games. This may be puzzling to some Westerners brought up on the “noble principles of Olympism”; in fact, one might construct a paradigm of traditional Western and popular East European perceptions of the Olympic movement.

West	Eastern Europe
Non-Political	Political/ideological
Amateur/Voluntary	State “shamateurism”/coercion
Independent Clubs/amateur federations/ university sponsorship	Security/armed forces
Universal/autonomous	Soviet/Russian hegemony
Fair play/open participation	Win at all costs/drug abuse/exploitation of children
Sport for all/self-financing	Distorted priorities in national income dispensation

It may justifiably be argued that Olympic realities never matched the noble aims set for Olympism by Baron Pierre de Coubertin and, in any case, have in recent years turned from largely amateur-elitism to mainly professional-commercialism. But it is the traditional and popular perceptions of Olympism that are referred to here. In the case of Eastern European countries, it will help us comprehend why the new leaderships are rapidly switching resources from Olympic commitment to commercial sport, sport for all, and sport for entertainment, dismantling along the way, institutions specifically intended for “breeding” champions.

The fact is, to many ordinary Soviet people and the new political leadership, the Olympic Games and Olympism represent all that is bad in the old regime’s policies: politics and ideology, hypocrisy and sham, paramilitary coercion, Russian diktat, drug abuse, exploitation of children, and grossly and immorally distorted priorities. Though each is discussed below, a caveat ought to be kept in mind, that in what was once the Soviet Union, the popular mood encourages a tendency “to cast out the baby with the bathwater” in all areas — in people’s haste to distance themselves from the past. This exhibits a peculiar Russian propensity to swing from one extreme to the other. So, too, with sport and Olympism.

Politics and Ideology

The striving for world supremacy in Olympic sport for political purposes — to demonstrate (largely to the Third World) the superiority of Soviet-style communism over US-style capitalism-is now utterly discredited. As the World Chess Champion Garri Kasparov has said of the policy:

International victories and titles won by Soviet athletes were supposed to prove “yet again” the advantages of socialism over capitalism... A world chess champion was nothing short of a political post .²²

As an example of political interference in sport, the one-time Soviet international goalkeeper and now sports commentator, Vladimir Maslachenko, recounts an

occasion before leaving for the 1982 World (Soccer) Cup in Spain, when he and other journalists were summoned before the then Sports Minister Marat Gramov. Opening a leather-bound folder emblazoned with the gold letters CCCPSU (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), he “told us exactly what we could and could not say in public.”²³

What no one could openly say, owing to strict censorship, was that Dinamo was the sports society sponsored and financed by the security forces, that athletes devoted themselves full time to sport and were paid accordingly, that athletes received bonuses for winning (including dollars), that the NOC was a government-run institution and that its Chairman had to be a member of the Communist Party, that Soviet athletes used drugs, etc.

The last Soviet Sports Minister, Nikolai Rusak, admitted that “our sports ministry was oriented primarily on attaining prestigious victories in international tournaments.” In response to pressure, he promised that:

Concern for promoting both sport for all and high-performance sport will steadily shift to independent federations. In time the Sports Committee will focus its efforts on training personnel, on the social protection of athletes and the provision of sports facilities.²⁴

It remains to be seen whether this will indeed occur. Time ran out for Rusak and his ministry (Rusak evidently backed the “wrong” side in the attempted coup of 19-21 August 1991). The government closed down the sports ministry in January 1992.²⁵

Hypocrisy

Communist Party manipulation of sport also involved a great deal of enforced hypocrisy. All athletes, coaches, sports medical personnel, officials and journalists had to toe the line and, not infrequently, “lie through their teeth” if they wanted to keep their jobs and not fall afoul of the law enforcement agencies, indeed, to assert that Soviet athletes were amateurs, instead of having army officer or KGB sinecures, eternal student status or false registration at a workplace. We have seen above how the Soviet leadership introduced “state amateur” status into Soviet sport in the early 1950s as a ploy to join the Olympic movement. From then on the appearance had to be given that performers received no remuneration for their sports performance, nor did they devote themselves fully to sport. The public, of course, knew differently, but it was part of the double-think of the 1950-1985 period never to mention it in public. In fact, all athletes, once they attained Master of Sport ranking, could devote themselves full time to sport with the state’s backing.

Now the veil is being drawn aside. As the leading Soviet male swimmer, Vladimir Salnikov, revealed early in 1989: “We have rid ourselves of hypocritical declarations about so-called amateurism and sporting achievements. Professionalism has been recognized and athletes no longer have to compromise themselves.”²⁶

A year previously, the youth monthly *Yunost* admitted that:

We got used to living a double life because many of our idols did

the same. We condemned professional sport in the West and were proud that our champions were amateurs. We took it for granted that they trained for six or seven hours each day after work or study. Yet everyone knew that most athletes never went to work or college, and they met their workmates or fellow students only on pay day.²⁷

It is now officially admitted that top soccer players, for example, received twice or three times the salary of the average working woman or man, specifically for playing soccer and spending as many as 250 days annually in training.²⁸

Sport and the Paramilitary

A salient feature of the turbulent revolutions during 1989 in Eastern Europe and the continuing unrest in the former Soviet Union has been the welling-up of hostility and revenge directed against the paramilitary forces that had shored up the old corrupt order. It is therefore understandable that their sponsored sports clubs should suffer by association. Soviet elite sport has always been linked to the paramilitary. In fact, since the end of World War II, the East European (and world communist) sports system has been dominated by clubs of the security forces and armed forces (see Table 2). Most sports heroes, therefore, have officially been soldiers or police officers, guardians of public order and role models for a disciplined, obedient and patriotic citizenry. Thus, to many people, sport, particularly elite (i.e. Olympic) sport, has been identified in the popular consciousness with paramilitary coercion. Future sports heroes are likely to be civilians, not warriors.

Russian Diktat

For non-Russians who made up over half of the 293 million population of the USSR, as well as the old East European communist states, there existed the irritation of having to put up with a system tailored by Stalin to Russian conditions, externally imposed in contradiction of their own traditions. Sokol gymnastics were banned in Czechoslovakia and Poland after 1948. Youth organizations involved in recreation, like the YMCA (extremely prominent, for example, in the Baltic states prior to 1939), the Scouts and Jewish Maccabi, were similarly proscribed. Pre-1939 Olympic committees were disbanded on orders from Moscow, and their members often persecuted (e.g. Estonia's two prewar IOC members, Friedrich Akel and Joakim Puhk, who "were put to death by the NKVD (Soviet precursor of the KGB) for their public activity").²⁹

All this happened in spite of the long traditions and often superior standards existing in the non-Russian states, both within and outside of the Soviet Union. For example, Lithuania won the European basketball championships in 1937 and 1939; Estonia had competed independently in the Olympics between 1920 and 1936, winning six gold, seven silver and nine bronze medals. Germany had not only pioneered sports medicine since the last century, but had competed successfully in the Olympics and staged the Games in 1936. It had also provided one of the strongest worker sports movements in the world; it is an irony that the social

democratic worker (arch rival of the communist worker sports movement) sport base in Leipzig was to be taken over and turned into the famous Deutsche Hochschule für Körperkultur in the postwar German Democratic Republic. Being tied to the USSR meant following Soviet foreign policy, including matters pertaining to Olympic boycotts (an association not dissimilar to that of nations tied to the USA, resulting in the boycott by many of the 1980 Moscow Olympics). The Soviet Communist Party’s decision to boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles was simply passed down to other members of the Warsaw Pact-no sports or national Olympic committee, not to mention athletes, were consulted. Romania demurred, though hardly because of democratic principles: it had been pursuing a relatively independent foreign policy since the early 1980s.

It was the Soviet state-controlled sports system that was adopted by, or imposed upon (along with other political, social and economic institutions) the Baltic States and those countries of Eastern Europe liberated by the Red Army in the period 1945-49. Each was forced to adopt the Soviet system of state control of sport, sports science and medicine, the national fitness program (Prepared for Work and Defence), the sports rankings pyramid for each Olympic sport, the trade union sports societies, state “shamateurism, ” a government-run Olympic committee, and overall control by the security and armed forces.

Country	Security Forces Club	Armed Forces Club
USSR	Dinamo (Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, Tbilisi, etc.)	TsSKA (Central Sports Club of the Army)
Bulgaria	Levski Sofia	TsSKA
GDR	Dinamo (Berlin, Dresden)	Vorwarts
Yugoslavia	Dinamo (Zagreb)	Red Star
Romania	Dinamo (Bucharest)	Steaua
Hungary	***	Honved
Poland	Legia	Legia
Czechoslovakia	Dinamo (Prauge)	Dukla Liberec
Albania	Tirana Dinamo	***

Table 2: Sports clubs of the security and armed forces in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

The extent of the Soviet blueprint being copied was such that very often the Soviet name was retained (however insensitive that may have been to national pride and dignity), as in the case of the KGB’s Dinamo clubs, the State Committee on Physical Culture and Sport; Gosudarstvenny komitet po fizicheskoi kulture i sportu in the USSR; *Staatssekretariat für Körperkultur und Sport* in the GDR; and the monthly theoretical journal *Theory and Practice of Physical Culture; Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kulturey* in the USSR; *Theorie and Praxis der Körperkultur* in the GDR; *Teorie a Praxe Telesne Vychovy* in Czechoslovakia, and so on. And

whenever the Soviet sports structure was changed or modified, so, too, did the rest of Eastern Europe and all Soviet republics follow suit. It is hardly surprising, then, that such contempt for national traditions should finally provoke mass anger and hatred expressed so violently in the popular uprisings of late 1989 in Eastern Europe and throughout 1990 in the Baltic States.

Drugs and the Exploitation Of Children

A major reason for the strong anti-elite (i.e., Olympic) sport sentiments may be found in the current revelations in the media of the long-term state production, testing, monitoring and administering of performance-enhancing drugs in regard to athletes as young as 7 to 8 years of age. It is this mendacity by members of the old regime, at once loudly condemning drug abuse in the West as a typical excess of capitalism, while concealing its own involvement in a far more extensive program of state manufacture and distribution of drugs (from growth stimulants to growth retardants, from anabolic steroids to blood doping) that has brought into question Olympic sport.

When a number of emigre athletes, coaches and sports doctors had previously talked of widespread use of drugs in sport, their testimony bore a suspicion of "selling out." In 1989, for example, the one-time East German ski-jump champion and later sports doctor, Hans-Georg Aschenbach, sold his story alleging that GDR athletes were drugged from childhood. For this revelation, he was widely attacked in both East and West for sensationalism. Yet the substance of what he said was never refuted. Two years later, in late 1991, four once prominent GDR swimming coaches issued a statement confessing to widespread use of anabolic steroids among GDR swimmers in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, a steady stream of evidence has been emerging, particularly from the former Soviet Union and the ex-GDR, of state-controlled administering of drugs.³⁰

In 1986, Yuri Vlasov, then Chairman of the USSR Weightlifting Federation (and one-time world champion), declared that immense damage had been done to Soviet sport in general, and weightlifting in particular, by the "coach-pharmacologist" who worked alongside the sports coach. Not only did Vlasov accuse athletes of using anabolic steroids from "1968 to 1970,"³¹ but he named names — specifically that of senior coach and USSR Sports Committee functionary Arkady Vorobyov, "who was one of the first to distribute anabolic steroids to members of our national team."³² A television report in late 1989 revealed a document, signed in 1982 by two deputy sports ministers, prescribing anabolic steroids as part of the preparation for Soviet cross-country skiers. The document set out a program to test the effects of steroids and for research into ways of avoiding detection.³³

It has long been known by those familiar with communist sport that drug taking was organized at the top and that no athlete was allowed overseas unless he or she had a clearance test before departing. At the Olympics of Montreal and Seoul, it has now been revealed, the Soviet squad had a "hospitality" boat used as a medical centre to ensure that Soviet competitors were at least "clean" at the last moment.³⁴ The Soviet coach Sergei Vaichkovsky, who was in charge of Soviet swimming from 1973 to 1982, admitted that the use of drugs was widespread: "From 1974 all Soviet swimmers were using banned substances. I've personally administered the

drugs and advised swimmers individually on how to avoid getting caught.” He indicated that while the East German method was to give drugs during periods of intensive training, which for swimmers usually comes at the start of the year, Soviet competitors took them for longer durations, usually to within a month of major meetings.³⁵

Following the Seoul Olympics of 1988 and the Ben Johnson drug scandal, Soviet senior track and field coach Igor Ter-Ovanesyan launched a well-publicized campaign against drug-taking in Soviet sport. Admitting that “many of our athletes” take drugs, he conceded that even several school athletes had been caught taking steroids; he advised that “society needs proper legislation to combat this evil, seriously punishing both athletes and doctors, coaches and drug-suppliers.”³⁶ Many reports in the press now reveal cases of schoolchildren having been given drugs to enhance their performance. Among those implicated in this practice was the coach V. Yatsyn, who “fattened up his fifteen-year-old athletes with anabolic steroids;” indeed, the exposure of several positively-tested schoolchildren dates back to the 1984 schoolchildren’s Spartakiad.³⁷

The sport in which Soviet athletes won many Olympic medals is that of weightlifting; and here, too, the revelations mount. A journalist recently wrote that the world champion super-heavyweight Vasily Alexeyev took anabolic steroids. “With their help he beat world records, won two Olympic, European and world championships.”³⁸ Other sources have uncovered drug-taking and modified forms of “doping” in cycling, rowing, body-building, gymnastics and track and field.

Distorted Priorities

To many, the worst aspect of the old system was the misplacement of priorities, the gap between living standards and ordinary sports and recreation facilities, on the one hand, and the money lavished on elite sport and star performers, on the other. As a sports commentator recently put it, we won Olympic medals while being “a land of clapped-out motor cars, evergreen tomatoes and totalitarian mendacity.”³⁹ Valuable resources were used to buy foreign sports equipment and pay dollar bonuses to athletes who won Olympic medals. For a gold medal at the Seoul Olympics, for example, Soviet recipients gained 12,000 rubles (6,000 for silver and 4,000 for bronze medals); since the Soviet team won 55 gold medals and 132 medals overall, it cost the Sports Committee about a million rubles (almost half paid in dollars) in bonuses alone.⁴⁰ At the Seattle Goodwill Games in 1990, some 2.6 million rubles were set aside for bonuses (with \$750 going to each gold medallist, \$450 to each silver medallist and \$225 to each bronze medallist).⁴¹

Some journalists have suggested that alongside Olympic medal tables Soviet newspapers ought to publish sports amenity comparisons: the 2,500 Soviet swimming pools by contrast with the US million plus,⁴² the 102 Soviet indoor skating rinks by contrast with Canada’s 10,000.⁴³ To give another example, before 1988 the USSR had never held sports competitions for any category of handicapped person; in 1988, for the first time ever, the Soviets sent a team of invalid athletes (13 blind men) to the Paralympics in Seoul. Unlike their able-bodied compatriots in the Olympic Games, who won 132 medals, the blind athletes won no medals at all. But at least a start was made.

Even more seriously, it is now being pointed out that the country supported an

elite sports system on an extremely weak and ramshackle base. It is now admitted that the nation is fifty-third in the world in per capita GNP, that as many as 100 million people, over a third of the population, live below the official poverty line, that while scarce foreign currency was being spent on expensive foreign sports equipment and paying dollar bonuses, children were dying for want of medicines, food and disposable instruments (more Soviet children than adults have died of AIDS, because of unhygienic conditions and the backward state of the health service). To one sports commentator, the sporting achievements diverted attention from conditions that "reinforce the most anti-human and anti-sport system in the world."⁴⁴

Conclusions

It should come as no surprise to find that the leaders in the post-perestroika period are radically changing their scale of priorities. They no longer see the need to demonstrate the advantages of socialism, in so far as they are trying to distance themselves from the command economy that has failed so badly and the totalitarian system that accompanied the imposition of communism from above.

Such a radical shift of policy is bound to cause a twinge of sadness to those who have admired aspects of Soviet (and East European) sport down through the years — and not only because it provided good competition with American sport. The old system, it merits saying, was generally open to individual talents in all sports, probably more so than in the West. It provided opportunities for women to play and succeed, if not on equal terms with men, at least on a higher plane than Western women. It gave an opportunity to the many ethnic minorities and relatively small states within the USSR and Eastern Europe to do well internationally and help promote that pride and dignity that sports success in the glare of world publicity can bring. Nowhere in the world has there been, since the early 1950s such reverence for Olympism, for Coubertin, for Olympic ritual and decorum. One practical embodiment of this was the contribution to Olympic solidarity with developing nations, that is, the training of Third World athletes, coaches, sports officials, medical officers and scholars at colleges and training camps located in the old Soviet Union and its affiliates, as well as similar initiatives in African, Asian and Latin American countries themselves. Much of this aid was free. None of it was disinterested: it went to those states whose governments generally looked to socialism rather than capitalism for their future. Further, no nation outside the Third World did more than the USSR to oppose apartheid in sport and strive for a South African ban from world sports forums and arenas.

Today, in the rapidly evolving erstwhile Soviet Union, the international challenge is diluted through lack of state support; the free trade union sports societies, as well as the ubiquitous Dinamo and armed forces clubs, have given way to private sports, health and recreation clubs; women's wrestling and boxing attract more profit than women's chess and volleyball; the various nationalities prefer their own independent teams rather than contributing to a combined effort and success. Thus, across the central and eastern European plain, as far as the Urals Mountains, state aid to sports and other once commendable projects is at an end; the Third World students (in medicine and engineering as well as in sport) have all gone home

as their support grants have run out. The ex-communist states are now competitors with other poor nations for development aid from the West.

The failed coup of 19-21 August 1991 accelerated the shift from state control of and support for sport towards private, commercial sport, and a “brain” and “muscle” drain of top athletes, coaches, sports medics and scientists to the richest overseas “buyers.” This has weakened Soviet interest in the Olympic movement and, in turn, led to the removing of the sinecures of an army commission and “eternal” studenthood for all top athletes, as well as to the dismantling of the forty Olympic sport boarding schools.⁴⁵

By 1992, the year of the Albertville Winter and Barcelona Summer Olympic Games, the old Soviet sports machine had not completely run down. The performance of Russian and other ex-Soviet athletes continued to be impressive. At Barcelona, for example, under the banner of the Unified Team (though under a dozen different flags), the former USSR, minus the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, won more gold, silver and aggregate medals than its nearest challenger, old rival USA. In this regard, the results were as follows:

	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
Unified Team	45	38	29	112
United States	37	34	37	108

Germany came third (though, at 82, with 20 medals fewer than East Germany by itself had won at the Seoul Games four years earlier). The two remaining communist sporting giants, China and Cuba, came fourth and fifth (with 54 and 31 total medals, respectively). A comparison between the USSR in 1988 and the Unified Team in 1992 shows only a relatively small decline in performance:

	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1988 (Seoul)	55	31	46	132
1992 (Barcelona)	45	38	29	112

Of some significance to the nations concerned were Estonia’s one gold and one bronze medal, Lithuania’s one gold and one bronze, and Latvia’s two silver and one bronze. Estonia has a population of 1.5 million, Lithuania of 4 million, and Latvia of 3.5 million. No doubt, this reputable performance owes something to the previous regime’s commitment to sports excellence and Olympic success.

Gone now are the Soviet flag and anthem. Barcelona and Albertville were the swan song of the Soviet and Unified Team; the CCCP logo has gone the way of the East German state symbols, having now been replaced by the colours and emblems of fifteen “national” teams and Olympic Committees, representing Russia, the Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaidzhan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Kirgizstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Who knows what else will follow? The result of all this will not merit universal applause nor enhance Olympism. But there is no alternative, just as there is none in the former Yugoslavia, or was none in the former British Empire. As far as the allotment of “national” income and resources for sport in the future of Eastern Europe is concerned, it is time to concentrate on more important things.

Notes

1. For a detailed account of Russia and the Olympics, see my *Sport, Politics and Communism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1991.
2. V. P. Kosmina, "Mezhdunarodnoye rabocheye sportivnoye dvizhenie posle Velikoi Oktyabrskoi sotsialisticheskoi revolyutsii (1917-1928)," in F. I. Samoukov and V. V. Stolbov, *Ocherki po istorii fizicheskoi kultury* (Moscow: Fizkultura i sport), 1967, p. 165.
3. See Chapter 3 of my *Sport, Politics and Communism*.
4. I. Novikov, "Bolshoi sport i vneshnyaya politika," in *Kultura i zhizn*, 11 January 1949, p. 3.
5. I. D. Chudinov, *Osnovnye postanovleniya, prikazy i instruktsii po voprosam fizicheskoi Kultury in sporta, 1917-1957*(Moscow: Politizdat), 1959, p. 189.
6. N. N. Romanov, *Trudnye dorogi k Olimpu*, (Moscow: Fizkultura i sport), 1987, p. 57.
7. V. V. Stolbov, "Sovetsky sport i osnovnye tendentsii razvitiya mezhdunarodnovo divizheniya," in *Sport i perestroika*, ed. S. I. Guskov (Moscow: VNIIFK), 1988, p. 146.
8. *Ibid.*, p.148.
9. J. Sigfrid Edstrom, Letter to members of the Executive Committee of the IOC (28 October 1947), in *Avery Brundage Collection* (hereafter cited as *ABC*), No. 149, 1947-69, United States Olympic Association (USOA), National Olympic Committee (NOC), Colorado Springs, Colorado, U.S.A.
10. P. W. Scharroo, Letter to J.S. Edstrom (12 November 1947), in *ABC*, No. 149, 1947-69, USOA, NOC.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Romanov, *op. cit.*, p.58.
13. Scharroo, *op. cit.*
14. Avery Brundage to J. Sigfrid Edstrom (16 November 1947)," in *ABC*, No. 149, 1947-69, USOA, NOC.
15. S. Tokarev, "Portrety na fone vremeni," *Ogonyok*, 1989, No. 24, p.30.
16. Brundage to J. Sigfrid Edstrom (7 December 1950), in *ABC*, No. 149, 1947-69, USOA, NOC.
17. S. Sobolev, Letter to IOC (Moscow, April 1951), *ABC*, No. 149, 1947-69, USOA, NOC.
18. Personal conversation with Ivor Montague, President of the British Communist and International Table Tennis Federation. Montague claimed he had discussed Olympic sport with Stalin on several occasions.
19. A. Brundage, Letter to all IOC members (7 May 1951), *ABC*, No. 149, 1947-69, USOA, NOC, p.2.

20. Brundage to all IOC members (no date, possibly 1952, shortly after he assumed the presidency), in *ABC*, No. 149, 1947-69, USOA, NOC, p. 1.
21. *Ibid.*, p.2. This was not the only contest. After the Yugoslav leader Tito broke with Stalin, the Soviet soccer team lost 3-1 to the Yugoslav "Tito clique team" at the Helsinki Games. Ten days after the close of the Olympics, the army team which had formed the core of the Soviet eleven was disbanded on Stalin's orders; it included such outstanding players as Netto, Ivanov and Bobrov (see S. Tokarev, A. Gorbunov, "Kak razgonyali komandu TsDSA," *Moskovskie novosti*, 1988, No. 28, p.15).
22. Garri Kasparov, "Too outspoken for a closed society?" *Moscow News*, 1991, No. 2, p. 3.
23. Vladimir Maslachenko, "Ya po-prezhnemu v igre," *Sobesednik*, 1990, No. 46, p. 15.
24. Nikolai Rusak, "Medali ili zdorovye?" *Argumenty i fakty*, 28 April – 4 May 1990, No. 46, p. 15.
25. "Funding challenge," *Soviet Weekly*, 11 July 1991, p. 16.
26. Vladimir Salnikov, "Vremya nadyozhd," *Argumenty i fakty*, 1989, No. 1, p. 3.
27. A. Novikov, "Pismo redaktsii," *Yunost*, 1988, No. 6, p. 9.
28. "Skolko poluchaet futbolist?" *Moskovskie novosti*, 1988, No. 10, p. 15.
29. Gounnar Paal, "Increasing Olympic Enthusiasm In Estonia," Paper given at the *International Symposim: Sport . . . Le Troisieme Millenaire*, 20-25 May 1990, Quebec, Canada, p. 2.
30. See Alois Mader, "Verwissenschaftlichung des Sports in der DDR— sportmedizinische Erkenntnisse und ihre Anwendung," unpublished manuscript (Cologne 1977). A. Mader and W. Hollmann, "Sportmedizin in der DDR," *Sportwissenschaft*, No. 2, June 1983, pp. 152-162. Peter Kühnst, *Des missbrauchte Sport Die politische Instrumentalisierung des Sports in des SBZ und DDR, 1945-57*, (Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, Cologne, 1983). Renate Heinrich-Vogel, "Mein Lebensweg vom sportbegeisterten Kind zur Hochleistungssportlerin der DDR," in Dieter Ehrlich, Renate Heinrich-Vogel and Gerhard Winkler, *Die DDR Breiten-und Spitzensport*, Kopernikus Verlag, Munich, 1981, pp. 49-59.
31. Yuri Vlasov, "Ya pravdu rasskazhu tebe takuyu. . ." *Sovetsky sport*, 31 October 1991, p. 4.
32. Yuri Vlasov, "Drugs And Cruelty," *Moscow News*, No. 37, p. 15. See also, A. Klaz, "Rekordy ps retseptu?" *Smena*, 4 May 1988, p. 3.
33. *Sovetsky sport*, 10 October 1989, p. 1.
34. Vasily Gromyko, "Nash styd," *Leninskoye znamya*, 28 March 1989, p. 2.
35. Reported in *Corriere Della Sport*. See Alan Page, "Sacked Soviet Official Admits Widescale Use Of Drugs," *Guardian*, 2 December 1989, p. 20.
36. Igor Ter-Ovanesyan, "I Declare War On Anabolics," *Moscow News*, 1988, No. 50, p. 15.

37. Ludmilla Chub, Alexander Pogonchenkov, "Impotent po... sobstvennomu zhelaniyu," *SPID-info*, November 1991, No. 11, p. 24.
38. Sergei Dadygin, "Damoklov mech," *Sobesednik*, April 1991, No. 14, p. 15.
39. Maslachenko, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
40. D. Rennick, "Soviet Olympians Compete For Pre-set Quota Of Medals," *The Korea Herald*, 27 September 1988, p. 9. The author (JR) heard the Sports Minister's words at a news conference in Seoul just prior to the opening of the 1988 Summer Olympics.
41. D. Grantsev, "Otvét na vopros," *Argumenty i fakty*, 4-10 August 1990, No. 31, p. 8.
42. Samikov. Another author makes the point that the USSR has one swimming pool per 115,000 people, while Germany and Japan have one pool per 3-4,000 people, and Hungary and Czechoslovakia have one per 10-15,000 people-see Alexander Churkin, "Melko plavayem," *Moskovskie novosti*, 15 January 1989, No. 3, p. 15.
43. A. Druzenko, "Olimpiyskaya slava," *Moskovskie novosti*, November 1988, p. 15.
44. Maslachenko, *op. cit.* p. 15.
45. The sports boarding schools, which began to be established in the early 1970s, following the example of those in the GDR, catered exclusively to individual athletes training for competition in Olympic sports, with the single exception of chess (at one school).