
Weaponization of Sports

The Battle for World Influence through Sporting Success

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The extent and complexity of the state-sponsored doping of Russian athletes laid bare in the McLaren report to the World Anti-Doping Agency in July 2016 seem to have come as a surprise to many people. The idea that so-called tamper-proof specimen bottles were tampered with to replace incriminating samples with clean ones may have been nearly unbelievable. But other people were amazed that anyone was actually surprised by the allegations in the report. Of course, there is a long history of suspicion about doping of athletes from the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, but the breakup of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Warsaw Pact led some people to believe that governmentally sponsored and organized use of banned performance-enhancing drugs had also come to an end.

One may wonder what performance-enhancing drug use has to do with the centennial anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Put simply, an implication of the Russian Revolution is the weaponization of sports (and of culture more broadly) in the battle for supremacy between the communism practiced in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe in the post-World War II period and the market capitalism practiced in the West, especially the United States. This weaponization or use of sports competitions as a surrogate battlefield not only provided governments with the incentive to help their

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athletes with performance-enhancing drugs but also may have contributed to the expansion of international competitions to include more countries and more participation from women. One might argue that this weaponization of sport and sport competition is not an outcome of the Russian Revolution. Nazi Germany surely used its hosting of the Summer Olympic Games in 1936 as a tool to aggrandize Nazism to the world. Nationalism was a part of the Olympics from the beginning as competitors represented their respective countries and the medal ceremony involved playing the national anthem and raising the flags of the first three finishers. Moreover, it was not until after World War II, thirty years after the Russian Revolution, that the Soviet Union entered international sporting competitions with the intent of winning them. It might therefore be argued that the weaponization of sport is a product of Stalinism rather than of the revolution. On the other hand, Nikita Khrushchev stated, “Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you.” Although he was not referring to sporting competition specifically, policies followed both before and during his leadership of the Soviet Union had the clear intent of winning support for communism and the Soviet Union through sports diplomacy, which relied to a great extent on Soviet athletes outperforming American athletes in international competitions.

Russian Sports Development from the Revolution until World War II

At the time of the Russian Revolution, organized sport in Russia was not highly developed.¹ Robert Edelman (2012) suggests that this lack of development was in part because the Russian working class, unlike its British and American counterparts, had neither the disposable income nor the leisure time to be active in organized sport. In addition, those who organized sporting competitions did not especially want participation by the lower class. The most organized sport, football (soccer), had a heavy British influence. British expatriates and a Frenchman named George Duperont organized a league in St. Petersburg in 1901. Duperont had translated the rules into Russian, and a match between his club, the St. Petersburg Circle of Amateur Sportsmen, and the Vasilostrovskii Football Society in October 1897 is credited with being the start of organized football in Russia. This club format and the participation of the expatriates meant that organized sport was largely an elite activity. At the outbreak of World War I, there were eight thousand registered soccer players in the Russian Empire, around one thousand of them in Moscow. The organized sport tended to divide the population rather than to unite it because while the upper class played soccer in its clubs, the lower or working class created teams spontaneously based on neighborhoods or linked to a common employer.

1. This section draws heavily on the first two chapters of Edelman 2012.

Just outside of Moscow, the Morozov textile mill hired a British engineer, Harry Charnock, to teach the factory workers a healthy activity, football, for their leisure time. The foreigners and other managers formed a team that competed throughout the Moscow region. Other factories followed the lead of the Morozov mill, and teams sprung up around the area. This organization along industrial or worker-interest lines carried over to the postrevolution period quite naturally. The leagues that arose developed along the railway lines but were confined largely to the Moscow suburbs.

After the revolution and Russia's withdrawal from the Great War, some Bolshevik leaders, such as Leon Trotsky, felt there was a need for a professional army. At the same time, there was concern about the health and fitness of the citizens, particularly as these qualities affected the ability to field an army. Sport for all was a means of advancing this goal, but it put the focus on sports such as track and field, swimming, wrestling, and riding, which also had military benefits. Soccer did not have a high priority in this development. In addition, special schools of physical education were developed to improve the fitness of recruits to the military. However, the Bolshevik leadership did not view events such as the Olympics favorably. Although Russia had participated in the Olympics prior to the revolution, the Bolshevik view was that the Games were elitist and "bourgeois." The very purpose of amateurism, in their view, was to deny participation to the working class. As a consequence, the Soviet Union organized the Rote Sport-Internationale, which for the Soviet athletes, according to Randy Roberts and James Olson, "was like laboring in the minor leagues" (1989, 7).

After the civil war concluded and the Bolsheviks consolidated power, sport as entertainment and leisure activity began to develop in the Soviet Union, just as it did in Europe. This development was not without controversy, however. "The growth of soccer and the kind of money and privilege it could generate made the sport one form of popular culture that discomfited members of the government," who "had historically mistrusted the spontaneity of the uneducated masses even as they wished to serve them." One result was that "[p]layers, especially stars, were in a position to seek greater privileges, higher compensation, and better travelling conditions" (Edelman 2012, 85). Barbara Keys describes the Soviet sporting goal of the 1920s as "a distinctly 'proletarian' brand of sport and physical culture that eschewed individualism and record-seeking" (2003, 414). The goal was unmet, and the commercialism of soccer and the money and fame gained by many of the players led the Moscow city government in 1926 to reorganize the sport to reduce these issues. Regional groupings, such as clubs that had formed in neighborhoods along the railway lines, were broken up and replaced by organizations sponsored explicitly by trade unions.

The forerunner of Spartak, one of the most successful and popular clubs in Russia, was one of these neighborhood teams, then known as Krasnaia Presnia. The club reorganized under the banner of the Food Workers Union, or Pishchevik, which became its name. Dinamo was founded by the Soviet security police and CSKA by the Red Army. Locomotiv was the club of the railway workers, Torpedo of the Moscow Automobile Factory. Pishchevik morphed into Spartak in the mid-1930s when it was

the club of the Ministry of Trade and the giant Promkoooperatsiia, a wealthy organization of retail tradesmen such as waiters, taxi drivers, and salespeople.

Soviet football clubs played relatively few international matches in the interwar period, for several reasons. First, the Soviet Union was not a member of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, the governing body of soccer, whose rules limited members to competitions with other members. Second, obtaining permission to travel outside the Soviet Union was difficult. The Soviet hierarchy was concerned about the bourgeois influences the players would face. When the players did compete against foreign competition, the latter were largely workers' teams rather than the top professional clubs in those countries. Toby Rider suggests that the rise of Nazi Germany provided an impetus for the Soviet Union to become more engaged with the rest of the world as it joined the League of Nations in 1934. Moreover, he argues, "the Soviets came to view international sport as a strategic device in propaganda and diplomacy," and there was an emphasis on "catch[ing] up to and overtak[ing] bourgeois records in sport" (2016, 50). Keys writes, "[P]articipation in élite international sport became a marker of national power. In an era obsessed with quantification and comparison, competition in international sport seemed to offer an equitable basis for quantifiable comparisons of national success in harnessing population resources—a political lure that proved irresistible even to a Stalinist mentality deeply hostile to capitalist forms of internationalism" (2003, 416).

However, before the Soviets could begin to integrate fully into international sporting competition, "to catch up and overtake bourgeois records," World War II intervened.

After World War II

After World War II, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) quickly convened to organize games to be held in 1948. London was chosen to host the summer games, and the IOC began courting Soviet participation. Although there was a strong anti-Communist bent within the IOC, there was also the clear recognition that key tenets of the Olympic movement were universalism and sport as a means of fostering peace among nations. Czarist Russia had been a member of the IOC, but the Soviet Union had withdrawn from the committee. Indeed, a problem for the IOC was that the individuals on it composed a rather elite group, many of whom were nobility. As such, it had often relied upon personal connections to find members, which was a problem for Soviet participation. Moreover, the committee members were supposed to represent the interests of the IOC to their countries, not represent their country's interests to the IOC. In any event, the Soviets did not participate in 1948 despite efforts both in the Soviet Union and in the IOC to make its participation happen.

On the Soviet side, the problem was the continuing struggle within the governing hierarchy over the issue of engagement with the West, in particular the ideological

position that the games were elitist and exploitative. Nikolai Romanov, chair of the Soviet Sports Committee, “argued that the Soviet Union should join the Olympic Movement, taking full advantage not only of the position of the Soviet Union but of the popularity of the Olympics to carve a place within the movement for Soviet interests” (Parks 2016, 39). Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov, a close associate of Stalin whose permission was necessary for the Soviet Union to begin the process of joining the IOC, was opposed to the idea. Indeed, in 1946 he had “initiated an ideological campaign against anyone with affinities or ties with Western culture.” He believed that the world was divided into two camps and that the Soviets must rally “the peace-loving elements in the struggle against the new American expansionist plans for the enslavement of Europe” (Parks 2016, 45)—that is, the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine. These views became known as the Zhdanov Doctrine. Some within the Soviet leadership thought participation in international organizations indicated capitulation to the United States. Romanov, in contrast, couched his arguments for participation in the Olympics in terms of the promotion of peace: because “the Olympic Games are a symbol of peace, the participation of the Soviet Union in the 1948 Games becomes particularly desirable” (Parks 2016, 45).

A second issue held significant influence within the Soviet leadership. If the Soviet Union were to participate and not win, that outcome would be taken as a blow to the Soviet system’s influence and credibility. According to Jenifer Parks, Romanov reported that “Stalin believed that even the second place finish of Soviet wrestlers at the 1946 World Championships discredited the Soviet Union.” Moreover, Stalin rebuked Romanov, saying, “[I]f you are not ready, then there’s no need to participate” (qtd. in Parks 2016, 45). That the Soviet hierarchy intended for the country to achieve dominance in sports is without a doubt, as a Central Committee resolution in 1948 makes clear: “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” (qtd. in Parks 2016, 47).

As indicated, the Soviet Union did not participate in the Olympics in 1948, and participation in the Helsinki Olympics in 1952 was not assured until April 23, 1951. The Soviet Union’s intention was “to consolidate its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and . . . hoped to use sports to promote Soviet influence internationally” (Parks 2016, 51). The IOC had to stretch its rules considerably to accept the Soviet application for membership. First, the rules explicitly require that a country form a National Olympic Committee that is completely independent of the country’s government. The Soviet member of the IOC, Konstantin Andrianov, was also a member of the Soviet Sports Committee, so this requirement clearly was not satisfied. Second, the IOC rules were explicit about the athletes’ amateur status. Athletes could not earn their livelihood from sport, nor could they participate in the sport for anything except for the joy of competing. Serious doubts about the Soviet athletes’ amateur standing were also ignored. As an IOC member, Andrianov was a strong advocate for Soviet interests. For example, he pushed for the IOC to admit the Peoples’ Republic of China and the

German Democratic Republic as members but did so using the language of the Olympic movement. Of course, Andrianov's advocacy could be interpreted either as supporting the Olympic ideals or as trying to gain membership for countries within the Soviet sphere of influence.

Fears that the Soviets would not win the Helsinki Olympics fueled efforts by Nikolai Romanov and Konstantin Andrianov to learn the Western countries' training methods, to expand the number of Soviet competitors, and to improve the Soviet athletes' compensation and conditions. For example, Romanov pressed for the payment of back salary to yachtsmen, who threatened to return home if they did not get it. The Soviet Sports Committee took significant interest in the athletes' diet, including the use of supplements and vitamins. Romanov requested an increase in the daily food expenditures for the athletes in especially rigorous sports such as swimming and distance running. Indeed, a dietary supplement was manufactured in special concentrations for marathoners and race walkers. According to Parks, the "Sports Committee authorized the use of experimental drugs on Soviet athletes less than two months before the opening of the Games" (2016, 64). This is not to say that the Russians were alone in using performance-enhancing drugs. Rather, the point is that success in the competition held such great importance for the Soviet hierarchy that it went to extreme lengths to achieve that success.

The Soviet view of the Olympics and other international sporting events as elitist and undemocratic motivated the push for expanding the number of countries and the number of women participating in the Games. Parks reports that in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics there were only 519 women competitors out of 4,955 athletes but that in the 1980 Moscow Olympics both the number of women and the percentage of the total athletes who were women were more than double the figures from 1952. Likewise, the number of events for women doubled during that time period, a result "due in large part to the persistence of Soviet representatives" (2016, 13). Indeed, an agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1958 resulted in bilateral track and field competitions, which caused a "rapid and significant expansion of women's track and field sports in the United States" (Parks 2016, 95). A revision to the Soviet National Olympic Committee bylaws in 1959 identified promotion of women's sports as an important goal, which was also connected to combating racial discrimination in sports: "In the socialist countries as much official encouragement is given to sport for women as is sport for men and more attention is focused upon elite female sport than in the West. The Soviet and [East German] teams are composed of a higher proportion of female competitors than western teams and East German women win a higher percentage of medals than East German men" (qtd. in Hargreaves 2003, 153). By contrast, Avery Brundage, the American representative on the IOC in 1948 and the committee's chairman from 1952 through 1972, had proposed that all women's competitions be eliminated from the Games and that women should focus on sports that emphasized grace and beauty and stay away from track and field. It also warrants mention that the

“addition of women’s sports gave socialist countries an advantage in the medal count” (Parks 2016, 111), so the Soviets’ motives may not have been entirely pure.

Brundage’s proposal to eliminate women’s events from the Games was undoubtedly sexist, but it was also based in part on the belief held by many members of the IOC that the Games were becoming too costly, a burden on the host country to organize and too expensive for countries sending teams (“Olympics Too Big—Brundage” 1957). One wonders how Brundage would feel about the reported \$60 billion spent by the Russian Federation on hosting the Sochi Winter Olympics.

Conclusion

The Russian Revolution had far-ranging consequences for the world, most of them more important than the perversion of sports as a tool of propaganda and the aggrandizement of one nation over others. Nonetheless, the historical record suggests that the Soviet Union partially betrayed its Bolshevik principle of sport for all in order to focus on sports success as a weapon against its rivals in the battle for world influence. This betrayal is linked to state-sponsored doping of athletes and to the burgeoning cost of hosting international sports events. However, despite this betrayal and the perhaps cynical use of the Olympic ideals, Soviet influence did help expand opportunities for athletes from around the world—perhaps most significantly for women athletes.

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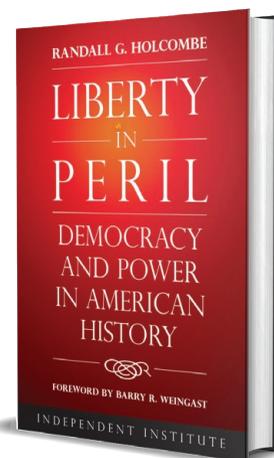
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