Weapons of the Weak: Sports and Politics in the Soviet Bloc

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Chapter I: Introduction

“The reality of the world is that sports are politics.”

“If he dies, he dies,” Ivan Drago said with cold indifference while watching officials tend to the lifeless body of his defeated opponent. That image of the beloved Apollo Creed - wearing his iconic stars-and-stripes boxing trunks and lying bloody and limp in the arms of Rocky Balboa - likely played a strong hand in molding many an impressionable movie-goers concept of the Soviet Bloc’s sports complex in 1985. The fourth installment of the Rocky movie franchise, Rocky IV pits the protagonist, champion boxer and all-around American hero Rocky Balboa, against the formidable Ivan Drago, a ruthless Soviet fighter with a career-ending punch. Drago’s callousness in the wake of Creed’s death and Rocky’s own feelings of personal responsibility inspire him to seek revenge against the Soviet super-power through the only way he knows how: a boxing match in Moscow. If Rocky’s ascetic training regimen of log-throwing and sleigh-pulling in remote Siberia was meant to elicit the respect and adoration of the audience, then Drago’s far more dubious methods surely were intended to outrage viewers. Drago’s fatal hook and impenetrable strength, the film reveals, come not from dedication and raw athletic ability, but rather from highly advanced, government-sponsored athletic technology and facilities and mysterious liquid injections that he receives from his team of Soviet trainers. In the final fight, Rocky’s patriotic grit and resilience champion Drago’s presumed steroid usage and high-tech training equipment, earning him the victory in Moscow and the applause and respect of the predominantly Soviet crowd in the arena, beginning with the Soviet Secretary General himself.

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In one poignant, albeit hard to understand, post-fight speech, it seemed that Rocky Balboa penetrated the monolithic Soviet sports machine and brought an end to Cold War tensions, all while draped in an American flag. Writer, director, and star of *Rocky IV*, Sylvester Stallone’s interpretation of the sports programs in the Eastern Bloc and, moreover, his impression of Soviet-American relations in the 1980’s may seem contrived and ridiculous, but the cultural impact of the film and its lasting legacy cannot be ignored. Though some critics lambasted Stallone’s appropriation of Cold War conflict and patriotism, calling it “obvious and unsuccessful,” the film enjoyed enormous popularity with audiences, grossing roughly $20 million opening weekend and over $300 million worldwide.\(^3\)\(^4\) These staggering numbers suggest that many readily accepted the notion of a hulking, steroid-abusing, and unified Soviet Bloc sports complex as an enjoyable stereotype, if not a semi-truth.

Drago’s inhumane cruelty, his determination to destroy his capitalist American competitor, and his unrelenting need to bring international glory to the Soviet Bloc similarly purport markedly truncated representations of twentieth century Eastern Bloc athletics. Many viewers likely understood these aspects of the plot as gimmicks and pathos deployed by Stallone for dramatic effect, but the mere existence of this film points towards the presence of a discrepancy between fact and fiction in regard to Soviet Bloc athletics. While steroid usage pervaded some elements of athletic competition in the Eastern Bloc, the towering Ivan Drago can scarcely be viewed as the prototypical Soviet athlete. On the same note, the influence of politics, though infused in almost all aspects of Soviet sports and culture, manifested itself in a decidedly less one-sided way in twentieth century Eastern Europe.

\(^4\) Box Office Mojo, "Rocky IV (1985)." http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&id=rocky4.htm. Data places *Rocky IV* as the second highest grossing sports drama of all time.
When historian and United States Olympic swimmer Andrew Strenk said, “The reality of the world is that sports are politics,” he certainly did not have Rocky IV in mind. More likely, he was referring to the inherent tie between athletic competition and government policy that dates back centuries, if not millennia in human existence. Cursory looks at Central and Eastern European history during the twentieth century tend to focus predominantly on power politics and bloodshed and, consequently, sports culture and happenings receive less attention. As proposed by Strenk, though, the cultural events of a period are intrinsically linked with and are as equally important as politics. The case of the Soviet Bloc in the twentieth century is, if anything, a prime example of this; like Rocky IV so bluntly suggested, the communist governments of the Eastern Bloc played an integral, granted less blatant and more dynamic than depicted in the film, role in the development and success of the Soviet Bloc’s international sports program. As the “iron curtain,” descended upon the Soviet Union’s periphery and enveloped much of Eastern Europe as satellite communist states, the communist leadership doggedly worked to repress political and nationalist opposition while simultaneously hoping to incorporate the newly acquired states into a transnational entity that could garner prestige politically, economically, and even athletically on a global scale.

Though the majority of my research will focus on Eastern Bloc sports culture in the second half of the twentieth century, the events that led up to that point in Soviet history help preface my research, underscore the importance of nationalist expression in the Soviet Union, and, consequently, must be detailed. Prior to the formation of the Soviet Union, strikes and dissension plagued tsarist Russia. In 1914, the outbreak of WWI dealt a painful blow to the Russian Empire, putting an economic strain on the already politically unstable Eastern European

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5 Strenk. "What price victory?"
giant. Severe food shortages and military failures, among other things, led to massive strikes, widespread unrest, and a revolution in February of 1917. Tsar Nicholas II quickly abdicated, allowing for the creation of a provisional government led by a variety of liberal and leftist-leaning political parties that had formed in Russia. In October of that year, the communist Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, overthrew the provisional government and, over the next few years, out-maneuvered their political opponents to consolidate power.

In these formative years of the Soviet Union, Lenin and Stalin relied heavily on the issue of self-determination to earn the trust and support of the people from the former Russian Empire. Lenin and Stalin criticized tsarist Russia’s previous oppressive policy of forced Russification, which included banning the native languages of ethnic minorities in the Russian Empire and allowing waves of pogroms, violent and anti-Semitic riots, to spread throughout the countryside unrestrained in the nineteenth century. Instead, Stalin advocated the Soviet policy of self-determination for all nations, which recognized a nation’s right to equality and even secession from the Soviet Union. Lenin, too, called for self-determination, acknowledging the importance of national sovereignty and a need to protect ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union from Great-Russian chauvinism.\(^6\)\(^7\) While these approaches to national identity and expression apply primarily to very small ethnic groups dispersed throughout the Soviet Union in the 1920’s and 1930’s, the larger trend of nationalist expression remained relevant in the Soviet Bloc well into the 1940’s and 1950’s and played a critical role in the development and understanding of Soviet sports culture.

\(^7\) Great-Russian chauvinism refers to an idea propagated by national minorities in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, expressing the concern that ethnic Russians, who constituted a vast majority of the population, would overpower and eliminate other ethnic identities.
Keeping this conflict of national identity that existed in the Soviet Bloc in mind, I argue that beginning in the 1920’s and -30’s and lasting until its collapse, the Soviet Union actively pursued a program of appropriating and, later, participating in the Western-based international sports complex, resulting in a decades-long policy of intentionally cultivating an Soviet Bloc sports program to assist in reaching both the domestic and international aspirations of the communist governments. For the Soviet Union and other communist states in the Eastern Bloc, socialist sport was one of the most visible and readily available means of demonstrating the benefits of communism over capitalism on a global level. The policy witnessed mixed results within the Soviet Union and its periphery states during the Communist era, specifically in the cases of Hungary and East Germany, but rendered international sports competition an integral part of political expression in the Eastern Bloc. Due to growing political dissidence and a necessity for political changes in the Soviet Union, though, Soviet sports culture could not maintain itself and collapsed.

I divide my research into four principal areas of focus: Russian and Soviet sports prior to the 1956 Revolution in Hungary, Soviet sports from the Hungarian perspective, Soviet sports from the East German perspective, and the collapse of the Big Red Machine. Outlining the development of a sports culture in tsarist Russia and the transformation it underwent as the Bolsheviks seized power will shed light on the extent to which the Soviet government exercised control over international athletic competition and culture vis-à-vis the tsarist regime. Moreover, as Soviet sports culture developed in Eastern Europe, the government’s policies towards it, too, evolved prior to the policies that existed in the second half of the twentieth century. Detailing the decades before that era will provide a better understanding of Soviet motivations and

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impressions in regards to athletic competition. An analysis of the strictly communist *Spartakiad* athletic competitions that emerged in the 1920’s will similarly provide insight into the political motivations behind the Soviet Union’s sports machine. More importantly, this period in Eastern Bloc sports sets the stage to explore the interplay between sports, foreign relations, and nationalist sentiments through two separate case studies: Hungary and the German Democratic Republic.

Using the events prior to, during, and after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as a backdrop, I argue that a clear blending of politics and sports existed in the Soviet Union and its periphery, with Hungary ignoring the collective image of the communist Eastern Bloc and using international athletic competition as one of their few means of rebellion against Soviet oppression. Matyas Rakosi, the Soviet-backed ruler of Hungary prior to 1956, and his hardline communist policies catalyzed unrest and resistance amongst the people of Hungary, ultimately ending in periods of revolution and Soviet occupation. Violence, rape, and censorship ran rampant in the period of occupation by the Soviets, further angering the Hungarians. Under these conditions, the oppressed Hungarians prepared for the 1956 Olympics and, in a fateful quarter-final water polo match, they met the Soviet Union head on. The political “weapons of the weak,” or those in a position powerless to their oppressor, can potentially manifest themselves outside of the political arena, sometimes emerging in the realm of cultural events like sports. These events are implicitly political, though, by virtue of the understanding of the disadvantaged population that they have no other method of directly resisting those above them.9

The resulting match was bloody and, according to this concept proposed by Milton Esman, inherently political in nature, with the Hungarians emerging victorious.

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Using East Germany to contrast with Hungary, I will demonstrate the intense desire of some periphery states in the Eastern Bloc to follow in the footsteps of the Soviet government’s competitive sports complex at any cost, and the repercussions these states endured for such policies. The construction of the Berlin Wall and the comparative success of West Germany fostered a bitter national consciousness with the East Germans. Sports culture allowed for East Germany to direct this sense of embitterment into a disciplined sense of purpose, provided the citizens with something to take pride in, and formed East Germany’s own “weapon of the weak,” against their ideological enemies, many of who enjoyed relative economic prosperity compared to the modest East Germans. In fact, the East German’s enjoyed a hugely successful sports program internationally for decades, but, beginning in the late 1970’s, fell victim to rumors of blood-doping and steroid abuse. Several notable athletes tested positive for anabolic steroids in international competitions. The few athletes who managed to flee East Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 revealed startling information about the mandatory steroid regimens athletes were placed under by government-backed sports institutions, the use of the Stasi to harass those athletes resistant to the steroid regimens, and the criminal behavior of both coaches and doctors overseeing the athletes.

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, Cold War tensions escalated and the Soviet Bloc looked for ways to demonstrate their superiority over the West in any way possible, including athletic competition. Though the Eastern Bloc continued to excel in international sports competitions, the Soviet Union received an unprecedented opportunity to display their infrastructural and athletic prowess when the International Olympic Committee selected Moscow as the host city for the 1980 Summer Olympics. Despite the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent United States’ refusal to participate in the Olympic Games, or perhaps because of it,
the Moscow Olympics ran smoothly, the Soviet Bloc performed particularly well in most events, and the Eastern Bloc sports culture stood at the height of its renown. Regardless of these successes, changing politics in the Soviet Union impacted the Eastern European sports culture and the Soviet’s efforts to use Western international sports competition to promote stability and supremacy domestically and abroad gradually fell apart. Policy reforms like perestroika dramatically altered the Soviet leadership’s approach to athletics and, much like the Soviet Union itself, Soviet Bloc sports culture collapsed.
Chapter II: Russian and Soviet Sports Prior to 1956

“All world sports records should belong to the USSR.”

Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, sports culture and competition had gradually percolated into Russian society from Western Europe and, after Russia’s humiliating 1855 defeat in the Crimean War, it served as a means of national unification and morale-building for the dejected population. As Russia’s relative backwardness compared to the rest of Europe became increasingly apparent, sports took on a more powerful role in Russia politics and society. Many Westernizers in Imperial Russia pushed for this participation in international athletics, believing it would help provide the modernization Russia desperately needed in the wake of the 1905 defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War. Slavophiles, however, resisted, instead urging the tsarist regime to bring back Russian folk sports.

Nicholas II opted to follow the path supported by the Westernizers; Russia came to play an integral role in the foundation of the modern Olympic Games and, by 1912, the state had developed its own Russian Olympic Committee and sent large delegations of athletes to compete. Some believed that the government’s sponsorship of international athletics was a way to intentionally distract the working class from politics and radicalism, inspiring a few revolutionaries to infiltrate Russian sports teams. In fact, a Bolshevik revolutionary, S.V.

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12 Slavophiles are members of an intellectual movement in the 19th and 20th centuries that wanted Russian society and politics to develop on the traditions of ancient Russian culture and ignore the influences of the West.
Kesiur, served as captain of the Kiev football team at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the onset of World War I and the subsequent political turmoil that engulfed Russia halted the development of an international athletic culture in Russia at its infancy. Moreover, the Bolshevik seizure of power signaled a dual-schism between the Soviets and traditional tsarist-Russian practices and, at the same time, the Russians and the West, bringing about an end to Russian participation in predominantly Western-based sports competitions.

Starting in the 1920’s, Bolshevik leadership appropriated the idea of popular sports in Soviet Union, deciding it would prove more beneficial to promote fizkul’turnik as a method of increasing productivity in the labor force, encouraging discipline among the masses, and promoting ideas of collectivism overall. The concepts of athletic competition and international rivalry became seen as patently Western, bourgeois, and capitalist by the Soviet leadership and, therefore, detrimental to the socialist experiment. These ideas continued to permeate Bolshevik thought well into the 1940’s and 1950’s. An editorial from a 1949 copy of Izvestia, a popular government-sponsored newspaper in the Soviet era, celebrates Soviet athletic achievements as evidence of the “high spirit of collectivism,” and the championing of the “the cause for the people.” In a typically Soviet fashion, the government established a sports magazine in 1923, Fizkultura i sport, which belonged to the state-sponsored publishing house and frequently asserted that the Soviet government’s sports program had noticeably improved participation in

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14 Mangan, p. 172.
15 Fizkul’turnik translates into “Physical Culture.”
18 During the Soviet period, Izvestia was published by a permanent body of the Supreme Soviets and primarily expressed the views of the Soviet government. It translates roughly to “news.”
Communist activities, increased the physical abilities of the military personnel, and raised overall labor productivity and output.\textsuperscript{19, 20}

The Soviet government’s appropriation of popular sports culture extended beyond control over athletic publications; in 1921, the Comintern, an international communist organization located in Moscow, created and sponsored Red Sport International (commonly known as the Sportintern or RSI) with the intent of promoting a united, communist-based international sports organization to counterbalance the capitalist Olympics. Sports federations dedicated to boxing, checkers, chess, riflery, soccer, tennis, and weight lifting emerged in 1923 and 1924, but they were largely non-governmental and dealt primarily with fostering sports culture and improving athletic ability, not actual athletic competition.\textsuperscript{21} The void once filled by Russian participation in the Olympic Games and other such international athletic competitions remained, despite these federations. The Sportintern, therefore, faced the difficult task of reconciling the Bolshevik notions of collectivism and common struggle with the inherent contention and rivalry present in almost all aspects of athletic competition.

The Sportintern attempted, with mixed results, to promote sports culture through a celebration of physicality and athletics that would highlight the peoples’ transition into new, communist individuals. Instead of participating in the Olympic Games, the Soviet government hosted Spartakiads, athletic pageants or festivals that included a mixture of parades; noncompetitive displays of athleticism, dancing, and singing; and some competition-based sports with fellow communist member states of Sportintern. They were named in honor of Spartacus, who led a revolt against slave owners in Rome that, for many in the Soviet Bloc, mirrored the

\textsuperscript{19} Fizkultura i sport translates into “physical culture and sport.”
Bolsheviks’ struggle against land owners. The *Spartakiads* were designed as a response to “bourgeois sports competitions,” and began in 1923. The first all-Union *Spartakiad* included 21 different sports, 7,000 different athletes, and representatives from 17 different countries, including Germany and Czechoslovakia. Unsurprisingly, the all-Union *Spartakiad* ran simultaneously with the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics.\(^2\) Though the *Spartakiads* and parades continued for decades in the Soviet Union and other communist states, they initially failed to inspire or unite the working-class masses behind the struggle of socialism as much as Soviet leadership insisted. Instead, the *Spartakiads* exposed the people’s desire to watch international competition; the soccer tournament portion of the event, which included foreign teams, attracted the largest crowds.\(^2\)

The limited successes of the Sportintern, the Soviet desire to prove its superiority over the capitalist West, or a combination thereof catalyzed a complete reversal in official Soviet policy towards athletics at the turn of the decade. By the early 1930’s, headlines and slogans emerged in the Soviet press stressing the need to surpass the bourgeois capitalists athletically and to bring worldwide recognition to the advantages of communism at all levels.\(^2\)\(^4\) Beginning in 1935, the Soviet government introduced a concept of ranking or classification, much like the Table of Ranks that existed in pre-Bolshevik Russia, for their athletes. The classification system represented a stark break with Soviet notions of solidarity and collectivism that existed in years prior. Moreover, the Soviet athletes who earned ranks enjoyed at least minor celebrity status. Distinguished Masters of Sports, one of the higher ranking athletic levels, gave lectures and

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spoke at events alongside celebrated academics and writers. The Soviet participation in the admittedly bourgeois aspects of sports – namely international competition - emerged in 1934 with a Soviet trip to Czechoslovakia to compete in boxing, running, and soccer, among other sports. Beyond introducing Soviet soccer players to international competition and the concept of professionalism in athletics, the Soviet trip to Czechoslovakia, depending on whether they won or lost, would either validate or humiliate the communist state. The Soviet soccer team narrowly escaped with a victory over the Czechoslovakians, marking a successful Soviet re-entry into international competition and contributing to the burgeoning Soviet sense of pride and aptitude.

While the Soviet Union began to embrace the notion of a sports culture at this time, it came with many limitations. The Soviet government expressly forbid any sort of exhibitionism, narcissism, or pure entertainment in athletics and denounced many sports as irrational and impractical. These denunciations stemmed from the propriety of Soviet ideology; sports whose cultural benefits did not extend beyond the realm of entertainment were seen as “philosophically alien,” by the Soviet leadership. For example, Soviet officials attacked yoga and karate for their promotion of “individualism,” and their groundings in a culture of spirituality that ran contrary to the practical and rational use of man’s energy. Oddly, horse racing, an individual sport that encourages spectator gambling, and others like it received the tacit approval of the Soviet Union, though some believe this was in order to avoid popular rebellion in other areas of interest for the Soviet government.

26 Keys. “Soviet Sport”
Though eager to continue their participation in international sports, the Soviet Union met extreme difficulty in finding venues and organizations that felt comfortable inviting them to compete. Both the International Olympic Committee and the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) expressed ideological reservations about allowing the communist Soviet Union entry into competition. The German invasion of the USSR in 1941 and the subsequent outbreak of World War II largely diverted international attention from athletics. For the victorious Soviet Union, though, the conclusion of World War II ended the political isolation they had endured decades prior and provided the necessary platform to fully enter international athletic competition.\(^\text{28}\)

The Soviet Union competed in their first Olympic Games in the summer of 1952 in Helsinki. Though the Soviets ostensibly supported the international accord and camaraderie put forth by the International Olympics Committee, they simultaneously expressed concerns over the proximity of the Olympic Games to the USSR’s borderland and, specifically, American interests in the Olympic Games. In an attempt to incite feelings of resentment or suspicion, some suggested that American tourists flooded into Finland under the pretenses of watching the Olympic Games, but with far more sinister motives in actuality – namely, to flex their economic muscle in the face of a weakened Finland and spy on the Soviet Union.\(^\text{29}\)\(^\text{30}\) Soviet efforts to arouse anti-American and pro-Soviet sentiments from both athletes and the masses in the months prior to the Olympic Games proved unnecessary; the Soviet athletes fared exceptionally well in 1952, despite this being their first time at the Olympics under communist rule. While the Soviet

\(^{28}\) Edelman, *Serious Fun.* p. 5.


\(^{30}\) These assertions were printed in *Pravda*, the primary newspaper for the Soviet Union. Many groups and organizations were forced to subscribe to *Pravda*. It was widely considered to be the mouthpiece of the Soviet Union, dispersing information on government policy to the public. *Pravda* means “truth.”
athletes set two world records at the 1952 Games, bringing their total world record count at the
time to over 80, a report by the Youth Communist League Central Committee given to the 12th
Congress reveals the Soviet leadership’s dissatisfaction with the performance of their athletes.
Citing failures in swimming, sailing, boxing, and track and field at the Olympics in comparison
to their Western competitors, A. N. Shelepin placed the blame for Soviet inadequacies on the
laziness of athletes and trainers, who, he alleged, had fabricated concepts like over-training and
burning out to avoid work, and the failure of local agencies of the Committee on Physical
Culture and Sport to provide proper equipment.31

Determined to overcome any inequalities with the West, real or imagined, the Soviet
leadership continued to cultivate a sports culture by opening the Luzhniki Sports Complex in
Moscow, complete with a Palace of Sport indoor arena that rivaled any western counterpart in
size and seating capacity.32 Construction of the massive stadium began in 1955 and was
overseen exclusively by Russian architects and engineers. Architects planned to seat
approximately 100,000 in the main stadium, which sits on the banks of the Moscow River, and
close to 35,000 seats in additional sections of the stadium, including a swimming pool and
gymnasium designed to accommodate boxing, gymnastics, fencing, and basketball events. The
Soviet newspaper Pravda purported that it would be among the most modern stadiums in the
world at the time of its construction, complete with automatic scoring devices and the ability to
time races and, if necessary, photograph finishes.33 The Luzhniki Sports Complex remained a
symbol of Soviet pride and accomplishment for decades and continues to be the largest stadium

31 “Report of the Y.C.L. Central Committee to the 12th Congress: Speech by Comrade A.N. Shelepin, Secretary of the
Press (formerly the Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press).
(formerly the Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press).
in the Russian Federation; it played host to the 1980 Summer Olympic Games and, in 2018, will host the FIFA World Cup.

The Soviet Union’s achievements in sports during and in the decade following World War II often find themselves overshadowed by the geopolitics of the period. While they certainly expanded the breadth and success of their international athletic complex, the Soviet leadership also impressively expanded their sphere of political influence in Central and Eastern Europe after the defeat of Germany and the Axis powers in World War II. The famously documented meetings between Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin laid the foundation for the socio-political future of Central and Eastern Europe uncomfortably in the grasps of the Soviet Union, a fact that was met with varying levels of active and passive resistance by those involved. For the formerly Nazi-allied Hungarians, Soviet occupation proved especially difficult and was met with great resistance. Extreme violence plagued the periods of Soviet occupation in the years following World War II in Hungary, bringing about feelings of resentment and antagonism in the newly formed Eastern Bloc. In 1956, tensions boiled over and revolution erupted in Hungary, setting the stage for an extremely contentious Summer Olympics in Melbourne. Hungary faced the Soviet Union in a fateful quarter-final water polo match, resulting in one of the most heavily-documented and violent matches in the sport’s history.
Chapter III: Sports in the People’s Republic of Hungary

“We were desperate to defeat the team of the Soviets who were crushing our country with tanks - it was a chance for revenge.”

Sports played a vital role in the mid-twentieth century history of Hungary prior to the 1956 Olympic Games, often providing a respite from the harshness of everyday life under restrictive and oppressive political regimes. In an effort to encourage athletes, the government rewarded them for successful performances; Hungarian Olympic swimmer Valerie Gyenge claimed to have been given extra food, including oranges and chocolate, which “nobody ever saw… in Hungary” and money. Hungary, possessing an especially impressive national sports complex, often found itself carrying much of the prestige of the Eastern Bloc’s sports program on an international level – at least in the sport of soccer. The Hungarian national soccer team in the 1950’s, in fact, remains one of the most celebrated and record-breaking national soccer teams in the history of the sport. Captained by “the most lethal left foot in Europe,” Ferenc Puskas, the Mighty Magyars enjoyed a nearly perfect record for several years in the 1950’s. An unusually squat, pudgy player, Puskas became an instrumental figure for the Eastern European governments to flaunt during Cold War hostilities. Puskas led Hungary to several notable victories, particularly against Yugoslavia in the 1952 Olympic finals and against England, a team that had previously never lost to a foreign opponent, in 1953. The match against England, often

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34 “Blood in the Water: ‘The Soviets were crushing our country with tanks.’” The Guardian December 6, 1956: p. 2.
35 Joe O’Connor. “Golden Years: From humble beginnings in Hungary to the top of the podium at the Olympic Games, Valeria Gyenge’s adventure really began when the Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest.” National Post. December 2, 2006.
dubbed “the match of the century,” carried special importance, with Hungary donning the banner of socialism for the Communist Bloc in the eyes of the West.\textsuperscript{38}

Hungary entered the 1954 World Cup, the premiere display of soccer on an international level, as the heavy favorite. The road to the finals for Hungary, however, proved surprisingly difficult. The quarter-finals pitted Hungary against a powerful Brazilian lineup. In an eerie harbinger of the intense 1956 Olympic water polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union, the match between Hungary and Brazil quickly deteriorated into a shocking display of violence. As the Brazilians grew desperate with frustration at their pending loss, they began intentionally tackling and kicking the Hungarians, who reciprocated with equal maliciousness. The violence continued after the referees blew the final whistle, declaring the Hungarians the victors; in the locker room, Puskas became involved in an altercation with a Brazilian player that ended with Puskas breaking a bottle over the other player’s head.\textsuperscript{39} Entering the finals undoubtedly fevered with a mixture of adrenaline and national pride, the Hungarians found themselves facing West Germany, their ideological enemies.

Like in Hungary, soccer powerfully influenced German culture in the mid-twentieth century. Seen by many as a form of solace from Nazism during World War II, soccer became resoundingly popular in Germany, leading the government to attempt to ascribe political motivations to the sport.\textsuperscript{40} For this reason, the West Germans followed the 1954 World cup with a borderline religious fervor, watching the games from televisions in store windows or in local bars, and relished the opportunity to defeat their Communist neighbors. The quintessential


\textsuperscript{39} Lisi. \textit{A History of the World Cup}.

underdogs, the West German team entered the World Cup finals in Bern, Switzerland strong but understandably apprehensive with playing against the Mighty Magyars. In a surprising twist, though, the German team came out victorious against the previously undefeated Hungarians, leading the German people to coin the phrase “Das Wunder von Bern” – “The Miracle of Bern.” The victory represented a moment of “collective bliss,” for the people of West Germany and provided a sense of national pride and unity that had been starkly absent from the area since the collapse of Hitlerite Germany and their defeat in World War II.41 While the 1954 World Cup provided the much-needed confidence to the rebuilding state of West Germany, it dealt a devastating blow to the national pride of the already suffering Hungarians; a relatively humiliating defeat at the international level served only to compound their feelings of insecurity and vulnerability under the auspices of the Soviet Union. The goalie of the defeated Hungarian team expressed the feeling that “[they] represented a country and [their] results could secure Hungary more favorable treatment both politically and economically. When [they] failed to become world champions, [they] fell from grace overnight.”42 While the overarching political themes that surrounded the 1956 Hungarian Revolution undoubtedly over-shadowed this loss in the scheme of Soviet history, the goalie’s statement captures an important sentiment expressed by people living in the Eastern Bloc at the time and indicates the presence of a political and cultural strain between the Eastern Bloc state and the Soviet Union. Moreover, it speaks to the level of political influence within sports culture at the time and reveals Soviet policies and ideas concerning international athletics.

41 Heinrich, p. 1493.
Tensions between Hungary and the Soviet Union had, in fact, been brewing for years prior to the 1956 Revolution and Olympic Games, beginning with the Allied-approved Soviet occupation of Hungary after 1945. Estimates suggest that during their occupation of Budapest at the end of the war, the Red Army raped upwards of 50,000 Hungarian women before fully asserting their influence over the nation. What began as a coalition government in the post-war period quickly deteriorated into a Bolshevik-sponsored communist government headed by the self-proclaimed disciple of Stalin and hard-line communist, Matyas Rakosi. Rampant economic hardship, corruption, torture, deportation eastward, and execution under the Stalinist-backed Rakosi regime bred contempt among the Hungarian population. Soviet propaganda suggested that, by 1950, far from resisting, the people of Hungary overwhelmingly supported the socialist party and the clerical opposition, led by alleged American spy Cardinal Mindszenty, had been eliminated. According to a United States intelligence report, however, dissidence became widespread, with popular support for the regime falling to around 10 percent in 1954. The political situation in Hungary continued to deteriorate leading up to 1956. In a 1956 report to Moscow, Ambassador Yurii Andropov claimed that a severe lack of legitimacy with the Hungarian Workers’ Party contributed to the subversive unrest. He recommended an immediate Soviet government intervention to remedy the brooding discontent, preferably with a Soviet delegation consisting of a “number of prominent party officials.” However, as Imre Nagy and other reform-minded communists began demanding a withdrawal of Soviet troops and

Hungarian-based democratic national elections, armed intervention increasingly became the only viable option for the Soviet Union to quell the rebellion.

Things came to a boil when, on October 23, a group of Hungarian protestors gathered in Budapest, growing from 50,000 to approximately 200,000 throughout the day and demanding the return of Nagy to leadership and a complete Soviet withdrawal. A previously formed special corps of Soviet troops, followed by tanks, marched into Budapest the very same day. The resistance continued and, on October 30, it appeared the Soviet leadership planned to rethink their course of action with the release of a declaration claiming that the Soviet government was “prepared to enter into the appropriate negotiations with the government” of Hungary. By October 31, the Soviet troops had withdrawn from Budapest. Hungarian victory lasted only momentarily, though; by November 4th, Soviet troops re-entered Budapest, quelled the rebellion, and placed Janos Kadar in power. In a radio address in November of 1956, Kadar called for national independence, a rejection of the “despotism and national slavery” witnessed under Rakosi, and a return to Marxist-Leninism, which characterized only parts of his decades-long leadership.

Under these tumultuous political conditions, both Hungary and the Soviet Union found themselves preparing for the 1956 Olympics. In terms of actual athletic competition, though, the Hungarians had little to worry about; they excelled at a number of sports on an international level, including water polo. Hungary’s water polo team came second only to their soccer team in

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regards to prestige and success and had won gold at the 1932, 1936, and 1952 Olympic Games. The resurgence of a Hungarian nationalist-grounded independence movement and revolution at the end of 1956, though, changed Hungary’s preparations for the Olympic Games and threatened the Magyars chance of defending their title in Melbourne. Gyorgy Karpáti, a member of the famous 1956 Hungarian national water polo team, recalls his leaving Hungary for the games: “There was still shooting in Budapest when we left for a training camp in Czechoslovakia at the end of October. There were debates every day about whether we should go to Melbourne. A lot of people with families would have preferred to go back to Hungary.”

While Karpáti, only 21 at the time of the Olympic Games and filled with ardent national pride, felt little holding him back from competing in Australia, the Hungarian Olympic team barely made it out of their revolting nation to participate at all. The team gathered in the hills just outside Budapest, preparing to leave for a final training camp, when the violence erupted. Hungarian swimmer, Valerie Gyenge, remembers: “They wouldn’t let us leave our hotel… We didn’t know anything.”

Days passed and the revolution intensified, inspiring many athletes to disregard instructions and leave their hotel. As one athlete put it, they “were in an ecstatic state,” and, allegedly, fought alongside the rebels against the Soviet troops. Overcome with national pride and emotion, many athletes abandoned their disciplined training regimens and “manned machine guns and barricades, fought secret police and Soviet troops, and helped carry wounded,” prior to leaving Budapest. One athlete commented:

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49 “Blood in the Water” The Guardian.
50 O’Connor, “Golden Years.”
When the revolution began we were all gathered in Budapest for training. Everyone felt very confident about the team's prospects at the Olympics; we were scheduled to leave Budapest by air October 28 and, according to the plans, we would have three weeks to settle down and acclimatize ourselves in Melbourne. But what happened in Hungary was too spontaneous, too natural to be ignored. It is hard to describe all the emotions that filled us during those hours.... Suddenly no one was afraid of the secret police. When October 23 came, and the marchers behind national flags started to swell into tens of thousands, our hearts leaped and sport and the Olympics were forgotten.51

As the Soviet troops intensified their occupation and cracked down on the nationalist uprising, Hungarian ties of communication with the West became strained and Olympic officials knew nothing of the Hungarian team’s circumstances. Radio reports coming out of Hungary following the outbreak of violence provided unreliable news, some falsely claiming that national hero and soccer captain, Ferenc Puskas, had been killed and others saying that Hungary had withdrawn from the competition altogether. The International Olympic Committee demanded an “Olympic truce” in order to allow Hungary to compete, but this had little effect. Eventually the athletes managed to get to Prague, some without luggage and still intoxicated with revolutionary fervor, and left for Australia. Communication remained limited between the Hungarian athletes and both their families and the Olympic officials. At one point amidst the chaos, the Olympic officials believed the team to be on an unknown island in the Danube, possibly stranded and completely without communication.52

Many athletes felt it their duty to compete in the Olympic Games and “tell the world about [their] wonderful revolution.” While travelling to Australia, the Hungarian team heard only morsels of information about their homeland. A number of trainers and coaches left for Australia prior to the outbreak of violence aboard a Russian steamship. On it, they listened to the Moscow Radio and, after hearing that Soviet reporters had fled Budapest, realized the gravity of the situation. Though things remained relatively benign aboard the ship considering the state of affairs, the Soviet sailors chastised their own athletes for talking with the rebel Hungarians and they travelled with little interaction. Not until arriving in Melbourne did the athletes come to learn what had happened in Hungary.53 Gyenge recalls hearing of the revolution’s failure in Melbourne and the unanimous team decision to abandon the Soviet Hungarian flag in favor of a nationalist Nagy emblem coupled with a black commemorative ribbon at the opening ceremonies. According to her claims, a member of the Hungarian gymnastics team climbed the Hungarian flagpole at the Olympic Games and physically cut out the Soviet symbol.54 For the periphery of the Soviet Bloc, sports became one of the few remaining methods of nationalist expression and political resistance against the ubiquitous Soviet influence; many hoped that “the bitter and vengeful determination so deeply rooted in the Hungarian character,” would help them best their Russian opponents in Melbourne.55

On December 6, roughly a month after Soviet troops re-entered Budapest, the Soviet Union faced Hungary in the water polo semi-finals – the first event to pit the Hungarians directly against their oppressors. Mirroring the sense of fermenting unrest seen in Budapest weeks ago, the match began with a kind of electric fervidity absent from previous rounds. According to

53 “Hungary’s Heroes.” *Sports Illustrated.*
54 O’Connor. “Golden Years.”
55 “Hungary’s Heroes.” *Sports Illustrated.*
Karpati, who felt the pressure from a number of Hungarian emigrants and nationalists present in the stands in Melbourne, the members of the team “were desperate to defeat the team of the Soviets who were crushing [their] country with tanks - it was a chance for revenge.”56 An impressive 5,500 people packed into the Melbourne pool to watch the match and catcall the Russian athletes, indicating the significance the match-up carried on an international level. The Hungarian players entered the water with the intention of antagonizing their opponents. In an interview decades later, Ervin Zador recalled the Hungarian tactics:

We became very defense-minded. We had travelled all over the world and people didn't expect us to play like that. It was totally a mind game… We had decided to try and make the Russians angry to distract them. The plan was: 'we play, they fight'. We spoke their language - back home we had all been made to learn two hours of Russian every day - and so we were able to tell them how much we disliked them, and their families. And soon they were fighting.57

Within the first minute, Soviet player Mchvenieradze, ostensibly trying to get the ball, responded to the insults and delivered the first strike by placing a Hungarian player in an illegal headlock. For this, he received jeers from the heavily anti-Soviet crowd and a penalty from the referees.58 The fans cheered as the Hungarians fought off the excessively aggressive Russians and finished the first half with a commanding 2-0 lead.

Paralleling the rapid descent into chaos that occurred in Hungary just a month prior, the second half of the match witnessed an escalation in the outright violence. Both sides delivered

deliberate punches and kicks while the incensed audience began cat-calling and spitting at the Soviet players. Much to the chagrin of the Soviet players and, moreover, government, the Hungarian athletes scored two more goals in the second half, bringing the score to a mortifying 4-0. Within the final minutes of the game, the Soviet players abandoned all pretenses of sportsmanship. One Russian player, Valentin Prokopov, entered the second half decidedly more violent than others. Antal Bolvari, the Hungarian marking him in the water, found himself overwhelmed with Prokopov and switched positions with Zador, the leading goal-scorer. Following his initial strategy, Zador goaded Prokopov, telling him that he and “his family were losers.” 59 As play continued on the opposite side of the pool, Propokov struck an unsuspecting Zador in the face, cutting him above his eye in the process. 60 A photograph of Zador exiting the pool with blood streaming down from his right brow circulated widely throughout the media, prompting commentators to dub the match “Blood in the Water.”

59 Rowbottom. “Ervin Zador.”
60 “Cold War Violence Erupts at Melbourne Olympics.” Sydney Morning Herald December 7, 1956.
Australian media outlets attempted to downplay the severity of the violence and the significance of that specific encounter, likely to avoid any potential embarrassment. Ken Knox, an Australian journalist, purported that “it was the inconsistent refereeing which touched off the displays of temper.” Western reporters, though, pounced on the opportunity to ascribe the match political undertones, assigning Hungarians to the role of resilient, ardent nationalist victims and underdogs to the ruthlessly violent, unscrupulous Soviet bullies. An article in *Sports Illustrated* stated that “sport has long been just another form of politics,” for the Soviet Union and included a quote from a Hungarian player claiming that the Russians played with “brutality and disregard for fairplay,” while failing to report on any of the rule violations committed by the Hungarians.\(^6\) \(^4\)

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\(^6\) “Cold War Violence.” *Sydney Morning Herald*. The photograph shows Ervin Zador being assisted out of the pool by officials shortly after the altercation.


\(^4\) “A Sweet and Bloody Victory for Hungary.” *Sports Illustrated* December 17, 1956.
While western media outlets undoubtedly exaggerated the events due to ideological bias, to say that the match between the Soviet Union and Hungary lacked the aforementioned elements of national and international pride and the political implications for its participants would be patently false. A Hungarian player, Deszo Gyarmati, claimed that two of the Russian players called him and his teammates fascists while attacking them. The severity with which the Soviet team fought – a level that commentators had scarcely seen in the sport before – reflects on more than the Soviet Union’s athletes desire to generate worldwide respect; it shows their dedication to the preservation of the Eastern Bloc and their hatred for ideological betrayers. Soviet public reports on the events of the 1956 Olympic Games remain largely silent on the bloody water polo semi-final match, instead choosing to emphasize how the Soviet team accumulated more points than the Americans did throughout the competition. Soviet newspapers blamed the American victory in track and field, “in the interest of justice,” on the American “Negro sportsmen,” and instead chose to celebrate the success of the internationally renowned Soviet gymnasts, ignoring the humiliating incident in the water polo semi-finals.

Moreover, for the Hungarians, their participation in the Olympic Games represents one of Esman’s “weapons of the weak”; though not occurring on a political stage, the Hungarians’ dogged resistance against the Soviets during the Olympic Games extends far beyond the realm of sports culture and well into international politics, displaying the clear fusion of political expression and athletics in the Eastern Bloc. Running contrary to the policies of the Soviet Union and, later, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary used the 1956 Summer Olympics to promote individual, nationalist interests and ignored the collective benefit that international

64 Rinehart. “Fists Flew and Blood Flowed.”
65 “Cold War Violence.” Sydney Morning Herald.
athletics afforded to the Soviet Bloc. While the water polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union is only a minor blip in the impressive legacy left behind by Eastern Bloc sports, a combination of heavy media coverage and the international political implications from the 1956 Hungarian Revolution render it one of the most notable fissures in the monolithic athletic complex.
Chapter IV: Sports in the German Democratic Republic

“They used me like a machine.”

Roughly twenty years after its formation in 1949, the German Democratic Republic had created one of the leading national sports programs in the world, rivaling those of the Soviet Union and the United States. While very little information from East Germany managed to escape from under the “iron curtain” during the second half of the twentieth century, the Western world was forced to take notice of the East Germans about once every four years. Beginning in 1968, the German Democratic Republic competed in the Olympic Games separate from West Germany and, in the twenty year period lasting from 1968 till their final Olympic Games in 1988, the country earned 519 medals, third in number only to the United States and the Soviet Union, who earned 624 medals and 774 medals, respectively. Though this, in and of itself, should prove impressive for a nation that found itself on the losing side of World War II and under foreign occupation just decades prior, it carries even more significance when viewed in the context of population sizes. In 1988, the German Democratic Republic had approximately 17.2 million citizens, while the Soviet Union had 266 million and the United States 246 million. When adjusted to Olympic medals received on a per capita basis, the German Democratic Republic earned roughly ten times more medals than the Soviet Union and twelve times more medals than the United States during that two decade period, making it by far the most successful sports culture in the world at that time.

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These statistics astounded many Western onlookers at the time, causing some to research and speculate on the East German athletic complex. Doug Gilbert, a Canadian journalist, became so captivated by the efficiency and effectiveness of the sports program that he dubbed it “the miracle machine.” But, when Ilona Slupianek, a female shot-putter from the German Democratic Republic, tested positive for anabolic steroids at the 1977 European Cup, the East German sports complex became a markedly more sinister concept in the Western consciousness. Western media outlets began describing an emerging steroid “epidemic” in international athletics, which became heavily, but not exclusively, associated with some Soviet Bloc states. In the fallout of Slupianek’s steroid scandal and others like it, many sports journalists expressed doubts over the legitimacy of the German Democratic Republic’s sports program and suggested that “something [was] up.”

As more information on the sports programs within the Soviet Bloc became available, allegations made against the German Democratic Republic concerning steroid usage and governmental abuse of athletes became more rampant. Western media outlets claimed that the excessive amounts of money given to professional athletes for successful performances left East Germany in financial ruin and galvanized class warfare between regular citizens and professional athletes. Some suggest, though, that these claims from Western observers are exaggerated and “lurid” attempts to discredit the systematic effectiveness of the East German sports program and

75 Janofsky. “Sports in East Germany.”
are rooted in remnants of McCarthyism.\textsuperscript{76} \textsuperscript{77} Regardless, discussion from both Westerners and former East German athletes of steroid abuse and government intimidation plague the history of the German Democratic Republic’s rapid ascension into sports greatness and point toward the presence of some truths, making it an area of interest in the larger spectrum of Soviet Bloc sports.

Much like the Soviet Union and its periphery, the German Democratic Republic, too, viewed international competition as a venue to demonstrate their athletic prowess and, subsequently, their successful political ideology and governmental organization. Even prior to the Soviet occupation of Germany, the German people placed a special emphasis on sports. In Nazi Germany, para-military and nationalist values tinged all aspects of sports culture and, as a result, sports became an extremely important part of the highly militarized German existence and national identity. In the wake of World War II, occupied Germany inherited this popular acceptance of sports as a component of national pride.\textsuperscript{78} While recovering from the experiences in Hitler’s Germany and their defeat in World War II, the East Germans relied on successful ventures in sports, both domestic via their own internal pseudo-Olympic \textit{Spartakiads} and in athletic meets on an international level, to maintain a stable East German government and ensure the precariously-balanced sense of national self-esteem among the population.

On top of the sense of insecurity and a need for something to rally behind, the central Soviet government played a role in molding sports culture in the German Democratic Republic. In 1952, the Socialist Unity party published an article encouraging other socialists to imitate the

\textsuperscript{76} Cole. \textit{The East German Sports System}. p. 8
Soviet Union’s concept of scientific physical education; namely, it called for an abandonment of decadent and bourgeois sports, like women’s boxing, and encouraged acknowledging the importance of socialist collective achievement and athletic success. While an article of this nature hints at mild Sovietization in the Eastern Bloc, it is also important to note that Marxism preceded Bolshevist-Leninism in Germany and the two likely played off each other in the development of East German sports culture. Demonstrating the importance of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Bloc, the government used the Spartakiads, which first emerged in East Germany in 1956, to honor the Communist Party, the East German army and police, and, above all, Karl Marx in a display viewed by the entire population. Much to the shock of Western observers, the East German people responded to the Spartakiad with “public merry-making, drinking, feasting, and marching and careening about the streets,” and generally accepted the politicization and militarization of the events. The Spartakiad served as more than a platform for East Germany to promote Marxism-Leninism; the government heavily encouraged youth organizations to participate in the events and frequently scouted the most promising athletes for enrollment in government-sponsored sports schools.

Outside of athletics, everyday life in East Germany rarely allowed for any overwhelming sense of satisfaction or pride; the population faced constant reminders of the relative prosperity in West Germany and had little to separate them from the homogeneity of the Soviet Bloc. For the majority of the population, sports directed the otherwise bitter sentiments into a controlled,

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80 Hoberman. *Sport and Political Ideology*. p. 205
disciplined sense of accomplishment and purpose.\textsuperscript{83} Hoping to exploit the power of sports over the general population and international affairs, the East German government placed enormous emphasis on developing their athletics program and procuring the top athletes in every sport. In a similar fashion to the Hungarian appropriation of sports as a “weapon of the weak,” against the Soviet Union, the East Germans hoped to use athletic achievement as a tool with which to upstage their more prosperous Western neighbors.

Home of the notorious Stasi, the German Democratic Republic frequently treaded the line between just and unjust to reach their ultimate goals.\textsuperscript{84} While many suspected it, the directors and trainers in the German College of Physical Culture emphatically denied rumors of government-mandated drug regimens or blood doping. After earning 40 gold, 25 silver, and 25 bronze medals at the 1976 Montreal Olympics and receiving international commendation, the East German government allowed a rare, highly limited visit by the Western press into their Olympics training program. Officials who administered the tours emphasized the importance of identifying and grooming talent from an early age and maintained that their athletes trained “without recourse to anabolics.”\textsuperscript{85} East German trainers and sports medicine experts additionally claimed to have developed a scientifically perfected training regimen implemented in sports schools for their athletes that produced the highest-performing individuals possible.\textsuperscript{86}

Despite the vehement assertions by East German sports directors that neither athletes nor coaches used illegal performance enhancing drugs, evidence began emerging in the 1970’s

\textsuperscript{83} Markham. “East German Sports.”
\textsuperscript{84} The Stasi was the official security service for the German Democratic Republic. They are commonly viewed as one of the most repressive and corrupt secret police organizations in the world.
\textsuperscript{86} Hoberman. Sport and Political Ideology. p. 211.
suggesting that rampant anabolic steroid usage existed in the German Democratic Republic. At the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics, the national women’s track and field team won gold in nine out of the fourteen events, reigniting the allegations of East German steroid abuse.\textsuperscript{87} In 1977, the International Amateur Athletic Association announced an indefinite ban on an East German shot-putter, Ilona Slupianek, after she tested positive for anabolic steroids at the European Cup in Helsinki.\textsuperscript{88} The German Democratic Republic contested Slupianek’s ban, getting it reduced to only one year to allow her to compete in the European championships of 1978 in Prague. Slupianek went on to win the gold at the European championships, win the gold at the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and, in that same year, be named the Woman Athlete of the Year by a panel of track and field experts.\textsuperscript{89} In the wake of Slupianek’s positive steroid test in 1977 and her successful appearance in the 1978 European championships, many became disillusioned with the “miracle machine.” A U.S. Olympic Committee medical staff member insisted that many steroid-abusing athletes had perfected the process of avoiding detection, and even suggested that they “had Ph.D. pharmacologists working for them,” to beat the tests.\textsuperscript{90} Though Slupianek was the only East German athlete to be discovered using anabolic steroids in competition by officials, her conviction provided fairly compelling evidence supporting what many Westerners had long speculated on and was followed by several other high-profile public accusations of blood doping and steroid abuse in East German athletics.

\textsuperscript{89} Elliott Almond, Julie Car, Randy Harvey. “Olympians Finding the Drug Test a Snap.” Los Angeles Times January 29, 1984 sec. 3 p. 15.
\textsuperscript{90} Barry Lorge. “IOC Gears Up to Detect Drugs, Ingenious Cheating in Moscow.” The Washington Post June 1, 1979, p. D5. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
In 1978, 20-year-old sprinter Renate Neufeld fled East Germany while training for the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. A short-distance sprinter and hurdler, Neufeld had helped her club team win the National Junior 400-meter relay in the summer of 1976. She recalled that, while in sports school, she and other talented athletes were required to present a self-analysis to specialists that evaluated “one’s own performance and goals,” and had “written evaluations of their parents’ social behaviors.”91 Steroid regimens often followed these psychological evaluations. Neufeld broke the stringent athletic privacy policy in West Germany, claiming that her trainers routinely gave her “vitamins” that resulted in improved strength and speed, but also a deeper voice, a mustache, and amenorrhea.92 Neufeld also cited a strange pain and stiffness in her upper thighs that made it difficult to walk. According to her, the pills were administered two or three times a day for a two week period, followed by a ten day break.93 After repeatedly refusing to take the pills and turning down an invitation to join the Communist Party, she was threatened with hard labor, interrogated by the Stasi for her relationship with a Bulgarian man, and refused the training money all members of the German Democratic Republic’s Olympic team received. The Free German Youth, a socialist youth group in the German Democratic Republic, required Neufeld to explain her decision to not take the pills and “accused [her] of not striving to achieve [her] best performances,” without ever addressing the content of the “vitamins,” she was receiving. After she failed to provide an acceptable explanation for not taking the pills and continued complaining about the painful side effects, Neufeld’s coaches forbid her from seeking outside medical treatment and instead sent her to a psychologist at her

91 Hoberman. Sport and Political Ideology. p. 212
93 Getler. “Athlete who Fled E. Germany.”
sports school. Reufeld claimed that, while sometimes helpful, the psychologists at the schools were primarily meant to “get the last reserves out of,” resistant athletes.\textsuperscript{94, 95}

After defecting to West Germany with her Bulgarian fiancé, Neufeld’s father lost his job as a teacher and her sister, a talented handball player, was expelled from her sports school. Scientists in West Germany analyzed a few of the pills Neufeld managed to smuggle out while escaping and concluded that they were anabolic steroids.\textsuperscript{96} East German officials remained silent on these two matters, continuing to deny the use of performance-enhancing drugs among their athletes. When questioned, an official spokesman for Neufeld’s sports club insisted that they never require athletes to do anything against their will and refused to comment further on the situation.\textsuperscript{97} However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 revealed previously hidden documents on anabolic steroids in sports schools, galvanizing an investigation into the successes of East German athletes throughout the 1970’s and 80’s.

In 1998, a criminal investigation was launched by German prosecutors against four coaches and two doctors for causing serious harm to 19 athletes through mandatory, state-endorsed steroid use. Uncovered documents revealed that thousands of athletes and hundreds of coaches participated in the East German operation to use performance-enhancing drugs to promote the ideological supremacy of communism over capitalism through international athletic successes.\textsuperscript{98} While former East German officials alleged that former West Germans were simply jealous of their Olympic success and that there was no truth in the claims, recovered reports from the Stasi suggest that some female athletes were required to have abortions and began using

\textsuperscript{94} Hoberman. \textit{Sport and Political ideology}, p. 212
\textsuperscript{95} Getler. “Athlete who Fled E. Germany.”
\textsuperscript{96} Vinocur. “East German Tale of Tyranny.”
\textsuperscript{97} Getler. “Athlete who Fled E. Germany.”
\textsuperscript{98} Cowell. “Germany Confronts Legacy of Steroids”.

steroids as young as 12. Many sports officials claimed that they were acting in accordance with instructions given to them from the East German government, insisting that they were told that “in East Germany, what mattered was not the individual but the collective.” Both Manfred Ewald, the former East German sports chief, and Dr. Manfred Hoeppner, his medical director, and roughly 20 other former trainers and coaches were found guilty of being accessories to causing bodily harm, receiving fines and probation.

Andreas Krieger was one of the German Democratic Republic’s athletes participating in the investigation and seeking compensation for the government-endorsed forced steroid regimens. Though now a man, Krieger lived formerly as a female member of the East German track and field team named Heidi. Krieger enrolled in a sports school in Berlin in 1979, when she was 14-years-old. Two years later, Krieger began regularly receiving blue pills from trainers at the school. Her trainers did not disclose that the pills were, in fact, anabolic steroids, but administered them daily at the same time as birth control. There was no mention of any potential side effects from taking the pills; doctors simply told Krieger that she should not get pregnant.

In less than a year, though, Krieger noticed significant and startling changes in her body. At the age of 18, she weighed 220 pounds and had an abnormal amount of facial and body hair and a deepened, gruff voice. Krieger often faced ridicule on the streets of the German Democratic Republic for her hyper-masculine appearance and people regularly mistook her for a man, he alleged while testifying in the investigation decades later.

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99 Cowell. “Germany Confronts Legacy of Steroids.”
102 Longman. “East German Steroids’ Toll.”
Krieger continued taking the pills and, in 1986, she won a European championship in the shot put. According to medical records, though, that same year she had received 2,590 milligrams of steroids, a dangerously high dosage. Krieger’s strenuous workout regimen began negatively affecting her body, particularly her knees and pelvis. By 1991, her career had ended and she was left with physical and psychological trauma. Though Krieger had always felt uncomfortable as a woman and suffered from a crisis of gender identity, he would later claim that retirement from professional athletics intensified the feelings of insecurity, depression, and gender confusion at the time. After meeting a transsexual in 1995, Krieger decided to undergo gender reassignment surgery and, by 1997, Krieger had surgery to transition into a man,

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104 Longman. “East German Steroids’ Toll.”
changing his name from Heidi to Andreas. While Krieger says that the state-mandated steroid regimen was not entirely responsible for his transition from woman to man, he insists that the excess hormones strongly influenced his decision and deprived him of the chance to discover his gender identity on his own. In a 2000 court testimony, Krieger testified against the East German officials, stating that “they used [him] like a machine.”

Though these incidences of steroid abuse are relative outliers in terms of the publicity they received in the larger history of East German athletics, the cases of Slupianek, Neufeld, and Krieger and the East German government’s involvement in them lend credence to the theory that Soviet Bloc states viewed international sports as a means of expressing ideological superiority and political stability. All three athletes stated, either tacitly or openly, that their government-mandated steroid regimens were intended to improve their performance and, subsequently, bring prestige and glory to the East Germany athletic system. While politics had been present since the birth of sports culture in the German Democratic Republic, specifically in the Spartakiads, the involvement of the minister of sports and the East German secret police demonstrates a politicization of sports culture that extends far beyond simply honoring Marxism-Leninism.

Contrasting starkly with Hungary, where sports represented a forum for political rebellion against oppression, the East German sports machine showed the willingness of both the government and citizens to intentionally harm individual athletes for the collective benefit of the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Bloc. In this sense, the “miracle machine” achieved its purpose; many refer to the East German national sports program as one of the most successful ever to exist and it garnered the modest state international attention, but not without a

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105 Longman. “East German Steroids’ Toll.”
The darker history behind the program - one focused on government-sponsored steroid abuse and intimidation by the secret police – demonstrates the extremes to which Eastern Bloc states will go to in their domination of sports culture and leaves little doubt as to from where Stallone drew his inspiration for *Rocky IV.*

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Chapter V: Conclusion

As the Cold War developed in the 1950’s and 1960’s and global politics appeared more and more to center on the bilateralism developing between the Communist East and the Capitalist West, sports became an increasingly implemented tool of foreign policy for the Soviet Union. The intrinsic fusion between international sports and both foreign and domestic politics in the USSR had long been established with the Soviet activity in decades prior, yet increased levels of international competition and Soviet successes only amplified the situation. The hotly competitive “space race” between the Soviet Union and the United States shifted in the favor of the Soviet Union with the 1957 launching of Sputnik. The USSR decisively jumped ahead in the race, though, when, in 1961, they successfully sent several men into space – a feat Khrushchev declared was accomplished under the “banner of Lenin.”

Soviet nationalistic domination continued, too, in athletics. Since their participation in the 1956 Summer and Winter Olympic Games, the Soviet Union had lost only one year in terms of overall points. At each Olympics, they intentionally used a ritualistic handling of flags, anthems, and marching that all pointed towards the seriousness with which the Soviet government applied Eastern Bloc pride to international sports.

In 1974, the International Olympic Committee presented the Soviet leadership with an unprecedented opportunity to display the accomplishments of socialism in athletics and the larger society by allowing them to host the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow. Preparation for the 1980 Olympics began immediately upon Moscow’s selection with the

creation of seventeen separate committees to oversee specific aspects in the preparation process. Plans included the construction of ten entirely new sports facilities in Moscow, the modernization of several already existing facilities, the construction of an “Olympic village” to accommodate the roughly 40,000 visitors expected, a revamping of the public transportation system, and a redecoration of many streets throughout Moscow. Aside from physically restructuring the city, the Olympic Organizing Committee recognized the need to accommodate guests on a more personal level. Schools of higher education in Moscow and other Republics provided over 10,000 interpreters trained in 43 languages, including dialects of specific African countries, for the visitors. In an effort to generate interest for the Olympic Games amongst youth, the government even distributed tickets to different sections of the Young Communist League. The Olympic Committee reportedly sent out tens of thousands of tickets to be given only to those who have completed their Five Year Plan ahead of time, demonstrated talent in the workforce, or displayed scholarly ability – the services only applied to members of the Youth Communist League and did not exist at an individual level, though. Despite the immense amount of effort the Soviet Union placed in prepping Moscow to host the Olympics, an unexpected blow, and another layer to the connection between politics and sports, put the Soviet’s prestige at risk.

At the end of 1979, Soviet troops, at the request of the Afghani government, invaded the Republic of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union shared a long and complicated history with

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Afghanistan that extended as far back as tsarist Russia and, after resistance against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan by the mujahideen proved too strong and it became clear that the pro-Soviet Kabul regime would collapse without the interjection of Soviet troops, the Moscow government sent in 80,000 troops to put down the rebellion.\textsuperscript{113} While the Soviets doubtlessly believed their presence would quell the uprising, guerrilla warfare spread throughout dozens of provinces in Afghanistan. The Soviet troops and tanks could do little to combat the mujahideen’s mountainous guerrilla warfare and it became clear the war would continue on through 1980 Olympics.\textsuperscript{114} In his 1980 State of the Union Address, President Jimmy Carter stated that, out of outrage for the Soviet Union’s “unjustifiably cruel,” attack on the Muslim people of Afghanistan, the United States would place an agricultural and technological embargo on the USSR and, along with several other nations around the world, would withdraw from the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.\textsuperscript{115}

The American boycott ultimately did little to affect the Moscow Olympic Games on a substantial level. The International Olympic Committee did not select a different location, despite American urging, and the Olympics proceeded as planned. Soviet media attacked the United States government for betraying the sanctity of the Olympic Charter and traditions and, on a larger scale, betraying the desires of their own athletes and coaches to represent their nation on an international level, despite having boycotted the Olympics 30 years prior.\textsuperscript{116} Regardless, the American withdrawal from the Olympic Games allowed for the Soviet Union to secure yet

\textsuperscript{113} The mujahideen refers to radical Islamic groups who launch Jiahds. During the Afghan Civil War, the mujahideen were financed and supported by the United States, Pakistan, and several other countries.


another overall Olympic victory and, for the Soviet government, marked another athletic victory over the lagging west.

The successes the Soviet Union enjoyed after the Moscow Olympics disappeared quickly. The Soviet policy of heavy and rapid industrial development sputtered out and it soon became clear that the Soviet Union’s ability to function in the technologically-advanced global economy, let alone its ability to satisfy the basic consumer needs of its people, could not be maintained. The unexpectedly long and costly war in Afghanistan served only to further detract from the overall quality of life in the Soviet Union during the 1980’s; the need to generate revenue and move towards a more market-based economy in the Soviet Union required state-sponsored sports institutions to unsuccessfully attempt to finance themselves. Attendance at sporting events decreased dramatically and, to raise money, Soviet sports leagues began to contract many of their celebrated Soviet soccer and basketball players to teams abroad. The introduction of perestroika and glasnost policies greatly changed the way the Soviet government approached sports; the absence of government control in sports left it vulnerable to commercial exploitation and corruption. After the economy and political structure of the Soviet Bloc collapsed in the 1990’s, the pattern of the Soviet Union and its periphery to intertwine international athletic competition with foreign and domestic policy, too, collapsed.

The Soviet Union and its periphery states’ efforts to appropriate and use the Western-based idea of an international sports program to promote stability and supremacy achieved mixed results. Though the Soviet Bloc sports program certainly had a monolithic, impenetrable quality in the eyes of Western culture, the reality is far more complicated. The Soviet Union’s gradual

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117 Riordan. Sport Under Communism p. 49.
118 Edelman. Serious Fun.
acceptance of and participation in international sports in the 1930’s always focused on proving the effectiveness of socialism over capitalism. In many ways, it accomplished that; the enormous success of the Soviet Union’s national team in the Olympic Games prompted some scholars to admire the seeming “superiority of the communist system,” in developing a consistently successful sports program.119 As the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence extended into Central and Eastern Europe, though, the relationship between domestic and international politics and sports culture within the Soviet Bloc became muddled. Some states resisted the introduction of communism and, in the case of Hungary in 1956, attempted a revolution, while others, like East Germany, adhered more closely to the Soviet government’s policy on the importance of embracing collectivism over individual triumph.

The Hungarian and East German situations expose an interesting dichotomy in Soviet Bloc sports culture and, more generally, society. For some, cultural events like sports competition became politicized as a way to rebel against the central Soviet government. Unable to stave off the Soviet troops in their 1956 uprising and without a means of military resistance, Hungarians used international sports competition to catch the political spillover from a failed revolution and apply it to the 1956 Summer Olympics. For others still, sports culture took on political undertones mirroring those that had developed in the USSR in years prior. Like the Soviets, the East Germans hoped to use victories in international sports competition to demonstrate the benefits of communism. Perhaps because of its proximity to West Germany and residual feelings of bitterness in the division of Germany after World War II, East Germany cultivated its national sports program with little regard to safety or fairness. Though many countries have faced accusations of athletes using anabolic steroids, few find themselves facing charges of state-sponsored, mandatory steroid regimens or secret police intimidation of resisting

athletes like East Germany. The political motivations behind the different Eastern Bloc states’ approaches to sports may not always align, but for the Soviet Union, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic, sports took on the role of an undeniably powerful and pervasive political weapon in the twentieth century.
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