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Sport Under the Iron Curtain: Alliance, Defection, and Competition During the Cold War

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Abstract

The crossroads at which Sports and Politics connect is the Summer Olympics. This is most evident is during the Olympics of the Cold War. Typically, sports history of the Cold War covers the clash between the United States and the Soviet Union. But examined further, Sports Politics in the Cold War was experienced by the other countries of the Eastern Bloc. Hungary's Golden Team in Helsinki 1952, Bulgaria's wrestlers in Rome 1960, East Germany's success through drug use at Munich 1972, and Poland's Pole Vaulters in Moscow 1980. Each case exemplifies the complex nature of sports politics, showing the connection of each country to the Stalinist model but also their independence from it through the actions of their athletes.

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Introduction: The Cold War and Sports

Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt, Larisa Semyonovna Latynina. When these names come to mind there is only one event they can be paired with. The Summer Olympics. The Summer Olympics, to many, is the premier sporting event in the world. Every four years, millions of people around the world gather around televisions or in the stadiums to watch world-class athletes participate in events ranging from skeet shooting to basketball to rowing. This being a year where the Tokyo Olympics has been postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the magnitude of the Olympics is truly being felt in its absence. It would be impossible for the Olympics to have the impact it does if it was solely about sports. Despite the best efforts of those like Avery Brundage, the Olympics has just as large of an impact in the areas of politics and culture as it does in sports. This is particularly noticeable when one looks back to the Olympics of the 1950s – 1980s when the politics of the Cold War dominated the games. This paper will seek to investigate that time, covering the Summer Olympics that took place in Europe from 1952, when the Soviet Union first participated in the Summer Olympics, to 1980, when the Summer Olympics found its way to Moscow. Using these Olympic Games, an argument can be made that the combination of sports and politics at the international level was felt by more than just the United States and the Soviet Union.

Much of the scholarship on the Olympic Games during this time covers the competition between the two main powers of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States. Both countries took a broad approach to focus on international sport as a way to engage in symbolic warfare. The success of one side and failure of the other would act as subtle propaganda promoting their political system. In her book *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War*, Jenifer Parks approaches this conflict from the side of the

Soviet Union. She writes that in the Soviet Union, sports were essential to building the new state. The role of sports in public health, education, and military preparation made it crucial to building a strong Soviet society both before and after WWII. The Olympics were also an important way to promote late Stalinism and communism to the rest of the world. Pitting Soviet-style sports regimes against the "free" west sports programs allowed the Soviets to overcome many of the negative perceptions of communism held by the rest of the world.[1]

On the opposite side is Toby C. Rider's book *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, in which he discusses the United States' approach to athletics during the Cold War. Rider writes that the Americans were keenly aware of the threat Soviet sport showed in its display of Soviet political and ideological strength, and, because of this, they engaged in a "Total Conflict" that was fought in the trenches of public opinion. In order to do this, the U.S. attempted to fully utilize the medium of the Olympic message for political gain through the competition itself, the host cities, and by secretly gaining leverage within the Olympic committee itself.[2]

The attempts of these two powers to influence the games they competed in were not lost on the games themselves. In his book *Rome 1960: The Olympics that Changed the World*, David Maraniss writes about the political, cultural, and athletic landscape of the Rome Olympics. While often overshadowed by games such as the Munich Olympics of '72 or the Moscow Olympics of '80, the Rome Olympics was still a significant affair. Maraniss writes that these games represented the dying of the old order and the formation of the new one. These were the first Olympic Games to be commercially broadcast, and this brought the athletic propaganda of these

[1] Jenifer Parks, *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War: Red Sport, Red Tape* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).
[2] Toby C. Rider, *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

countries to an even wider audience. Female athletes also had a much larger role than ever before, as did the African countries that competed and represented the burgeoning success of the African decolonization movement. The games also took place against the backdrop of an anxious period of the Cold War, with the infamous U2 affair and Nikita Khrushchev's visit to the UN General Assembly putting fuel on the political fire.[3]

If the political torch of the Olympic Games was burning bright after Rome, it would become an inferno after the Munich Olympics of 1972. In their study, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, Kay Schiller and Christopher Young show how these games forged the state of Germany that we know today. The narrative of these Olympics could be easily overshadowed by the boycotts of Rhodesia's inclusion, the opposition to the games by the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), or by the most infamous event that occurred, the murder of eleven Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists. Schiller and Young attempt to overcome this by telling the story of the Munich from beginning to end. They write that beyond the politics of the Cold War, these games were important for how they showed West Germany's successful rehabilitation to the world stage through their attempts to distance themselves from the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the so-called "Nazi Olympics."[4]

David Clay Large's book *Munich 1972: Tragedy, Terror, and Triumph At The Olympic Games* follows a similar path, claiming that the Munich Olympics was the most political of all of the modern Olympic Games. He reminds the reader that West Germany's importance in the Cold War was because of its position directly next to communist East Germany and that this resulted

[3] David Maraniss, *Rome 1960 : The Olympics That Changed the World* (New York : Simon & Schuster, 2008), accessed March 27, 2020, http://archive.org/details/rome1960olympics00mara.
[4] Kay Schiller, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, Weimar and now 42 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

in militant anti-communism in West Germany.[5] The most important point that Large makes is that in the magnitude of the festivals and the political atmosphere surrounding them, especially in the case of the Munich Olympics, it is easy for the athletes to get lost. That is the case for most of these Olympic Games. What is also clear is that much of the scholarship on the Olympics during the Cold War is very focused on the aims and actions of the two great powers, the United States and Russia. This causes the experiences of the athletes of other nations to be overshadowed as well. This paper will distance itself from this scholarship is to investigate the Olympic involvement of the other nations of the Warsaw Pact in Europe, and to see what cultural and political implications their involvement came with. The politics of the Soviet Union's allies in Eastern Europe were just as intertwined with their sporting programs as they were for the larger powers. Sports allowed these countries to show their allegiance to their socialist allies and prove their dominance over capitalism and the west but were also examples of the oppressiveness of the Stalinist system and provided an outlet for the discontent of the people under the communist regimes.

Helsinki and Hungary: The Golden Team

The Helsinki Olympic Games were significant because they were the first true "Cold War" Olympics. These games were the first in which the athletes of the Soviet Union would compete against the athletes of the United States.[6] From this point forward, the games would have an inherently political nature. But this was not the only major story to come out of the 1952 Olympics. If there is a story that defines the experience of the non-Soviet communist countries in

[5] David Clay Large, *Munich 1972: Tragedy, Terror, and Triumph at the Olympic Games* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).
[6] Allen Guttmann, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 97.

Helsinki, it is that of the Hungarian national team and their gold medal-winning soccer team, the "Golden Team." One of the most famous football teams of all time, it was captained by the legendary Ferenc Puskás, for whom the Puskás award is named. The team was formed by coach Gustav Sebes, who needed to argue with Soviet-influenced Hungarian political authorities for the ability to enter a team into the games.[7] The team's legend comes from more than just their success, they would go on to have a deep impact on how the game of football itself is played. The team pioneered the 4-2-4 formation and a unique playstyle, as described by Puskas as "'a proto-type of the 'total football' played by the Dutch [in the 1970s].'"[8] Throughout the six years of the team's existence, including the 1962 Olympics, they had forty-two victories, seven draws, and one defeat, which came in 1954 to the West German team in the game that became known as "The Miracle at Bern."

While the "Golden Team" exemplified the success of Hungarian international sports, especially at the 1952 Olympics, it also exemplified the dark nature of sports under the iron curtain. In 1952, Hungary was in the midst of Stalinist rule, characterized by harsh political practices and oppression. This would take the form of violent altercations by the Hungarian secret police with anyone who seemed to be a threat to the state.[9] Despite this, as shown by the success of the football team at the Olympics, the Hungarian athletes achieved relative success in sports. Yet this success came with a political cost. From 1948-1951, the Hungarian Communist Party, the MKP, centralized more than just the economy; it also took firm control of the nation's sports teams as well. All the sports clubs in the nation became attached to state-owned industries,

[7] "The Legend of the Hungarian Golden Team Was Born at the Helsinki Games in 1952 - Olympic News," *International Olympic Committee*, last modified April 19, 2020, accessed April 30, 2020, https://www.olympic.org/news/the-legend-of-the-hungarian-golden-team-was-born-at-the-helsinki-games-in-1952.
[8] "The Legend of the Hungarian Golden Team."
[9] Johanna Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators: The Impact of 1956 on Athletes, Sport Leaders and Sport Policy in Socialist Hungary," *Contemporary European History* 29, no. 1 (February 2020): 60–76, 64-65.

and both the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense placed teams under their control, stacking them with the best players in the process.[10] This created an atmosphere in which the sports teams, and their players, were seen as connected to the communist government and essential in its promotion. While their needs were met to ensure that they were successful in their athletic endeavors, heavy punishments were used to control their behavior and make them into models of the Soviet Man and Woman.[11] This created the conditions that made their teams so successful but also greatly damaged them, especially in the case of Sándor Szúcs.

Sándor was a defender on the Hungarian team owned by the Ministry of the Interior and was drawn away from Hungary for love and for money. He had planned to escape to West Germany with his mistress and also felt that he could earn money playing football in Italy.[12] Defection was the biggest threat to the Hungarian national sports body, and this was primarily what the punishments were used to prevent. In 1951, Sándor attempted to purchase the documents he needed to defect but unknowingly purchased them from an agent working for the Ministry of the Interior. He was caught armed with a pistol on his way to the border. Sándor was subsequently tried and despite pleas from Puskás and other members of the Hungarian national team, he was sentenced to death.[13] This served as a painful lesson to Hungarian athletes and may have served to assist in the success of the Golden Team. The team's most talented players would have been too scared to leave the country and be well-paid for their talents, instead choosing to not risk death and play for Hungary. Their morale was most definitely shaken as well, yet they still were able to find great success. The Hungarian football team at the time of the 1952 Olympics was an example of the initial strength of the Stalinist system. Hungarian officials saw

[10] Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators," 65.
[11] Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators," 65.
[12] Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators," 66.
[13] Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators," 66-67.

sports as essential to their foreign policy goals, wanting to use it to promote the ideal Soviet Men and Women through physical success. Yet to achieve this they had to resort to violent and oppressive tactics, which would lead to the challenges to the Soviet system in Hungary in the subsequent 1956 revolution. The painful memories of their lost friends like Sándor had stuck with the Hungarian athletes, and at the Melbourne Olympics of that same year they promised "that at the Olympic Games we will be fighting in the sacred spirit of the martyrs of the national revolution and for the glory of the Hungarian nation.'[14]

Rome and Bulgaria: The Dive

As mentioned earlier, the 1960 Olympics in Rome were overshadowed by other games in popular memory. Besides the success of Wilma Rudolph and these games being the first to be televised internationally, the 1960 Olympics lacked notable events. But there is one event that flew under the radar in its subtlety that sheds light on the politics of sport in another iron curtain country, Bulgaria. In the semifinals of the Men's Greco-Roman wrestling competition, Bulgarian Dimitro Stoyanov and the USSR's Avtandil Koridze faced off for a chance to wrestle Yugoslavia's Branislav Martinovic in the gold medal match. At the time, the Bulgarians were seen as "loyal to the Soviets to the point of athletic obedience."[15] So when faced with the possibility of both wrestlers being eliminated if the match was to end in a tie, Stoyanov seemingly gave up and allowed Koridze to win. Koridze would subsequently defeat Martinovic for the Olympic gold, and many fans and commentators were quick to call foul and blame Stoyanov for throwing the match.[16] Does this claim hold any weight?

[14] Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators," 68.
[15] Maraniss, *Rome 1960,* 215.
[16] Maraniss, *Rome 1960*, 215.

Bulgaria had a long history of domination at the hands of Soviet authorities. Following World War Two, Bulgaria was quickly swept up in the Stalinization of Eastern Europe. The Soviet Red Army occupied the nation after its victory over the Germans, and this put it in a prime position to force a communist takeover of Bulgaria's government. Its politicians were unjustly tried and either imprisoned or shot.[17] The political oppression went so far as to reach the founder of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Traicho Kostov, who was tried and executed for criticizing a Soviet-Bulgarian economic agreement that was unfavorable towards Bulgaria. Stalin did this to show the crimes of "nationalism," despite the fact that Kostov was a key opponent to Yugoslavia, one of Stalin's main opponents at the time.[18]

This connection to the Soviet system would have a direct influence on the Bulgarian approach to sports. The Bulgarian government matched its political takeover with one of the sports leadership of the country, eliminating the old system and establishing the Supreme Committee for Physical Culture and Sport in 1949.[19] This lead to a centralization of sports by the government, similar to that of Hungary, whereby the number of sports clubs in the country was minimized in order to bring full control under the state apparatus.[20] This allowed for the importance of sport to the Soviet to system to take hold in the country, which was made clear by Bulgarian head of state Todor Zhikov in 1963: "'What kind of builders of socialism and communism would people be? What defenders of the country would they be with an undermined health? What generations would they create?'"[21] As in Hungary, sports were essential to the idea

[17] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 132, 137, 175.
[18] Judt, *Postwar*, 178.
[19] Vassil Girginov, "Totalitarian Sport: Towards an Understanding of Its Logic, Practice and Legacy," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 25–58, 37.
[20] Girginov, "Totalitarian Sport," 36.
[21] Girginov, "Totalitarian Sport," 39.

of an ideal communist society. In order to defend the country and its communist system, health needed to be a priority of the Bulgarian people.

Was Stoyanov feeling this pressure? While we may never know what was going on in his head, it was certainly possible. Wrestling was one of the six sports imposed by the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1958, which was brought down from the eleven imposed in 1949.[22] By imposing a sport the Communist party put these six sports at the forefront of their goals at the time, distributing resources and privileges to the sports that others did not receive. Most importantly, Stoyanov could have been in direct contact with Zhikov. During his time as First Secretary of Bulgaria, 1954-1988, Zhikov wrote fifty-seven letters to world champion and Olympic athletes. The content of these letters revolved around one central idea, that their accomplishments were "A sporting victory in the name and for the glory of Bulgaria."[23] Bulgaria's direct communist takeover at the hands of the Red Army, the direct influence of the communist government on the sports leadership of the country through the centralization of sport, and direct communication from the First Secretary of the Communist Party to athletes would all provide reasons for the Bulgarian teams to be "athletically obedient" in their loyalty to the Soviets, pushing Stoyanov to feel compelled to throw the match.

Interestingly enough, the Soviet sports bureaucracy was not feeling confident in their communist neighbors at the time. In 1961 a report was prepared by Russian bureaucrats to argue that contests between Soviet teams and the teams of other socialists were being used for nationalistic purposes. They cited incidents in which Bulgarian athletes, among others, had injured their Soviet competitors, and Bulgarian fans had exhibited “hooliganish” behavior in

[22] Girginov, “Totalitarian Sport,” 38.
[23] Girginov, “Totalitarian Sport,” 46.

their treatment of the Soviet athletes.[24] So was Stoyanov's loss truly an iron curtain submission? An argument could be made for both sides. The Bulgarian government was closely connected to the Soviet system and its political leaders placed importance on sports, but there was also an air of discontent among the Bulgarian athletes and fans. While Stoyanov may have simply tired at the end of the match and been defeated fair and square by his opponent, the world, for the first time televised internationally, saw what they believed to be a Cold War act of socialist oppression.

Munich and the GDR: The Scandal

The Munich Olympics will be forever characterized by the tragic events that unfolded during it, but the athletic achievements of these games are stained by much more than blood. The Munich Olympics provided a stage for one of the most important conflicts of the Cold War to play out: the rivalry between Western Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and Eastern Germany, the GDR. The GDR was one of, if not the most important socialist ally of the Soviets. The Russians had established a communist regime during their post-war occupation, and by the time de-Stalinization was threatening many of their socialist allies, the East Germans had become the most loyal and obedient ally of the Russians.[25] The importance of this was the GDR's proximity to Western Germany, which was directly connected to the socialist enemies in the Western Bloc. Any division within the communist party of the GDR would endanger its independence from the West, so great care was taken with their leaders by Russia, and any inkling of national independence was crushed.[26]

[24] Parks, *The Olympic Games*, 53.
[25] Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 434.
[26] Gilbert and Large, *The End of the European Era,* 434.

Like the other Eastern Bloc countries, sports were seen as a political weapon for both the GDR and the FRG. In its early days of 1949, GDR officials wanted to avoid athletic involvement, especially in the Olympics, because they saw it as capitalist exploitation. Their minds were changed by the sporting ambitions of their Soviet allies and of their neighbors, resulting in their attempts to join the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the governing body of the Olympics.[27] The opposition to sports had transitioned to willing participation, and eventually to obsession when the FRG prevented GDR athletes from competing in either of the 1952 Olympics. East German officials saw that "Olympic Sport offered a golden opportunity for the GDR to challenge the FRG's peremptory claim to be the only legitimate Germany."[28] Not only did sport become the way for the GDR to compete directly with the FRG, but sports became a pillar of socialist society there. Athletes became the heroes of the workers' and peasants' state, and victory was a success for the GDR and its socialist system.[29] The only thing that stood in their way was the IOC's goal to avoid politics being involved in the games and have one, unified Germany compete. Neither side was a fan of this, and the GDR used Soviet backing to push for the ability to compete on its own, winning the right to do so before the 1968 Olympics in Mexico.[30] This set up the 1972 games in Munich as the absolute perfect time to prove the dominance of the Soviet system over the "evil capitalists."

At the end of the games, the East Germans seemed triumphant. They were third in the medal count with sixty-six medals, twenty-six more than their West German neighbors. But a "grotesque shadow [was] hanging over the competition."[31] Allegations and stories about drug

[27] David Clay Large, *Munich 1972: Tragedy, Terror, and Triumph at the Olympic Games* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 23.
[28] Large, *Munich 1972*, 24.
[29] Large, *Munich 1972*, 25.
[30] Guttman, *The Olympics*, 96.
[31] Large, *Munich 1972,* 284.

use and gender manipulation surrounded the GDR teams. Their reliance on pharmaceutical enhancement became clearer over time. The GDR's major contribution to sports medicine was the recent development of an anabolic steroid, and the speculation about their drug use was confirmed by testing after the games.[32] Yet due to the poor testing of athletes during the games, particularly the West German officials' inability to test for steroids, meant that the stained East German performances would stand. What led to the GDR taking such drastic measures? Was the direct influence of their Soviet allies so strong that they would throw ethics out the window in order to win? In the leadup to the 1972 games, the GDR wanted to strengthen its alliance with the other socialists through sports, organizing meetings of the sports leadership of socialist countries.[33] The East Germans also found common ground through political propaganda before the games. But in reality, they were very much on their own: "the prospect of Western currency and Olympic capital provided more luster than the GDR's ideological smear could tarnish."[34] The West German's Ostpolik policies had begun to break up the solidarity between the socialist states, and the Soviets had been working on treaties with the West Germans in order to enforce the subsidiary nature of the GDR. Yet, "In Sport, in contrast to politics, however, it was the imperial master who felt exploited by its satellite."[35] Despite the Soviet's best efforts to enforce the GDR's subsidiary role, the GDR had become a sports powerhouse and a daunting threat to the Soviet Union.

Like the Bulgarians, the East German athletic teams potentially broke ethical barriers in order to achieve athletic success: taking a dive to ensure success for the Soviet athletes in the case of the Bulgarian wrestlers, and for the East Germans rampant drug use was implemented to

[32] Large, *Munich 1972,* 181-182.
[33] Schiller, *The 1972 Munich Olympics,* 179.
[34] Schiller, *The 1972 Munich Olympics,* 179.
[35] Schiller, *The 1972 Munich Olympics,* 176-177.

ensure that their athletes were at the top of their game. It could be argued that the direct influence of the Soviet Union due to the importance of East Germany caused this. But in reality, the athletics policies of the GDR and its socialist allies were split at the time, with the Soviets and other Eastern Bloc states working with West Germany in order to make money through athletics. The true cause lies in the intense rivalry between East and West Germany due to their ideological differences and political history. The East Germans were driven to abandon their allies and devote themselves to beating their neighbors by whatever means necessary.

Moscow and Poland: The Pole Vaulter

Of all the Olympic games that took place in Europe during the Cold War, the Moscow 1980 Olympics may be most emblematic of the divide between East and West. Upon the announcement of Moscow's selection as the host city there was immediate controversy. The Russians were more than pleased with the selection: "The Soviet people, the Communist Party, and the Government of the USSR view the Olympic Games as an outstanding event in international sporting life, reflecting the striving of peoples for peace, détente, cooperation, and mutual understanding."[36] But there would be little room for mutual understanding. Calls for a boycott of the games came very quickly, and these calls became shouts upon the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979. The Americans had already been wary of the games, predicting that they would be "a 'major propaganda festival' advancing the Soviet cause," and jumped on the opportunity the invasion presented to boycott the games if the Soviets refused to remove their troops, urging other countries to join them.[37] When his deadline for removal passed, United States President Jimmy Carter stayed true to his word and used presidential powers to

[36] Alfred Erich Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1999), 174.
[37] Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympics Games,* 176-177.

pressure the United States Olympic Committee into supporting the boycott. Thirty-five other countries refused the IOC invitation for the games, and twenty did not respond at all.[38] For those that did compete at the games, their participation inherently showed their support for the Soviet Union. It was impossible for the IOC, or anyone for that matter, to deny the political nature of these games.

The games themselves went particularly well in the eyes of those that supported them, but there was one event that stuck in the mind of spectators. The Moscow Olympics were meant to be a display of the dominance of Soviet sport, and their winning medal count proved that it was, but the way this dominance was achieved left a sour taste in the mouth of observers. During the final of the men's pole vault competition, it became obvious that the home crowd wanted Soviet athlete Konstantin Volkov, who was going up against the Polish favorite Wladyslaw Kozakiewicz, to win.[39] The Soviet fans tried everything in their power to undermine Kozakiewicz during his jumps, whistling, booing, and heckling him during each attempt and staying silent during the jumps of his competitor.[40] Despite this, the Pole vaulter (Kozakiewicz) won the event, setting a new world and Olympic record in the process. Upon his winning jump, Kozakiewicz stood up and gave a now-infamous Italian gesture to the entire Russian crowd in attendance, who were praised by the very unbiased Eastern European press for their politeness.[41]

Was this an act of political dissidence? Or just competitive in nature? In the politically charged atmosphere of the games, both are likely. Poland had a long history in the Eastern Bloc. It was one of the countries occupied by the Red Army immediately after World War Two and

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[38] Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympics Games,* 182-183.
[39] "Kozakiewicz Denies Local Hero in Pole Vault - Olympic News," *International Olympic Committee*, last modified July 21, 2016, accessed May 1, 2020, https://www.olympic.org/news/kozakiewicz-denies-local-hero-in-pole-vault.
[40] Barukh Hazan, *Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games: Moscow 1980* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1982),183.
[41] Hazan, *Olympic Sports, and Propaganda Games*, 183

suffered at the hands of Stalinist purges. Despite this, it would go on to become one of the most industrialized countries in the Bloc.[42] The de-Stalinization period at the end of the 1950s was a period of social unrest. Communist leader Wladyslaw Gomulka, who was removed from power by the Stalinists, took over after their ousting yet remained loyal to the Soviet system. He continued to emphasize industrialization, and his failures led to the communist government retaining its image as an oppressive force in Poland.[43] This was evident in their approach to sports. In the same 1961 report naming Bulgarian fans as being hostile to Soviet athletes, Russian officials claimed that Polish fans threw bottles at the athletes during contests.[44] In 1980, the year of the Moscow Olympics, the discontent reached another boiling point. Polish workers across the country launched non-violent strikes that were successful enough to receive support from Pope John Paul II, who was the first Polish Pope.[45] Similar to the other individual acts made by athletes mentioned in this paper, it is impossible to truly know what Kozakiewicz was thinking when he made his gesture. The picture of him smiling and giving his gesture to the crowd could have been competitive spirit, it could have been emblematic of the simmering discontent of the Polish people, or, as the Polish government reportedly claimed, it could have been an involuntary muscle spasm.[46] Like the other athletes, regardless of his intent, it is impossible to separate his action in a sporting competition from the political contexts in which it existed.

[42] Gilbert and Large, *The End of the European Era*, 324.
[43] Gilbert and Large, *The End of the European Era,* 432.
[44] Parks, *The Olympic Games*, 53.
[45] Gilbert and Large, *The End of the European Era,* 520.
[46] Christian Tugnoli, "Gest Kozakiewicza | Vintage Sport," accessed May 1, 2020, https://www.sportvintage.it/2009/05/02/gest-kozakiewicza/.

Conclusion: More Than A Game

The issue with using the examples of individual athletes is that their example only provides a snapshot and not the full picture of the approach to sport in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. But viewed against the context of their international politics and the importance each communist government placed on sport, it is obvious that the connection between politics and sport was just as strong in the Eastern Bloc countries as it was in the Soviet Union or the United States. In Hungary, the centralization of sports programs and oppression of its athletes created the conditions in which their soccer culture thrived. In Bulgaria, their athletic obedience to the Soviet Union and their own centralization of sports was seemingly tested through a potential dive. The East German sports program made an effort to align themselves with other socialist countries and was so consumed with its drive to dominate West Germany that they threw ethics out the window. With Poland, their athletes experienced the importance of sports success to the Russian people.

But in each case, there is an air of independence. Hungarian athletes attempted to leave the country prior to Helsinki and pledged their performances in Melbourne to those involved in the Hungarian Revolution. The Bulgarians were not trusted by Russian sports officials because of their anti-Soviet fans, casting doubt on the potential of a dive. The Germans were virtually independent in their sports efforts from their Soviet allies in Munich. And against the backdrop of protests in Poland, Kozakiewicz showed the Russian fans what he thought of their efforts. Each case displays the complicated nature of sports and politics in the Eastern Bloc. Sports were a way for each country to connect to the Soviet system at the state level, show their superiority to the West, and create the ideal Soviet Mand and Woman. But sports also showed the independence of the states from the Soviet system both at the individual level through athletes'

attempts to achieve success for reasons separate of the system their country was pledged to. To those living under the Iron curtain, sports were more than just games. If it was up to Avery Brundage, this wouldn't be the case, but to those who compete and love their sport, it will always be more than a game.

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