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## REVENGE IN 1969, MIRACLE IN 1980

### THE TWO MOST POLITICALLY CHARGED MOMENTS OF COLD WAR ICE HOCKEY

‘Serious sport is war minus the shooting’

*George Orwell*

#### 1. Introduction

The linkage between sports and nationalism has gained extensive scholarly attention and has long since grown out of its adolescence. There is a continually growing body of literature on the topic ranging from mainstream research on nationalism and cultural studies through to sociology of sport.<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Stuart Hall have pointed out that major sporting events and tournaments have regularly been used to promote ‘narratives of nation’, carefully selected particular versions of national discourse.<sup>2</sup> Dozens of monographs, edited volumes and hundreds of scholarly journal articles have been written on the interplay between nationalism and soccer, the most global of all team sports. However, if one wants to look at the political uses of sport during the Cold War era (1947-1991), the haul from soccer is a rather modest one compared to other sports, for example, track

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<sup>1</sup> For a more general discussion on the linkages between sport, nationalism, ideology and politics see for example: Sport and International Politics, ed. by PIERRE ARNAUD/JAMES RIORDAN, London 1998; ALAN BAIRNER, Sport, Nationalism and Globalisation. European and North American Perspectives, New York 2002; JOHN M. HOBERMAN, Sport and Political Ideology, London 1984; Sporting Nationalisms. Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation, ed. by MICHAEL CRONIN/DAVID MAYALL, London 1998; JOHN HARGREAVES, Sport and Socialism in Britain, in: Sociology of Sport Journal 9 (1992), pp. 131-153.

<sup>2</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, Mass-Producing Traditions. Europe, 1870-1914, in: The Invention of Tradition, ed. by ERIC HOBSBAWM/TERENCE RANGER, Cambridge 1983, pp. 301-302; STUART HALL, The West and the Rest. Discourse and Power, in: Formations of Modernity, ed. by STUART HALL/BRAM GIEBEN, Cambridge 1992, pp. 275-331.

and field, gymnastics or figure skating. In team sports it was ice hockey that became the fiercest arena of ideological confrontation between the capitalist West and the communist East. Against this background it is rather surprising how little academic scholarly research has been conducted on the interfaces of hockey and nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Hockey, War and Masculinity

During the Cold War the chilly surface of the hockey rink became a platform of heated nationalism and frenzied ideological competition between different political systems trying to show their superiority to the world at large. Olympic hockey tournaments and world championships also faithfully mirrored the recent events and current political atmosphere of the Cold War struggle, frequently witnessing diverse repercussions from the real life duel between the two opposing ideological camps. Although international games also offered a forum for peaceful competition among nations and at least occasionally also served the purpose of political rapprochement, the majority of media commentators and the general public interpreted them in confrontational terms and as being in line with the dominant ideological tenets.<sup>4</sup>

There were several reasons why ice hockey became so tightly harnessed for political purposes. Most importantly, it was the only major international team sport which was played at the very highest level on both sides of the Iron Curtain and in which Soviet Union, unlike in basketball or soccer, was able to challenge successfully even the best western professional teams. Canada, the home country of the game, had absolutely dominated the international scene for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but from the 1950s onwards, the Soviet Union emerged as a serious contender for world hockey supremacy. The Soviets had consciously developed their own style of playing and thinking about the game, which was completely different

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<sup>3</sup> The history of football as a substitute for war has been dealt with in many scholarly studies (e.g. ALLEN GUTTMANN, *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sports*, New York 1978). Although, for example, Roy MacSkimming and Scott Young (see the following note) have stressed the nationalistic underpinnings of hockey and treated it as a form of waging a war, their interpretation like the overwhelming majority of other hockey studies belongs mostly to the genres of historical sports journalism and sports historical hockey research.

<sup>4</sup> On this political East-West rivalry in hockey see: LAWRENCE MARTIN, *The Red Machine. The Soviet Quest to Dominate Canada's Game*, Toronto 1990; ROY MACSKIMMING, *Cold War. The Amazing Canada-Soviet Hockey Series of 1972*, Vancouver 1996, and SCOTT YOUNG, *War on Ice. Canada in International Hockey*, Toronto 1976.

from the North American hockey philosophy. The battle between these two different hockey styles took off immediately when the Soviets entered international hockey in the 1954 world championships, and from the very beginning this rivalry also encompassed deeper non-athletic dimensions. On many occasions, the hockey rink became analogous to the Cold War political scramble for power, as game results were seen and presented as proof of the respective preeminence of different ideologies and nations.<sup>5</sup>

However, although it was thus connected to the realities of international politics, international hockey was by no means completely subordinated to them. The game had established itself as an autarkic world in itself already long before the advent of the Cold War. It had its own distinctive traditions, rules, language and folklore, which often proved to be rather immune to the political imperatives of the outside world. In order to understand the mechanisms of using hockey as a scene of ideological war one has to be familiar with the plot of the specific rink encounters and their sportive background. Political exploitation of the game was a far from simple matter, and the Soviet Union especially experienced the unintended and unexpected negative backlash effects of these aspirations. The Soviets were the pioneers in the ideological uses of hockey, but they did not have a monopoly on political interpretations of the game. On more than a few occasions they learnt the bitter lesson that the political momentum of the game could also be seized by others. In spite of all political pressures, hockey retained a considerable degree of independence and refused to be completely controlled let alone owned by any one of the participating powers. Hockey was surely used to further political aims, but the game also affected politics in a more subtle, spontaneous and from the bottom up fashion.

Cold War hockey was a fascinating mixture of a variety of ingredients. The game combined purely sporting motives with traditional ideals of masculinity that stressed aggressive physicality, readiness to violence and ideas like honour, dominance, loyalty, respect, courage, instrumentality, adventure and risk-taking on the one hand, and ideological interpretations stemming from world political antagonisms on the other. Physical toughness had been a vital part of hockey already from the very initial phases of its development. In sociological research game is even depicted as 'an occupational subculture of violence', where young players undergo a socialisation process aimed at producing a 'tough fighting unit prepared for

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<sup>5</sup> For the history of Soviet ice hockey see: MARTIN, pp. 16-81; ROBERT EDELMAN, *Serious Fun. A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR*, New York 1993, pp. 110-116; GEORG SAMOILOV, *SSSR History*, in: Sergei Makarov and Soviet Hockey Fanpage, at: [www.russianrocket.de/welcome.htm](http://www.russianrocket.de/welcome.htm) (last accessed: 20 May 2006).

violence whose primary objective is to win hockey games'.<sup>6</sup> All this makes hockey particularly feasible as a mimetic metaphor for war: in the Cold War it was a spectacular but still a safe way for nations to engage in a physical confrontation.

Already the central terminology of hockey underlines this confrontational nature: the game was about winning and losing, offence and defence, a neutral zone, charging, rushing, feinting, interfering, shooting, checking, fighting, firing and so on. This terminology was well substantiated by the extremely intensive actual events of the game, which made it even a more applicable as a metaphor for waging war. With its regular and explicit violence hockey had developed its own particular macho culture. It was played in an outspokenly physical manner with ferocious body checks and tackles in every shift and regular interruptions to the game caused by bare-fisted fighting. Especially Canadian hockey, the most influential and for a long time also most successful version of the game, was inspired by a very straightforward idea of masculinity. The stereotypical hockey player was a hard-boiled, stubborn and violence-prone self-made man for whom the end justified almost any means necessary.<sup>7</sup>

In the Western media the Soviets were given designations like the 'Red Hockey Army' and 'hockey soldiers from the east', which aimed to underline the militaristic and propagandistic nature of their team. These descriptions were not completely untrue, since Soviet sports was closely linked to the military both in imagery and reality. It developed into a special branch of industry aiming to produce international prestige and glory for communism, and its top athletes were expected to exhibit similar levels of heroism and self-sacrifice as their predecessors had done in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1944. Peculiarly most players in the Soviet national team were soldiers by profession, playing for the Central Army Sports Club (TsSKA) hockey team, the most successful sports squad in the Soviet history. It won no less than 33 national championships during the existence of Soviet hockey (1948-1991) winning often 40 games or more of the annual total of 44 and even had a winning record in its 36 encounters with NHL-teams (27 wins, one tie, eight losses). TsSKA was one of the most important weapons

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<sup>6</sup> EDMUND VAZ, *The Culture of Young Hockey Players. Some Initial Observations*, in: *Sport Sociology. Contemporary Themes*, ed. by ANDREW YIANNAKIS ET AL., Dubuque 1976, pp. 211-215, p. 212; MARC WEINSTEIN/MICHAEL D. SMITH/DAVID WIESENTHAL, *Masculinity and Hockey Violence*, in: *Sex Roles* 33 (1995), pp. 831-847.

<sup>7</sup> TOBIAS STARK, *Pionjären, Polar'n och Poeten. Maskuliniteter, nationella identiteter och kroppsytan inom kanadensisk, svensk och sovjetisk ishockey under det kalla kriget*, in: *Historisk tidskrift* 121 (2001), pp. 697-700; BAIRNER, p. 131; RICHARD GRUNEAU/DAVID WHITSON, *Hockey Night in Canada. Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*, Toronto 1993, pp. 31-53 and 175-196.

of official propaganda, which presented the team as archetypal of communist virtues of sacrifice, discipline and tireless work. Although military careers were just a smoke screen to circumvent the strict amateur rules of the International Olympic Committee and the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), the performances these hockey-playing Red Army majors and captains were seen to reflect the standard of actual Soviet war machinery as well. Many westerners saw the national squad as a Soviet society in miniature: a hierarchic oppressive machinery where robot-like subjects fulfill the commands of a dictatorial leader with unquestioning obedience and loyalty.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly the team of the Soviet Union, or the ‘Red Machine’ as it became known, was always involved when hockey gained political significance during the Cold War. The most famous Cold War hockey moments were produced by losses suffered by the Soviets in important games. The purpose of this article is to look at two Soviet losses that generated the greatest political ramifications: in 1969 in the wake of Prague Spring against Czechoslovakia and in 1980 in the Lake Placid Winter Olympics ‘Miracle On Ice’ against the US.

### 3. Revenge for the Prague Spring

In the mid-1960s there was a growing dissatisfaction among the Czechoslovak population with the policies of the existing regime. The reform-minded Slovak politician Alexander Dubček was elected to the office of First Secretary of Czechoslovakian Communist Party in January 1969. In March Dubček launched a series of political reforms aiming to liberalise the system and regenerate it as ‘Socialism with a human face’. Reforms included increasing public participation in decision-making, widening the freedom of press and allowing for more private initiative in the economy. The Soviet Union, however, feared that reforms could trigger dangerous developments in other Eastern European communist countries. The Brezhnev Doctrine stipulated that the Soviet Union would foster ideologically orthodox communism in its satellite states even by military means if necessary. Czechoslovakia was a central fortress in the Warsaw Pact defensive structure and its possible defection would endanger even the security of Soviet Union. Over the night 20-21 August 1968, the Warsaw Pact Forces

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<sup>8</sup> ROBERT F. BAUMANN, The Central Army Sports Club (TsSKA). Forging a Military Tradition in Soviet Ice Hockey, in: *Journal of Sport History* 15 (1988), pp. 151-166, pp. 151, 155; JAMES RIORDAN, *Soviet Sport*, Oxford 1980, p. 21; LAWRENCE MARTIN, A Bodycheck to Communism, in: *Globe and Mail*, 17 September 2002; STARK, pp. 693-694.

of the USSR, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary and East Germany invaded the country with 200,000 troops and 5,000 tanks. More than 100 people were killed in the hostilities and Dubček himself was arrested and taken to Moscow together with other leading reformers. Reforms were cancelled, reformers ousted and the Communist Party's iron grip on all aspects of political and economical life was restored.<sup>9</sup>

Czechoslovak ice hockey, unlike that of the Soviet Union, had never quite buckled under to the political pressures of the communist regime. Quite the contrary: hockey became one of the very few outlets for the forbidden nationalist and anticommunist sentiments. The frictions started already in 1948 when communists after their seizure of power denounced hockey as a bourgeois game. 1950 witnessed the complete purging of the national team of persons that the regime found suspicious. When the team was about to leave for the world championships in London, the government heard not completely unsubstantiated rumours about the players' plans to defect to the West and had them all arrested. After being held in prison for months without proper charges, the players were convicted for treason and espionage in a show trial in true communist fashion. Most players were sent to labour camps for several years, the longest sentences being no less than 15 years. Although the rulers soon realised the propagandistic value of the game, the relationship between Czechoslovak hockey and the authorities never became completely harmonious. The events of 1950 planted a seed of deep suspicion toward the regime in the minds and hearts of Czechoslovakian hockey people. Consequently hockey rinks became a forum for civil disobedience and political protest, with crowds yelling out cheers and team songs littered with anticommunist and anti-Soviet slogans.<sup>10</sup>

These political tensions were especially visible in the vigorous encounters between the Czechoslovak national team and the Soviets. Although there always seemed to be much more at stake than just sports, in the latter half of the 1960s, the atmosphere in these games rose to a whole new level. Signs of the coming storm were already evident in the 1967 world championships in Vienna. The last day of the tournament witnessed an insignificant game between Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union, which had secured

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of the Prague Spring see HUGH AGNEW: *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*. Stanford 2004, 252-269; GORDON H. SKILLING, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, Princeton 1976; KIERAN WILLIAMS, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath*. Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970, Cambridge 1997.

<sup>10</sup> OSMO KIVINEN/JANI MESIKÄMMEN/TIMO METSÄ/TOKILA, *Kylmä kiekkosota. Kaksi mannerta, kaksi kulttuuria* [Cold hockey war. Two continents, two cultures], Helsinki 2000, pp. 40-41; JAN VELINGER/KATRIN BOCK, *A Brief History of Czech Ice Hockey*, at: Radio Prague website, [www.radio.cz/en/article/53259](http://www.radio.cz/en/article/53259) (last accessed: 15 December 2005).

its title already earlier. Two minutes before the final whistle a scrimmage broke out on the ice. In the post-game ceremonies the Soviet national anthem was drowned in the deafening concert of whistles by the crowd. In a defiant political demonstration Czechoslovak players left the ice without the customary handshakes with the opponent.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background it was understandable that the games between the two teams in the 1969 world championships, the first to take place after the crushing of the reform movement, were awaited with excitement mixed with fear. The tournament was originally to be held in Czechoslovakia, but after an apparent intervention by Soviet officials and with a keen eye on the current political development IIHF decided to move the venue to Sweden. It was hoped that playing on the neutral Scandinavian soil would prevent political demonstrations and clashes. From the sporting point of view there did not seem to be room for too many surprises. Everybody expected an easy win for the Soviets, who had been absolutely dominant in international rinks for the better part of the decade, winning every world title since 1963, and had a whipping 91-30 score difference in the 15 pre-tournament exhibition games.<sup>12</sup> Canadian international hockey was going through its lowest ebb at the time because after NHL expansion in 1967 all the best amateur players had signed professional contracts, Sweden had lately had to struggle even to beat inferior Finland, and the Czechoslovaks suffered from the aftershocks of the 1968 occupation.

Despite the neutral venue IIHF could not stop politics entering the scene. Jaroslav Pitner, coach of the Czechoslovak team, told the world in an interview about the unusually high stakes in this particular tournament. He aimed at shaking the morale of the Soviets by tiring them down with extremely intensive play and forcing them to make mistakes:

‘To beat the Soviets has always been our important objective, but never before has our will to win been as strong as today. In the course of the last year, sport was affected by the events in August. Emotions have now a far greater influence on the performances of our team than before.’<sup>13</sup>

According to team captain Jozef Golonka, the players were unanimous that they had to win against the Soviets as a revenge for the events of August

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<sup>11</sup> See in this volume the contribution of Jörg Ganzenmüller; DANIEL WECHLIN, Eishockey-WM als gesellschaftspolitischer Seismograph. Eine interdisziplinäre Tagung zur Sportgeschichte, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13 October 2005, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> For historical statistics of the Soviet national team see website: SSSR Hockey International 1954-1991, at: [www.chidlovski.com/personal/1954/](http://www.chidlovski.com/personal/1954/) (last accessed: 16 February 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Championats du Monde 1969 [s. n.], at: [www.hockeyarchives.info](http://www.hockeyarchives.info) (last accessed: 5 January 2006).



1968. Players also agreed on another show of their mentality: again they would refuse to shake hands with the Soviets as demonstratively and visibly as possible, so that television broadcast of the game would deliver a clear message for all the world to see. 'We can lose all the other games, but we have to win against the Russians', said Golonka.<sup>14</sup> Czechoslovaks were not the only ones under political pressure to win. The Soviet team was of course fully aware of the political overtones of the encounter, and they also with regret acknowledged the fact that one of their biggest fans back home was General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, who besides being an eager hockey enthusiast was the man behind the crushing of the Prague spring reforms.

Czechoslovak players made their first political gesture already before entering the rink. Their game jerseys had their country's emblem, a crest with a lion, with a red star above pledging allegiance to Soviet Union. On the night of the first game against the Soviets on 21 March 1969, most of the players had covered the star with hockey tape, a deliberate and bold act of defiance with which they risked serious repercussions. The full-capacity crowd of 8,000 consisted mostly of Swedes sympathetic to the Czechoslovak cause and supporting them eagerly, but there were a couple of hundred Soviet and Czechoslovak spectators as well. They had the privilege of witnessing a game which still today is one if not the most intense in the history of hockey.<sup>15</sup>

On paper the roster of the Czechoslovak team was good, but the Soviets nevertheless were the overwhelming favourites, especially because of the quality of the new talent they introduced in Stockholm. The 1969 tournament was a baptism of fire for Boris Mikhailov, Valerii Kharlamov, Vladimir Petrov and Aleksandr Maltsev, who all became world-class superstars of Soviet hockey. However, the hurt patriotic pride of the Czechoslovaks made them raise to the occasion by seemingly multiplying their determination, strength and stamina. They skated, hit, checked and shot like never before, attacking like the wind in offence and showing an unparalleled will to sacrifice in defence. Despite the furious intensity of the game, no goals were scored until the second period, when defenceman Jan Suchý finally netted the puck as Czechoslovakia was playing with a two-man advantage. In the last period forward Josef Černý added to the plight of the Soviets by breaking free of two defencemen and scoring 2-0. With goaltender

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<sup>14</sup> LUDWIG TEGELBECKERS/SILJA SCHULTHEIS, *Volk am Puck*, a manuscript of a tv-documentary, 5-6. Available online at: [www.dradio.de/download/32403/](http://www.dradio.de/download/32403/) (last accessed: 26 December 2005).

<sup>15</sup> *Championats du Monde 1969* [s. n.], at: [www.hockeyarchives.info](http://www.hockeyarchives.info) (last accessed: 5 January 2006).



Vladimír Dzurilla giving his best-ever international performance, the Soviets were held down to zero for the first time in the world championships since 1955. The crowd was in ecstasy, cheering the Czechoslovaks with constant shouts of ‘Dubček! Dubček!’ and fiercely waving signs with slogans like ‘This time you can’t count on your tanks!’ at the stands. In the Soviet box the excitement took a heavy toll on coach Anatolii Tarasov, who suffered a mild heart attack.<sup>16</sup>

During the post-game ceremonies air was thick with Czechoslovakian nationalism. Players and coaches sang the national anthem with all the patriotic fervour and pride they could muster, and even the commentator of the Czechoslovak television joined in with his microphone on.<sup>17</sup> The event ended with a major breach of behaviour code of international sports as the Czechoslovaks respected their earlier agreement and left the ice without shaking hands with the Soviets. The Soviet players could not quite grasp, let alone accept, the political meanings attached to their loss. Later forward Evgenii Zimin recalled the game with astonishment:

‘We saw this joy. It was so overwhelming. The whole stadium stood up. The applause was incredible. We realised what was going on. But we didn’t view the Czech players as our enemies. We didn’t have any influence on the decisions of the Kremlin. But, in our hearts and our minds, we did not agree with the policy of the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the use of tanks against the Czech players.’<sup>18</sup>

Czechoslovakia had to go into a second confrontation with the Soviets on March 29 without one of their best players, as Suchý broke his index finger in the game against the United States. Once again goaltending proved to be decisive, as Viktor Zinger in the Soviet cage allowed couple of easy goals by making staggering mistakes. The second Czechoslovak victory, this time 4-3, seemed to end the unprecedented Soviet streak of consecutive world titles at six. Already the round robin victory had led to country-wide celebrations in Czechoslovakia, and with the renewed win, joy knew no boundaries. Most of the people had followed the games on television, and, for example, in Prague a national theatre premiere had to be performed to a half-empty house. Painted scores of the two games started to appear on house walls all over the country.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> MARTIN, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> TEGELBECKERS/SCHULTEIS, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> MARTIN, pp. 95-96.

<sup>19</sup> AGNEW, pp. 268-269; *The Prague Spring 1968. A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, comp. and ed. by JAROMIR NAVRATIL, Budapest 1998, pp. 564-570; TEGELBECKERS/SCHULTEIS, pp. 6-7.

As over 500,000 people took to the streets, the patriotic sport enthusiasm and slogans like ‘You may have tanks, but we have scorers!’ were soon mixed with more aggressive expressions of political dissatisfaction, and spontaneous celebrations turned into an anti-Soviet mass demonstration. Fights between the demonstrators and the police broke out on Wenceslas Square in the heart of Prague, where more than 100,000 people had gathered. As the revolutionary atmosphere gained momentum the demonstrations partly got out of hand. As a result of a probable secret police provocation Czechoslovakian headquarters of the Soviet airline Aeroflot were demolished by vandal attacks, as well as many other Soviet properties all over Czechoslovakia. Maybe the most rebellious gesture by the demonstrators was to surround the command centre and the barracks of Soviet military base in Prague. The world press was eager to capitalize on the potential for political analogies offered by the two games, and the results made headlines all around the world. The Soviet press of course never mentioned the political side of the matter, nor did coach Arkadii Chernyshev comment on it when asked after the games in a press conference why the Czechoslovaks had suddenly been able to raise their game to such a level.<sup>20</sup>

Two victories over the dominant Soviets made the Czechoslovaks the favorites to win, and in their last game they only needed a tie against Sweden to claim the title. However they were unable to maintain the intensity of their game and lost 1-0, which left them tied in total points with the Swedes and the Soviets. When all the three teams had zero goal difference in their mutual games, the Soviets took the gold medals with their best general goal difference. The Czechoslovaks were of course hugely disappointed with the result. After the last game of the tournament, a Soviet 4-2 victory over Canada, a Czechoslovak television broadcast went mute in the middle of the Soviet anthem. Only a moment later, after a camera close-up came of the Soviet flag being hoisted, the live picture also disappeared. The very next day Czechoslovakian communist party launched investigations to find people responsible for these in political terms amazingly expedient connection failures.<sup>21</sup>

Hard-line communists both in Prague and Moscow used ‘the hockey crisis’ as a pretext to destroy what was left of the previous year’s reforms. After the Aeroflot incident, the Politburo in the Kremlin sent Soviet defence minister Andrei Grechko to Czechoslovakia together with acting Foreign minister Vladimir Semenov and acting Civil aviation minister Boris Bugaev. Grechko demanded an immediate restoration of order and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

the removal of Dubček, threatening the country openly with a new invasion should this not happen. Censorship was consequently reintroduced in the beginning of April, and in the course of the following weeks, magazines and newspapers critical of the regime were banned from publication. On 17 April, Dubček, the symbolic head of the reform movement, was ousted from his post as a general secretary of the Czechoslovak communist party. The last remains of the Prague Spring had been swept away.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the fact that the Czechoslovaks failed to win the world title and the political movement started by the victories over Soviet Union faded in the face of another Moscow intervention, events linked to the 1969 hockey championships were extremely important from the point of view of the self-esteem of the Czechoslovak people. The revenge on the ice was undisputable, and it produced tremendous satisfaction for millions of disillusioned and politically humiliated Czechs and Slovaks. For a brief period of time, ice hockey became much more than just a game: in the minds and hearts of the Czechoslovak people it grew to the most important symbol of national self-defence and pride. Czechoslovak hockey continued to be a stronghold for sporting civil disobedience and defiance in the face of oppressive communism. Signs of this bold ‘hockey nationalism’ can still be seen even today. The best Czechoslovak-born player ever, Jaromír Jágr, who at the time of writing this was leading the NHL in points scored playing for New York Rangers, has throughout his playing career worn the number 68 on his jersey.

#### 4. Capitalist College Kids against Red Army Majors

At the turn of the decade from the 1970s to the 1980s, the United States was facing a multitude of problems both at home and abroad. The country had still to recover from the humiliations caused by the war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. President Jimmy Carter’s administration was wrestling with huge economic problems. In 1973, the OPEC countries had launched an oil embargo following the Yom Kippur War, and the subsequent international energy crisis plunged the US national economy into a severe recession. As the budget deficit reached its peacetime peak as a result of continued extensive government spending, the rising price of oil imports led to an alarmingly high rate of inflation and interest rates skyrocketed to unprecedented levels. The national economy stagnated, leaving more and more people unemployed.

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<sup>22</sup> AGNEW, pp. 268-269.

The year 1979 also marked the beginning of the so-called second Cold War and brought a series of heavy setbacks for Washington's foreign policy. In February, the US faced a major defeat in the strategically vital Middle-East area, when the pro-US monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran was toppled in an Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This prompted the second oil crisis, and as had been the case six years before, there were long queues at American petrol stations. In July, the US-backed dictatorship of the Somoza family in Nicaragua was overthrown by Marxist Sandinistas, who then sought support from Cuba and the Soviet Union. In November, militant crowds stormed the US embassy in Teheran and took 66 American citizens as hostages. The hostage crisis went on for 444 days with 53 people still held by the militants when the 1980 Olympics started. On Christmas Day 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to restore the pro-Moscow communist government of Babrak Kamal.<sup>23</sup>

As the Olympics in Lake Placid got underway the air was heavy with Cold War political rivalry. With the backing of Congress and the US National Olympic Committee, President Carter made a request to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that the 1980 Summer Olympics should be moved away from Moscow unless the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. On the first day of the Lake Placid Games, the Committee announced its rejection of the Carter proposal as 'legally and technically impossible'.<sup>24</sup> Carter's proposal did not trigger similar considerations about participation in the Lake Placid Olympics on the Soviet side. Quite on the contrary, the Soviet authorities saw the Olympics as an excellent opportunity to back up their foreign policy with sporting tours-de-force and to gain sympathy from the neutral countries. Expectations of success were high especially for the ice hockey team, which at the time was probably the best team in the world, including the professionals in the NHL. A year earlier they had even crushed the NHL all-star team 6-0. In the Olympics, the main challenge would come from traditional rivals Sweden and Czechoslovakia. The thought of the US team as a serious contender did not even enter the minds of the Soviet players or anybody else for that matter.

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<sup>23</sup> On the political backdrop to the 1980 Olympics see for example: Jimmy Carter. *Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years*, ed. by HERBERT D. ROSENBAUM/ALEXEJ UGRINSKY, Westport 1993; JOHN DUMBRELL, *The Carter Presidency. A Re-Evaluation*, Manchester 1993.

<sup>24</sup> TERENCE SMITH, *The President Said Nyet*, in: *New York Times*, 20 January 1980, at: [www.nytimes.com/packages/html/sports/year\\_in\\_sports/01.20.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/sports/year_in_sports/01.20.html) (last accessed: 10 January 2006).

Back in 1980, ice hockey was a minor team sport in the US compared to professional American football, baseball and basketball. Although the amount of American players in the NHL was constantly growing, US hockey was light-years behind the Canadian in terms of skills, talent and experience. Unlike, for example, in basketball or track and field, Americans could not make much political use of their hockey rivalries with the Soviets for the simple reason that they were no match for the Red Machine. Of the 61 encounters between the teams in the years 1955-1991, the Soviets won 55, lost five and tied one. The Americans had only two major international wins, and those were from a different era: the World Championship in 1933 and the Olympic Gold in 1960. However, the Squaw Valley win was an important motivator and a paragon for the 1980 team, because it was stolen from the Soviets.

The US team was an upstart collection of players from six different university teams, nine players of the University of Minnesota forming the core of the team. None of them had ever played in the NHL. Two weeks before the Olympic tournament they met the Soviets in an exhibition game in the Madison Square Garden and were trounced 10-3. The general opinion was that the best the Americans could achieve with a team like this was fifth or sixth place, but coach Herb Brooks believed that even a medal was possible. When the tournament proceeded it was starting look like Brooks was right: in its first two games, the team met two medal prospect squads, Sweden and Czechoslovakia, tying with the former and crushing the latter 7-3. After easy victories over Norway and Romania plus a little harder one against the West German side the Americans had clawed their way to the medal round together with Soviet Union, Sweden and Finland. At this point the performances of the fast-skating and spirited young Americans had been noted in the public eye too. Before their first medal round game against the Soviets excitement started to mount, and the media presented the game as a genuine Cold War showdown between the Western and communist ways of life. In a pre-game interview captain of the American team Mike Eruzione uttered a rather bellicose statement: 'When it comes to our attitude towards Russia, we are typical Americans. The only difference is that on the ice we can do something about it.'<sup>25</sup>

Despite their favourite status the Soviets were troubled. As a result of the lack of suitable housing facilities the hosts had lodged them in a federal penitentiary converted to a temporary hostel. Suspicious about letting his players sniff the winds of capitalist freedom, the coach Viktor Tikhonov

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<sup>25</sup> CRAIG NICKERSON, *Red Dawn in Lake Placid. The Semi-final Hockey Game at the 1980 Winter Olympics as Cold War Battleground*, in: *Canadian Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (1995), p. 75.

kept them locked up with the exception of two brief furloughs during the two-week tournament. Moreover, it seemed that their best and most important player, goalkeeper Vladislav Tretiak, was hit by chronic nervousness, which hindered him from reaching his normal standard of playing. In the games against Finland and Canada he allowed too many easy goals, and the team had been able to secure victory only very late in the game. The constant booing and more or less open expressions of hatred by the partisan and overwhelmingly American crowd did not help the Soviets either, although they had become used to it during their playing trips in Canada and the United States.<sup>26</sup>

The first period ended 2-2. The equaliser of the Americans came with less than a second left to play, when Tretiak and his defencemen thought that the period was already over and stopped playing. This triggered Tikhonov to consider replacing the goalkeeper. Very soon the matter was solved through the political intervention of a delegation of senior Communist Party officials, who descended from the stands to the dressing-room. The delegation urged Tikhonov to pull out Tretiak and put Vladimir Myshkin in his place, and the coach, always perfectly loyal and obedient to the authorities, complied. As the game continued to unfold, this move proved to be a decisive turning point for the game. Taking out the world's best goalkeeper shook the self-confidence of the Soviets so profoundly that they were not able to assert their usual domination for the remainder of the game. Conversely it boosted the morale of the Americans, who now realised exactly into how tight a corner they had driven the feared Red Machine. Coach Herb Brooks used Tikhonov's surprising move cunningly to whip up his players' will to win and make them believe that winning was possible.<sup>27</sup>

When the third period started Soviets were still leading 3-2, but there was a growing feeling of crisis in the Soviet box. Tikhonov decided to counter the mounting grip of panic by overloading his old war horses Mikhailov, Petrov and Kharlamov, who started to face more and more difficulties with fast-skating and extremely conditioned young Americans. After a Soviet penalty, forward Mark Johnson scored for USA and the game was even. With 10 minutes to go, Mike Eruzione netted a 25-foot wrist shot with the screened Myshkin completely unable to see it even coming. For the rest of the game, the Soviets were all the more panic-stricken and they could not come back. As the siren wailed, the triumphal joy of the US players was overwhelming. The Soviets, who without a doubt were painfully conscious of the enormous political significance of

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<sup>26</sup> MARTIN, pp. 186-187.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*; NICKERSON, p. 75.

their loss, were quiet and depressed, but nevertheless came up with sportsmanlike congratulations. As commentators not very familiar with hockey so often forget, ‘Miracle on Ice’ was not just one, but two games. After the Soviets, the US still had to beat Finland to claim the gold medal. This game too was a close call. After two periods Finland was leading 2-1, but in the third period, the Americans scored three unanswered goals. As commentator Al Michaels put it, the impossible ‘dream’ had come true.<sup>28</sup> Nobody outside the American team believed in their chances of grabbing a medal, let alone the Olympic victory. However, as the team recorded one win after another, the expectation started to rise and the public eye turned to the small rink in Lake Placid. The incredible win over the Soviets, which gave the team a shot at the gold, then really gripped the nation’s imagination and became one of the biggest sporting news events in the US ever. Moreover, having been the underdog against the almighty Soviets suited the American mentality perfectly, especially when it was combined with immediate political interpretations linking Cold War rivalry to the game result. Dave Kindred, Washington Post staff writer, jotted in his notebook as the seconds ticked away in the third period: ‘This is like a college all-star football team beating a team from Mars who beat the Steelers.’<sup>29</sup> Ken Dryden, a legendary NHL goalie, saw the game as one those rare occasions when the US gets to play the role of David against Goliath: this time ‘the little guy jumped up and punched the big guy in the nose’. According to Kevin Allen, an USA Today sports columnist, ‘to Americans, Russian athletes had lost their humanity. To those who watched international competition on television, Russian athletes were state-run machines [...] Soviets players were Darth Vader on skates, unemotional soldiers from the evil empire.’<sup>30</sup>

However, the team did not view the result in a political light. When coach Brooks was asked if the Soviet invasion Afghanistan and other Cold War politics had been important motivators for the players he answered with a laconic statement: ‘It was just a hockey game for the players.’<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless the players soon came to realise the political magnitude of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Author refers to Pittsburgh Steelers, an American football team in National Football League that won the Super Bowl four times during the 1970s.

<sup>30</sup> DAVE KINDRED, Born to Be Players, Born to The Moment, in: *Washington Post*, 23 January 1980, A1; RUSSELL LEVINE, A Look Back at a ‘Miracle’. U.S. Shocks Soviets, in: *NHL.com*, 22 February 2000, at: [www.nhl.com/olympics2002/1980\\_miracle.html](http://www.nhl.com/olympics2002/1980_miracle.html) (last accessed: 3 January 2006); KEVIN ALLEN, The 1980 Miracle on Ice – Kicking Stan Laurel’s Fanny, at: [www.usahockey.com/usa\\_hockey/main\\_site/main/home/the80mironeice/](http://www.usahockey.com/usa_hockey/main_site/main/home/the80mironeice/) (last accessed: 22 May 2004).

<sup>31</sup> KINDRED, A1.



their achievement. Brooks was called three times by President Jimmy Carter, telling how proud they had made the American people and how they had defended the ideals that the West stood for. Carter invited the team to the White House and even provided his plane for the trip.<sup>32</sup> However, the players shunned the interpretation of their game as another round in the Cold War political struggle. Mike Eruzione, the team captain, gave a very sober-headed analysis of the meaning of the victory 20 years later:

'Because we won, the hostages were not released, the Soviets did not pull out of Afghanistan, the economy never changed [...]. It never solved, really, any of the world's problems, other than, I think, we brought some pride back to the United States.'<sup>33</sup>

Despite its factual correctness and objectivity, Eruzione's account is beside the point. There are many political commentators who see the 1980 Olympic ice hockey tournament as a major turning point in the political duel of the Cold War. It was a battle between two ways of life, American and Soviet, in itself a marginal event at least from the world political point of view that nevertheless became to have huge political repercussions in the US. Freelance journalist Scott Holleran articulated many of the central features of this interpretation in his anachronistically triumphalist but emblematic piece of writing published in the online Capitalism Magazine:

'It was a breathtaking, symbolic victory over the evil of communism and Islamic jihad – it was a repudiation of the idea that a nation that forces its athletes to compete at gunpoint is more powerful than a nation of self-made men – and it remains an exceptionally exhilarating athletic triumph [...]. In a world of thugs, tribes and ayatollahs, beating the Soviets mattered deeply to the nation. The so-called miracle on ice felt like miracle because it represented the central conflict of the world's bloodiest century: between individualism and collectivism and, for once, the good prevailed.'<sup>34</sup>

The historical context made Miracle On Ice transcend the realm of sport. For the media and the public it represented a spark of hope and a promise of the better future in times of national despair and impotence. It was the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.; RUSSELL LEVINE, One More Hill to Climb. U.S. Tops Finland for Gold, in: *NHL.com*, 24 February 2000, at: [www.nhl.com/olympics2002/1980\\_goldmedalgame.html](http://www.nhl.com/olympics2002/1980_goldmedalgame.html) (last accessed: 15 August 2005); RON COOK, Brooks can't ignore call of Olympics, in: *Post-gazette.com*, 1 November 2000, at: [www.post-gazette.com/sports/columnists/20001101cook.asp](http://www.post-gazette.com/sports/columnists/20001101cook.asp) (last accessed: 8 October 2005).

<sup>33</sup> MATTI GOKSØYR, Historisk perspektiv på idrett og konflikt/konfliktløsning, a paper presented in a seminar on sports ethics organized by the Norwegian Confederation of Sports on 18 February 2004.

<sup>34</sup> SCOTT HOLLERAN, Miracle on Ice Offered an Escape From 1979, in: *Capitalism Magazine*, at: [www.capmag.com/article.asp?ID=3533](http://www.capmag.com/article.asp?ID=3533) (last accessed: 20 January 2006).

first step in that revival of patriotism that then during the presidency of Ronald Reagan led to a national renewal under Republican political signs. A politically, economically and culturally beaten-down nation was looking for and needed a miracle, and the US hockey team just happened to be in the right place at the right time, doing just the right thing. A trivial sports victory ignited something that had been simmering below the surface for some time. In itself it would not have been enough to transform the nation's attitude towards the Cold War, the Soviets and itself, but it did offer a starting point for such a transformation. It gave Americans a reason to be happy about something, and made them feel, at least for a while, that their country was back in control. Hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, a dozen of books, a TVM (1981), a television documentary (2001) and finally a Hollywood motion picture (2004) starring Kurt Russell have turned Miracle On Ice into an indelible part of American sports, cultural and political history. In 2000 American major sports cable television network ESPN rated the event the 'greatest game of the century'.<sup>35</sup>

Dave Ogreaan, a former director of USA Hockey, has given a telling description of the significance of Miracle On Ice to his nation: 'For people who were born between 1945 and 1955, they know where they were when John Kennedy was shot, when man walked on the moon, and when the USA beat the Soviet Union in Lake Placid.'<sup>36</sup> The Soviets were quick to understand the political significance of what had happened as well. After the game Communist Party officials again entered the Soviet dressing-room and told the players: 'You just made one the biggest mistakes of your lives. Ten years from now, 20 years, everyone will remember this game.'<sup>37</sup> They were right. In the opening ceremonies of the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, the US 1980 hockey team had the honour of together lighting up the Olympic flame wearing their game jerseys. As the atmosphere of the ceremonies was strongly influenced by the tragedies of 11 September 2001, some commentators saw this as a conscious effort by George W. Bush administration to capitalise on the enormous political significance of the

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<sup>35</sup> STEPHEN HARDY, *Miracle*, Directed by GAVIN O'CONNOR, in: *American Historical Review* 109 (2004), p. 943.

<sup>36</sup> ALLEN.

<sup>37</sup> OLIVER OWEN, *Miracle on Ice*, in: *The Observer Sport Monthly*, 6 March 2005, at: [observer.guardian.co.uk/osm/story/0,6903,1428816,00.html](http://observer.guardian.co.uk/osm/story/0,6903,1428816,00.html) (last accessed: 16 January 2006).

Miracle on Ice by linking this Cold War victory to the ongoing war against terrorism.<sup>38</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Despite their ideological and political burdens and their aggressive and violent touch, the Cold War hockey encounters between nations were peaceful compared to the 'real world' alternatives of physical combat. The Cold War created a need for mimic feats of strength just short of military action but still resembling war as much as possible. In the international atmosphere shadowed by the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, hockey provided political adversaries with a safe way to wage this kind of pseudo-war within a closed medium of 60 minutes of effective playing time on a hockey rink, organised around and governed by rules that were accepted and shared by all participants. Thus hockey became a sporting substitute for war as a continuation of politics by other means.

The two cases studied here share some aspects but are very different in others. Both took place against a backdrop of a highly charged world political situation. In 1969 this was due to the preceding violent crushing of the Czechoslovak reform movement by Warsaw Pact troops, in 1980 to the end of détente and the subsequent onset of the so-called second Cold War. However, the political configuration of the games was very different already in that the 1969 games were an internal feud of the Eastern bloc as the 1980 game was an archetypal battle between the world's two superpowers. In 1969, the Soviet Union was at the peak of its power, unchallenged and uncontested. In terms of real politics, despite all the joy and feelings of regained national pride produced by the surprising hockey victories, the games changed nothing in Czechoslovakia. Winning against the Soviets in the rink provided a quickly passing moment of consolation and symbolic revenge for the events of 1968, but beyond that Czechoslovakia remained a defeated and demoralised nation. In contrast the 1980 game can be seen as having also had 'real world' political significance as a revitaliser of American patriotism and as a symbolic end to an era filled with adversities.

The most interesting common trait of the two games is that they produced a public humiliation for the country that had most forcefully and deliberately tried to exploit the game for political purposes. Political harnessing of sport always contains the risk of producing unwanted and re-

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, DUNCAN MACKAY, *Chariots of Ire. Is US Jingoism Tarnishing the Olympic Ideal?*, in: *The Guardian*, 15 February 2005, at: [www.guardian.co.uk/bush/story/0,,650451,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/bush/story/0,,650451,00.html) (last accessed: 22 August 2006).

verse consequences, especially in the case of athletic failure. When the supposedly unbeatable Red Machine was defeated, Soviet propaganda efforts reciprocated with a spontaneous but equally politically adverse grassroots reaction. By trumpeting their own excellence in hockey as well as in terms of ideology Soviets turned themselves into everyone's favourite target. They were the one team that all the others wanted to beat, and when this happened, sporting triumph was mixed with a considerable degree of political glee. The political interpretations of the game were thus a double-edged sword. Undoubtedly the game lent itself easily and even willingly to political harnessing, but it also worked the other way around: occasionally games generated immense spontaneous political ramifications that nobody and certainly not the political leaderships could have planned or expected beforehand. Ultimately, sport gained the upper hand over purpose-oriented ideological abuse.