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THE SOVIET UNION, CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND THE 1956 MELBOURNE OLYMPIC GAMES[1]

Did cultural exchange play a role in the sudden and dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union? Historians writing at the height of the Cold War would have proclaimed a loud 'nyet' in assessing any such potential for cultural exchange to undermine Soviet rule. In 1960, for example, Frederick Barghoorn raised alarms about a post-Stalinist 'cultural offensive' in which culture was deployed as a 'weapon' in a diplomatic arsenal, skillfully manipulated to serve the Kremlin's purposes and to avoid any genuine reciprocity.[2] But that 'nyet' is now shifting to 'da', as what observers once viewed simply as a dangerous tool of Soviet propaganda is increasingly seen as having been a double-edged sword. Writing with the benefit of hindsight, historians such as Walter Hixson and Yale Richmond have recently suggested that cultural exchanges served as a focal point of cultural 'infiltration', providing Soviet citizens with images of a 'modern, consumer-driven, mass-mediated society associated with the West' that ultimately served to destabilise an ever-more-permeable 'Iron Curtain'.[3]

Among the elements of cultural exchange that affected the USSR – from formal exchanges in theatre, film, classical music, popular music, ballet, painting, sculpture, and journalism to informal exchanges in the realms of fashion, fast food, soft drinks, and cars – sporting exchanges arguably had enormous significance, as measured by the breadth and depth of their

[1] I would like to thank Curtis Murphy and the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars for providing research support.

[2] FREDERICK BARGHOORN, The Soviet Cultural Offensive. The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy, Princeton 1960.

[3] WALTER L. HIXSON, Parting the Curtain. Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961, New York 1997; YALE RICHMOND, Cultural Exchange and the Cold War. Raising the Iron Curtain, State College 2003. See also DAVID CAUTE, The Dancer Defects. The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War, Oxford 2003. There is also a forthcoming book by VICTOR ROSENBERG, Soviet-American Relations, 1953-1960. Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange During the Eisenhower Presidency. I am quoting from HIXSON, p. 230.

popular appeal. Despite this importance, however, the USSR's Cold War campaign for international sports supremacy has not yet been comprehensively studied, and its meaning in the larger context of Soviet cultural developments remains unclear.[4]

Few commentators would have described Soviet participation in the Olympics in language quite as extreme as that used by conservative US Senator John Marshall Butler, who described the Soviet athlete as 'a paid propaganda agent of the USSR, one more slave in the hideous chain gang of brainwashed individuals slavishly advancing the Communist cause.'[5] But contemporary observers tended to agree on the purpose and results of the Soviet sports drive. As one American official wrote in 1951: 'Sports in the slave world are conceived primarily as a tool of propaganda, an instrument of national policy, a means of strengthening the party line of Soviet superiority and of further indoctrinating Communists.'[6] Another American observer wrote in 1956 that sports in the USSR 'are merely a means to an end – the consolidation of state power through mass training and indoctrination', and noted that sports were playing an increasingly important role in 'furthering [...] foreign policy objectives'.[7] Historians, too, tended to see Soviet sport primarily as a tool of repression and manipulation. Henry Morton, for example, argued that the Soviet regime promoted mass participation in sports and victories in elite international competition primarily as 'a lever of social control'.[8]

Certainly, Soviet participation in elite sports events did serve to enhance the regime's legitimacy at home as well as its prestige abroad. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest, however, that Soviet participation in international sports competitions may also have served, in the long run, to undermine the very legitimacy that participation was supposed to ensure. The verb 'suggest' is of critical importance: my aim here is not to demonstrate specific cultural or political fallout from sport exchanges – indeed, demonstrating the causal effects of cultural influence is notoriously difficult – but rather to suggest in a tentative fashion some of the possible ways in which

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[4] On Soviet sport in general, see JAMES RIORDAN, Sport in Soviet Society, Cambridge 1977; ROBERT EDELMAN, Serious Fun. A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR, New York 1993. See also JOSEPH M. TURRINI, 'It Was Communism versus the Free World'. The USA-USSR Dual Track Meet Series and the Development of Track and Field in the United States, 1958-1985, in: Journal of Sport History 28 (2001) 3, pp. 427-471.

[5] *New York Times*, 10 June 1955, p. 18.

[6] RICHARD B. WALSH, The Soviet Athlete in International Competition, in: *State Department Bulletin* 25, 24 December 1951, pp. 1007-1010.

[7] JOHN N. WASHBURN, Sport as a Soviet Tool, in: Foreign Affairs 34 (1956), pp. 490-499, p. 490.

[8] HENRY W. MORTON, Soviet Sport. Mirror of Soviet Society, New York 1963, p. 22.

sports competitions opened up a 'back door' to subtle but arguably significant openings to global culture, eventually playing a role both in undermining the closed nature of the Soviet system and in spurring the kinds of global cultural flows that led to the current era of globalisation. Rather than providing a definitive treatment of the cultural effects of Soviet sport exchanges in the mid-1950s, then, the aim here is to point to lines of further research.

I focus here on three kinds of cultural transfer in the context of the 1956 Olympic Games. First, I suggest that Soviet participation in international sports organisations, a necessary precondition for participation in elite sports competitions, was a form of cultural exchange, one that resulted in the acclimatisation of a certain group of Soviet officials to universal norms and forms of discourse. Second, I look at examples of the kind of contacts with Western culture and individuals that gave Soviet athletes a first-hand taste of life in the West – contacts that in some cases may have served to undermine loyalties to the Soviet state. Third, participation in international sports events led to greater international coverage in the Soviet sports press, providing images of the West that helped to shape how Soviet citizens viewed the outside world. In some cases these images sent out messages that subverted the official line; more generally, this coverage implicitly situated the Soviet Union as part of an international community in ways that may have helped create the basis for a more 'globalised' view of the world.

1. The 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games

Soviet sport diplomacy in the 1950s developed at a time when the forces of globalisation were beginning to emerge in strength. The Olympics of 1956, held in Melbourne, Australia, displayed in microcosm the forces that shook the world in that seminal year. Held in late November and early December, the Games were jolted by the Suez crisis, as several countries boycotted to protest Israeli participation. Hungarian athletes set sail before the outcome of the uprising in Hungary had been decided; when they disembarked in Australia in mid-November they refused to participate under the communist Hungarian flag, and dozens of athletes defected to the West after the Games. Both East and West Germany and the 'two Chinas' (mainland communist China and the Republic of China on Taiwan) battled for representation. For the Soviets the Games were the culmination of a years-long drive to demonstrate the superiority of communism by 'winning' the Olympics, which in turn was part of a multifaceted campaign that, with achievements like Sputnik, would shake Western confidence. The Games also saw

the entrance of the first newly decolonised nations, as the Olympics became, like the United Nations, a necessary venue for the assertion of nationhood in the international community. The presence of television and new levels of advertising and consumption connected with the Games also pointed to the Olympics' deepening connections with new transnational currents of popular culture.[9]

For the Soviet Union these Games marked a critical phase in a policy of global engagement begun after Stalin's death in 1953. The new Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev inaugurated a domestic 'thaw' and in foreign policy called for peaceful coexistence, loosened restrictions on East-West travel, and pushed for expanded cultural exchanges.[10] In sports, building on policies begun during the war, the regime poured resources into a state-run system that intensively cultivated elite professional athletes, lightly disguised as amateurs. The Soviet sports programme was a calculated and coordinated effort to enhance Soviet prestige, both internally and around the world, through demonstrations of athletic prowess. Soviet athletes had stormed onto the world stage at the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952, and racked up an impressive medal count that came close to – though it did not quite overtake – the American total.[11] The USSR handily won the 1956 Winter Games in Cortina d'Ampezza, Italy, at the beginning of the year. Then, at the Summer Games in Melbourne, the 'Reds' carried off 98 medals to the Americans' 74.

2. International Organisations

The Cold War was in large part a struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of the world. Both superpowers came to see sports victories as an important venue in the battle for public opinion. In order to achieve these victories, the Soviet Union had to participate in international sports competitions like the Olympic Games, and in order to participate in international competi-

[9] On the 1956 Games, see the overviews provided in IAN JOBLING, Strained Beginnings and Friendly Farewells. The Games of the XVI Olympiad, Melbourne 1956, in: Stadion 21/22 (1995/96), pp. 251-266; RICHARD ESPY, The Politics of the Olympic Games, Berkeley 1979, pp. 39-58; BARBARA KEYS, The 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games and the Postwar International Order, in: 1956. New Perspectives, ed. by CAROLE FINK/FRANK HADLER/TOMASZ SCHRAMM, Leipzig, forthcoming.

[10] The Eisenhower administration, suspicious of Soviet motives, was slow to respond to these initiatives. HIXSON, pp. 87-119.

[11] The United States won 76 medals (40 gold, 19 silver, and 17 bronze), coming in first in the unofficial team rankings. The Soviet Union finished in second place with a total of 71 medals (22 gold, 30 silver, and 19 bronze).

tions the USSR had to join the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which oversaw the Olympic Games, and the Western-dominated international sports federations (IFs) that governed participation in individual sports, such as the International Amateur Athletic Federation (which governed track and field).[12] Involvement in these organisations, as with other international bodies like the United Nations and the Red Cross, was a means to an end. The ultimate goal, of course, was to enhance Soviet power, and successive Soviet regimes endeavored to manipulate these organisations to advance their own agendas. Participation, however, was a two-way street. Because these organisations were run according to international norms and rules, Soviet membership also entailed a degree of cultural adaptation. Soviet officials learned, with varying degrees of success, to adhere to certain standards of behaviour, communicating and negotiating in many cases largely on Western terms. Although tracing the precise long-term effects of this process of acculturation is difficult, membership in international organisations, including those relating to sports, may have accustomed Soviet officials in certain respects to thinking and behaving not just as Soviets but also as members of a global community.[13]

Soviet relations with sports organisations after the Second World War underwent dramatic transformations – from isolation to engagement, from awkward bumbling to comfortable belonging. When the Soviets began to apply for membership in the major sports IFs beginning in 1946, Western sports officials often reacted with irritation at what seemed like crude and inappropriate behaviour. Soviet officials frequently displayed ignorance not only of the most basic rules and statutes governing these organisations but also of the more subtle nuances of polite communication and formal corre-

[12] It is worth noting, in this respect, that it is possible to imagine the Soviet regime choosing not to participate in the Western-run system of international sports after the Second World War. It could instead have decided, as it had done in the 1930s and as the Nazi regime had attempted to do at the end of the 1930s, to establish its own international sports network. It might still have earned global prestige by setting records within this network that could be compared across time and place with Western records. But the global cachet of the Olympics was already so high, and the propaganda benefits of victory in face-to-face competition so much greater, that the regime surely knew that the potential value of joining the West in this one venue outweighed the risks.

[13] On the role of international organizations in creating a global culture and a global community, see AKIRA IRIYE, Global Community. The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World, Berkeley 2002; JOHN BOLI/GEORGE M. THOMAS, Constructing World Culture. International Nongovernmental Organizations since 1875, Stanford 1999.

spondence.[14] (Particularly irritating to French officials was that Soviet officials communicated only in Russian.)[15] In 1946, for example, two planeloads of Soviet athletes and officials simply arrived, unannounced, to participate in the European track and field championships, apparently unaware that the meet was open only to members of the international track and field federation (IAAF). The IAAF waived the regulations and allowed them to compete, but as Avery Brundage laconically noted, 'It was a strange approach.' Brundage recalled, too, that when the Soviets did apply formally for membership in the IAAF and other federations, they made demands he characterised as 'arrogant' and 'impudent', including that Russian be made an official language and that a Soviet delegate be placed on the executive committee – demands that showed a lack of understanding of the organisations' rules and that served only to alienate other members.[16]

Over the next decade, both sides made accommodations to establish good working relationships. For their part, the leaders of international sports organisations recognised that their own legitimacy depended on the participation of the impressive Soviet sport machine, and they sought to smooth the entry of the USSR and its communist satellites (even while attempting to limit their powers). Thus, for example, as head of the IOC Avery Brundage arranged a special meeting with Eastern European countries to discuss Olympic issues in 1953 and travelled to the USSR in 1954.[17] The IOC, constituted as a self-perpetuating body nominally composed of representatives of the IOC *to* their respective countries, not as representatives *from* those countries, also found a way to circumvent the tricky issue

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[14] For example, IOC chancellor Otto Mayer expressed exasperation when he forwarded to IOC President Brundage a letter from Konstantin Andrianov, one of two Soviet members of the IOC: 'At last we have things put right by them in a letter. It is the first time they write to us! And it was in Russian: I had to have it translated!' Mayer to Brundage, 19 January 1953, Avery Brundage Collection, microfilm copy at the Amateur Athletic Federation Library, Los Angeles [hereafter ABC], Box 46. On Soviet relations with IFs, see BARBARA KEYS, Soviet Sport and Transnational Mass Culture in the 1930s, in: Journal of Contemporary History 38 (2003) 3, pp. 413-434, p. 431-432.

[15] In 1954 the IOC required future members to be conversant with French and/or English; Andrianov added the caveat that present members could continue to be assisted by interpreters. Minutes of the 49th Session of the IOC, Athens, May 1954, ABC, Box 77.

[16] AVERY BRUNDAGE, unpublished memoirs, manuscript draft, ch. 10, first two pages, ABC, Box 330. Note that Brundage crossed out these adjectives in pencil in the draft manuscript. Soviet officials also tried to include Ukraine and Belarus as separate members and to create European groupings within federations to counter American influence. On Soviet entry into IFs, see the excellent account in KRISTINA EXNER-CARL, Sport und Politik in den Beziehungen Finnlands zur Sowjetunion 1940-1952, Wiesbaden 1997.

[17] The Soviets offered to pay his way, but Brundage covered his own expenses. BRUNDAGE, ch. XI, p. 8.

of selecting Soviet-bloc members when it had no contacts within the Soviet bloc and professed to exclude 'political agents'. As Brundage later wrote, 'it was decided that in a strictly limited fashion, the rule requiring independence might be waived in these cases [for Eastern bloc members]; however, there must never be more than a very small percentage of members in this category.'[18] In other words, the Soviet government, not the IOC, selected its IOC members, who served de facto as representatives of the Soviet government rather than (as IOC rules required) as private persons. The Soviet National Olympic Committee was recognised by the IOC in 1951, the first Soviet member of the IOC was inducted in 1951, and by 1953 the USSR had joined 22 international sports federations.[19]

The documentary record shows that over the years Soviet officials, such as the Soviet Olympic Committee chairman and IOC representative Konstantin Andrianov, made enormous strides in acclimatising themselves to the norms of behaviour in these organisations.[20] They, of course, wanted to wield power in these organisations commensurate with the USSR's great power status, and to do so they had to work for change from within. This required a mastery of rules and procedures, as well as what might be described as ideological fluency, or the ability to manipulate the rhetoric and ideals of the West to promote Soviet objectives.[21] Perhaps more surprisingly, Andrianov and other Soviet sports officials successfully established good working relationships with their Western counterparts, relationships that were based on rivalry but included a certain amount of camaraderie as well. A full accounting of the personal diplomacy that formed a significant part of the work of these organisations would require interviews and candid memoirs, because members of the IOC and IFs met with some frequency and discussed many issues in private, without leaving a documentary trail. However, the minutes of formal meetings and private correspondence do illuminate important aspects of the personal relationships within these organisations.

To cite just two brief examples of Andrianov's increasing level of comfort within the IOC: first, by 1956 Andrianov was writing in a familiar

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[18] BRUNDAGE, ch. IV, p. 19. In 1947, then IOC president Sigfrid Edstrom had written to Brundage on the problem of IOC members from communist countries, noting, 'I am against turning people down for political reasons. The greatest trouble will be to find men that we can have present in the IOC. I do not feel inclined to go so far as to admit communists there.' Quoted in ESPY, p. 28.

[19] BRUNDAGE, ch. XI, p. 7.

[20] Andrianov was admitted as IOC representative in 1951. He was handicapped by his inability to speak English or French, but managed with the help of an interpreter.

[21] Minutes of the 49th Session of the IOC, Athens, May 1954, ABC, Box 77.

tone to Brundage and showing a mastery of IOC procedures, as with his letter to Brundage proposing the election to the IOC of a representative from the GDR: 'You know [Heinz Schöbel] very well and I think I needn't speak much about his personal qualities.'[22] (Schöbel, incidentally, was a good choice for the IOC. As a token of the good relations he established with Brundage he published a glowing photographic biography of the IOC president.[23]) Second, Andrianov's argument in 1954 for the inclusion of the GDR in the Olympics was a measured and cogent appeal based on the stated ideals of the IOC (that the GDR NOC functioned according to the IOC's required statutes, and that all countries should have the right to participate in the Olympics); its sensitivity to the rhetoric and rules of the IOC stands in contrast to the more crudely bullying propaganda speeches characteristic of Soviet officials in earlier years.[24]

As the Cold War continued, the Soviet bloc did succeed in exercising greater power within these sports organisations, but the IOC and most of the federations continued throughout the Cold War to be dominated by the West. In the 1950s the Soviets had little success in pushing their agenda (for example, with regard to East Germany), as Soviet-bloc representatives were still considerably outnumbered by Western representatives. The 1954 IOC session in Athens, for example, was attended by seven members from Communist countries and 34 from Western-bloc nations.[25] As the Soviets became more adept at operating within international organisations, however, it meant not only that Soviet efforts to manipulate these organisations had greater chances of success. It also meant that a segment of Soviet officialdom was learning how to interact with the world on Western terms.

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[22] Andrianov to Brundage, 22 March 1956, ABC, Box 50.

[23] HEINZ SCHÖBEL, The Four Dimensions of Avery Brundage, Leipzig 1968. I thank Chris Young for pointing out this connection.

[24] Minutes of the 49th Session of the IOC, Athens, May 1954, ABC, Box 77.

[25] Listes de presence, Minutes of the 49th Session of the IOC, Athens, May 1954, ABC, Box 77. In 1955, for example, the USSR tried to get volleyball added to the Olympic programme, to get the GDR recognized, to exclude Taiwan's IOC representatives, and to expand the IOC's Executive Committee with the aim of getting a Communist bloc representative on it. Only on the latter point did the Soviets achieve partial success, when Bulgarian member Vladimir Stoichev – who spoke English, French, and German – was elected to the Executive Board. Andrianov to Brundage, 26 February 1955, ABC, Box 77; Minutes of 52nd Session, Melbourne, 19 November 1956, ABC, Box 78.

3. Consumer Culture and the Media: the Nina Ponomareva Affair

For the Soviet athletes who participated in international sports events, the experience could have two very different effects. Going abroad, along with the other perquisites and special treatment afforded to top athletes, could solidify their loyalty to the regime. Or, by exposing them at first hand to a world at odds with Soviet propaganda, it could undermine their beliefs in the Soviet system. Which effect predominated varied according to each individual, but many experienced some loss of faith. As political scientist Igor Zevelev has said of cultural and scientific exchanges in general, 'Exchanges helped to overcome the ideology of dogma regarding communism and capitalism. We started to think differently, and saw the world as more complex than we had been taught to believe.'[26] One study noted a recurrent problem with the many intelligence officials sent abroad: 'that after postings abroad [they] sometimes returned with an 'incorrect' attitude towards life in the Soviet Union.'[27] Although athletes were typically sent abroad for relatively short periods and, like other Soviets, were monitored while abroad by the secret police, they nonetheless had opportunities to experience Western life and culture; and for many of them, this cultural contact may have served to undermine their confidence in the Soviet system.

The case of Nina Ponomareva illustrates how exposure to Western culture often highlighted the lure of Western-style capitalism, and how the popularity of sports meant that media coverage of athletes played an important role in shaping public perceptions of the 'enemy' on both sides of the Iron Curtain. A gold-medal discus thrower, Ponomareva was part of a Soviet athletic delegation to a Soviet-British meet in August 1956. According to standard practice, when the team arrived in London, Soviet sports authorities handed each member an allowance in British pounds. (Rubles were not convertible, and it was virtually impossible for Soviet citizens to obtain hard currency legally.) Ponomareva and her friends immediately set off on a shopping expedition, during the course of which she bought consumer goods that were unavailable or in short supply in the USSR: socks, hats, earrings, lipstick. At one shop on Oxford Street, Ponomareva, perhaps overcome by the seemingly limitless variety of hats on display, furtively lifted five cheap hats – one red woollen hat and four feathered half-hats of varying colours, worth a total of 32 shillings and eleven pence[28] –

[26] Quoted in RICHMOND, p. 222.

[27] Ibid., p. 225.

[28] Prior to 1971, the pound sterling was made up of 20 shillings, each worth 12 pence.

from the counter display, put them into two paper bags and walked out of the store. Store personnel, unaware of her identity, escorted her back into the store and accused her of shoplifting.[29] In a Cabinet-level decision, British authorities decided to try her, and she was eventually convicted, fined, and escorted straight to a waiting Soviet ship.[30] Her disgrace did not prevent her, a few weeks later, from representing the USSR at the Melbourne Olympics, where, upon arrival, she was greeted with friendly shouts from local crowds: 'Watch your hats, girls, here comes Nina!'[31]

Her arrest, however, caused a furore that led the Soviet government to cancel the track meet and to threaten to cancel an upcoming visit of the Bolshoi Ballet, whose members allegedly feared similar 'persecution'.[32] Soviet-British relations were seriously strained. The Soviet information agency TASS labeled the arrest a 'provocation' intended to prevent Ponomareva from competing. The Soviet Embassy lodged a formal request with the British Foreign Office that the charges be dropped, but the British government resolutely adhered to the position that it was constitutionally barred from intervening with the judicial branch, even while secretly hoping that the Soviet Embassy would give Ponomareva a diplomatic passport and '[whisk] her out of the country.'[33]

On the one hand, the 'tempest in a hat shop' involved a series of cultural misunderstandings: most obviously, Ponomareva's misunderstanding of in-store surveillance in Western countries; and then the Soviet Embassy's misunderstanding of the British justice system. The initial efforts of the Embassy staff to get the charges dismissed would have been far more effective had the Soviets worked quietly with the store managers rather than appealing loudly to the Foreign Office, and the decision to hide Ponomareva in the Embassy for 44 days until her trial only made the situation worse.

On the other hand, however, the incident also illustrates how attractive Soviet visitors found certain aspects of Western consumer culture. Such

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[29] *Evening Standard*, 12 October 1956, p. 1 ff., in ABC, Box 149; *New York Times*, 1 September 1956, p. 1.

[30] Ibid; CAUTE, p. 473.

[31] *New York Times*, 16 November 1956, p. 41. *Sovetskii sport* reported laconically on her conviction, noting that she was released after paying a fine; 13 October 1956, p. 6.

[32] *New York Times*, 21 September 1956, p. 31. The phrase was used in a *New York Times* editorial, 1 September 1956, p. 14.

[33] Ibid., 4 September 1956, p. 2; ibid., 2 September 1956, p. 14. London to Washington, 4 September 1956, 861.453/9-456; London to Washington, 18 September 1956, 861.453/9-1856, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, State Department Decimal Files. I obtained these classified cables through a Freedom of Information Act request.

shoplifting incidents became a regular occurrence as the number of exchanges multiplied, although in most cases the stores victimised chose not to press charges rather than provoke a diplomatic contretemps.[34] Oddly, for the most part the press reported on the Ponomareva case without commenting on the essential context – the dearth of consumer goods in the USSR – and few observers noted the similarity between Nina Ponomareva's real-life story and the 1939 Hollywood film Ninotchka, in which Greta Garbo starred as an austere Soviet official who falls in love with a Parisian – and with Western consumer goods (a film remade in 1957 as Silk Stockings).[35]

The 'Ninochka affair' also highlights the prominence of athletes in shaping Western perceptions of what Soviets were like. Press coverage on both sides of the Atlantic was extensive. In Britain the papers were largely sympathetic to the accused. The Daily Express said the incident had been handled in 'a clumsy manner' and that the shop's personnel ought to have made allowances for a foreigner.[36] When the trial came, a thousand Londoners thronged the entrance to the court, perching on railing and climbing lampposts, to see 'the strapping Russian' – hatless – enter the building. The tabloid press printed every detail of the nearly four-hour procedure, including Ponomareva's testimony that she had paid for the hats, though she could produce no receipt. (Attempting to be sympathetic, the magistrate remarked that 'the hats [...] probably constitute a considerable temptation to a woman.') The incident was grist for humour on both sides of the Atlantic; typical was an American humourist who congratulated Ponomareva on setting a new record for speed in jumping bail and lamented that it was not an Olympic event.[37]

4. Cultural Perceptions

In the West, curiosity about life behind the Iron Curtain was often fed by news stories about Soviet athletes, and the articles about athletic Ivans and Vladimirs and Ninas that Americans digested over morning coffee helped shape the way Americans viewed their adversary. So, too, were Soviet

[34] See, for example, the cases of the Soviet musician accused of taking 23 ties, five pairs of socks, a handbag, and a brassiere from Macy's in New York, and the Soviet ballerina who was accused of stealing gloves and an umbrella from a store in Brussels: *New York Times*, 9 February 1959, p. 27; ibid., 29 June 1958, p. 1.

[35] The one reference to Ninochka I came across was in a brief editorial in the *New York Times*, 1 September 1956, p. 14.

[36] Ibid., 2 September 1956, p. 14.

[37] Ibid., 1 September 1956, p. 14.

views of the 'free world' influenced by reporting on sports. As the pace of Soviet sports exchanges accelerated after 1955, especially in preparation for the 1956 Olympics, Soviet press coverage of foreign athletes increased. In the months before the Summer Olympics, the thrice-weekly Soviet sports paper Sovetskii sport began to devote up to two of its seven pages to international events and athletes. The 18 August 1956 issue, for example, while still focused predominantly on domestic events (both sports and politics), also included a United Press report on the Olympic preparations of Japanese track and field athletes, an article on a Hungarian runner, a report from Newsweek projecting that an American would set a new record in the high jump, a detailed profile of the African American runner Louis Jones, a report on a Soviet soccer team's trip to Canada, one on fencing at the Olympics, and so forth. Other issues carried news from far-flung places like China, Indonesia, and Argentina, in addition to heavy coverage of sports in 'the people's democracies' (Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe) and in the United States.[38]

Some of this reporting was surprisingly positive. The profile of Louis Jones appeared in a regular column entitled 'Stories of Foreign Sportsmen', which featured the kind of glowing portraits of athletes, especially Americans, that could be found in any American newspaper. When the column showcased basketball giant Bill Russell, for example, the hardships the star endured as a youth (such as the death of his mother and his having to work at an early age to help pay the rent) were presented not as indictments of American society but as part of a human-interest out-of-adversity-comes-greatness trope. The Soviet author used Russell's college career not to snipe at the semi-professional abuses rampant in American college sports but simply to glorify Russell's stellar achievements. In other venues the Soviet government was eager to make propaganda of discrimination against blacks; here, there was not a word about American racism.[39]

In addition to substantial and often favorable reporting on foreign athletes and events, Soviet journalists and writers were preoccupied with what the foreign press was saying about Soviet achievements. Sovetskii sport and the half-dozen published accounts of the 1956 Games that appeared afterward repeatedly quoted from foreign press accounts acclaiming Soviet

[38] See: *Sovetskii sport*, 21 August 1956.

[39] Ibid., 15 November 1956, p. 7. On Soviet propaganda about American racism, see, for example, MARY DUDZIAK, Cold War Civil Rights. Race and the Image of American Democracy, Princeton 2000.

victories.[40] Partly this fact reflected Soviet insecurities and the desire to affirm that the USSR was indeed respected around the world. But it also had the effect of accustoming Soviet readers to the idea that Soviet athletes competed in an international system according to international rules.

5. Direct Cultural Contacts

Events like the Olympic Games produced direct cultural contacts among athletes and officials of different nations. Without subscribing to the idea promoted by sports enthusiasts that such contact inevitably produces 'mutual understanding and friendship' and serves to further the cause of world peace, we can nevertheless assume that these cross-cultural exchanges did in some cases produce lasting effects on the worldviews and perceptions of participants and observers. For the Soviet Union, participation in the 1956 Olympics – nicknamed the 'Friendly Olympics' – produced unprecedented opportunities for friendly cultural contacts. In 1952, at the Helsinki Games, the Soviet delegation's aloof behaviour had garnered negative publicity. In 1956, thanks to the policy shift outlined above, the Soviet team made a strong effort to appear warm and open. American athletes, aware that the press was paying a great deal of attention to their relations with Soviets, also made special efforts to appear amiable and sportsmanlike.

The Olympic Village, introduced in 1932, was by the 1950s a major symbol of the Olympic ideal of fostering friendship and understanding among nations, and by all accounts the Melbourne Olympic Village had an unusually congenial atmosphere. The Soviet Central Committee had initially decided to house the Soviet team in Melbourne on a Soviet ship instead of in the Olympic Village, in order to conserve foreign currency and to ensure better discipline, but was later persuaded to let the Soviet athletes join the Village.[41] One of the leaders of the Soviet delegation later described the atmosphere at the Village as 'very friendly':

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[40] See, for example, *Sovetskii sport*, 13 December 1956, p. 4; NIKOLAI N. ROMANOV, XVI olimpiiskie igry v Mel'burne (1956 g.), Moskva 1957, pp. 29-30, 33-34. Other accounts of the Games include NIKOLAI S. KISELEV/IGOR A. MEL'NIKOV, Nad Mel'burnom goluboe nebo, Moskva 1957; ALEKSANDR P. KULESHOV/PETR A. SOBOLEV, V dalekom Mel'burne. Ocherki o XVI Olimpiiskikh igrakh, 2d ed., Moskva 1958; BORIS N. SLIVKO, God olimpiiskii. 1956, Moskva 1958; ZAKHARII P. FIRSOV, Olimpiiskii mesiats v Mel'burne. Armeiskie sportsmeny na XVI olimpiiskikh igrakh, Moskva 1957; NIKOLAI I. LIUBOMIROV/VLADIMIR A. PASHININ/VIKTOR V. FROLOV, XVI Olimpiiskie igry, Moskva 1957.

[41] MIKHAIL IU. PROZUMENSHCHIKOV, Bol'shoi sport i bol'shaia politika, Moskva 2004, p. 174.

> 'From morning till evening athletes in their free moments visited each other. Soviet athletes had many interesting and exciting meetings with their foreign friends [...]. In the building occupied by the Soviet delegation, there was a sort of international club set up, where Soviet, American and athletes from other countries gathered for a cup of tea or coffee and talked to each other about their lives, studies, about who is training and how, about their sports victories and plans for the future.'[42]

Under the auspices of the Australian-Soviet Friendship Society, the Soviet team visited many manufacturing facilities, universities, hospitals, schools, and sheep-breeding farms in and around Melbourne, meeting with Australian students, dock workers, doctors, writers, journalists, architects, and engineers.[43] Athletes from the Cold War antagonists threw 'vodka-parties', drank 'cocktails-rock and roll', and danced to the latest American pop music.[44] Athletes from all nations mingled on the many sightseeing excursions offered by the Village management.[45] In the most highly publicised case of 'cultural contact' at Melbourne, American hammer thrower Hal Connolly met and later married Czech discus thrower Olga Fikotová, in an affair dubbed 'détente at first sight'.[46] Fikotová's memoirs depict the Village as a meeting ground for many nationalities. Even the disapproving eyes of the 'political' representatives on her delegation did not keep her from spending countless hours with her new American beau.[47] Despite the presence of 15 KGB agents (presented as translators and correspondents) within the 489-member Soviet delegation, there were ample opportunities for Soviet athletes to experience the lures of the West.[48]

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[42] ROMANOV, p. 29.

[43] Ibid., p. 30.

[44] *Le Monde*, 22 November 1956, p. 11. As the *New York Times* reported, 'Willie White [...] has made the most important conquest of the Games so far. She has taught the Russians to rock 'n' roll ... [The Russian men] took to jive readily and graduate to rock 'n' roll with a will.' *New York Times*, 13 November 1956, p. 62. The American press perhaps underestimated Soviet exposure to Western music. The Kremlin had lifted a futile ban on listening to Western music in 1955, and jazz and rock 'n' roll were being crudely recorded on millions of X-ray plates from the Voice of America's 'Music USA' programme. HIXSON, p. 116.

[45] OLGA CONNOLLY, The Rings of Destiny, New York 1968, p. 33.

[46] HARRY GORDON, Australia and the Olympic Games, St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia 1994, p. 224. See also CONNOLLY.

[47] Ibid.

[48] PROZUMENSHCHIKOV, pp. 32-33, 58.

Historians of cultural relations are almost always handicapped by the extraordinary slipperiness of culture and the difficulty of proving that elements of culture – cultural transfer, images, perceptions – had direct and measurable effects on policy.[49] But as Alexander Dallin put it in 1973, 'the impact of contacts and exposure, whether bread or circus, cannot fail to field a slow, perhaps imperceptible cumulation of new attitudes, perspectives, learning, borrowing [...]. It is bound to make for healthier, more open human relations.' Such effects, he admitted, were so 'subtle [...] that perhaps none can fathom or weigh.'[50] It is impossible to determine with precision the particular effects that cultural exchanges had in shifting Soviet perceptions of the outside world and of the USSR's role in the world. Yet it seems clear that Soviet participation in international sports events like the 1956 Olympics constituted a form of engagement and integration with the world and opened up a susceptibility to transnational influences. In the 1950s, on balance, such contacts probably worked primarily to strengthen the Soviet regime, augmenting both its domestic legitimacy and its international prestige. In the longer term, however, cultural dialogue opened the country to influences that would ultimately serve to undermine the coercive power of the Soviet state. Whether it was engaging with the West in Western-led organisations, viewing at first hand the riches of Western consumer culture, or appreciating the lives and achievements of foreign athletes, international sports placed the USSR in the midst of a global culture, one whose demands ultimately opened cracks in a closed society.

[49] For one very interesting rumination on this dilemma, see: FRANK NINKOVICH, Culture, Power, and Civilization. The Place of Culture in the Study of International Relations, in: On Cultural Ground. Essays in International History, ed. by ROBERT DAVID JOHNSON, Chicago 1994, pp. 11-15.

[50] Quoted in: RICHMOND, p. 210.