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The Impact of Communism on Sport

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Abstract: Communist sport policy in Europe, that dominated large parts of it during the Cold War, is dead. The collapse of Soviet-style communism gives an opportunity to look back on the characteristics of communist sports. Especially its achievements should not be underestimated, as it promoted social mobility, equal rights for women and helped integrating national minorities as well as modernising societies.

Communist sport in Europe is no more. It lives on in China, Cuba and North Korea. It was not everywhere identical, nor did it feature highly in the national priorities of less advanced communist nations, such as Albania, Vietnam and Cambodia. The rapid collapse of Soviet-style communism throughout Eastern and Central Europe in 1989-91 and of the nine nations there that subscribed to it provides an opportunity to examine 'communist sport'.

One reason for world-wide interest in communist sport was that its success, particularly at the Olympic Games, drew considerable attention. How *did* they do it? After all, in terms of medals, the Soviet Union and German Democratic Republic dominated the Olympics, summer and winter.

A less remarkable, though perhaps more far-reaching, aspect of communist sport, however, was the evolution of a model of sport for a modernising community, employing sport for utilitarian purposes to promote health and hygiene, defence, productivity, integration of a multiethnic population into a unified state, and international prestige – what we might call 'nation-building'. With the exception of the GDR and Czechoslovakia, communist development was initially based on a mass illiterate, rural population. It was this model that had some attraction for nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In most communist states, sport had the quite revolutionary role of being an agent of social change, with the state as pilot. In any case, after revolution or liberation there was rarely a leisure class around to promote sport for its own disport. Further, partly under the influence of Marxist philosophy that stressed the interdependence of the mental and physical states of human beings, many communist states emphasised the notion that physical is as vital as mental

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culture in human development, and that it should be treated as such both for the all-round development of the individual and, ultimately, for the health of society.

The following would seem to have been the principal state priorities assigned to sport in communist development.

1. Nation-building

All communist states faced problems of political stabilisation and of economic and social development; some were confronted with the task of national integration of ethnically-diverse populations into the new unified state. A key issue here is that of nation-building – the inculcation of political loyalties to the nation as a whole, transcending the bounds of kinship, race, language, religion and geographical location. Not only was this a key problem facing post-revolutionary Russia, China and Cuba, it has been equally relevant to post-liberation societies in Africa and Asia.

What better than sport to help the regime in such societies promote the building of strong nation states? After all, sport, with its broad relevance to education, health, culture and politics, and its capacity to mobilise people (pre-dispose them towards change), may uniquely serve the purpose of nation-building and help foster national integration. It extends to and unites wider sections of the population than probably any other social activity. It is easily understood and enjoyed, cutting across social, economic, ethnic, educational, religious and language barriers. It permits some emotional release (reasonably) safely, it can be relatively cheap and is easily adapted to support health and social welfare objectives.

2. Integration

Bound up with nation-building has been the state-desired aim of integrating a multinational population, often in transition from a rural to an urban way of life, into the new nation state. Many communist societies were loose confederations of diverse ethnic groups: different colours, languages, traditions, religions, stages of economic growth.

As an example, the billion-plus people of China consist of at least a dozen distinctly different ethnic groups, while the USSR had over a hundred nationalities within its 290 million people. The governments of both these great nations quite deliberately took Western sports from town to country and, in the case of the USSR, from the European metropolis to the Asiatic interior, and

used them to help integrate the diverse peoples into the new nation and to promote a patriotism that transcended petty nations and ethnic affiliation.

3. Defence

Since many communist states were born in war and lived under the constant threat of war, terrorism and subversion, it is hardly surprising that defence was a prime consideration. Sport was therefore often subordinated to the role of military training. In some countries the system was best described as a ‘militarisation of sport’. The role of the military in sport was further heightened by centralised control of sports development.

It should be remembered that both China and the USSR have had extensive borders with foreign states – 14 in the case of China, and 12 in that of the Soviet Union. Moreover, in recent times both countries lost immense numbers of people in wars. For example, China lost 13 million and the USSR up to 50 million in World War II, by far the greatest human war losses in history.

In both nations, as well as certain other communist states (eg North Korea and Cuba), the sports movement was initially the responsibility of the armed forces and even recently was dominated by instrumental needs of defence and by military or paramilitary organisations. All communist nations had a nation-wide fitness programme with a bias towards military training, modelled on the Soviet ‘Prepared for Work and Defence’ – *Gotov k trudu i oborone* – system (in the GDR this was renamed ‘Prepared for Work and Peace’). The programme was originally modelled on the standards set by Lord Baden Powell for the Boy Scout ‘marksman’ and ‘athlete’ badges, and significantly called ‘Be Prepared for Work and Defence’.

All communist and some non-aligned states had a strong military presence in the sports movement through armed and security force clubs, which provided military sinecures for full-time athletes (see table below).

Table 1: Sports clubs of the security and armed forces in Eastern Europe and the USSR

<i>Country</i>	<i>Security forces club</i>	<i>Armed forces club</i>
USSR	Dinamo	TsSKA
Bulgaria	Levski (Sofia)	TsSKA
elsewhere	Dinamo	
GDR	Dinamo	Vorwarts
Yugoslavia	Dinamo	Red Star/Partizan
Romania	Dinamo	Steaua
Hungary	MTK	Honved
Poland	Gwardia	Legia
Czechoslovakia	Dinamo	Dukla Liberec

4. Health and hygiene

Of all the functions of state-run sport in communist states, that to promote and maintain health always took precedence. Regular participation in physical exercise was to be one means – relatively inexpensive and effective – of improving health standards rapidly and a channel by which to educate people in hygiene, nutrition and exercise. For this purpose a new approach to health and recreation was sought. The name given to the new system was *physical culture* (*fizicheskaya kultura; Korperkultur, etc.*).

Physical culture stood for ‘clean living’, progress, good health and rationality, and was regarded by the authorities as one of the most suitable and effective instruments for implementing their social policies, as well as for the social control implicit in the programme.

As industrialisation got underway in the USSR at the end of the 1920s, physical exercise also became an adjunct, like everything else, of the five-year plan. At all workplaces throughout the country a regime of therapeutic gymnastics was introduced with the intention of boosting productivity, cutting down absenteeism through sickness and injury, reducing fatigue, and spreading hygienic habits among the millions of new workers who had only recently inhabited bug-infested wooden huts in the village.

This Soviet-pioneered health-oriented system of sport (physical culture) was either imposed upon or adopted by every state that took the road to communism.

5. Social policies

There are many facets of social policy relevant to sport that concerned communist states. Among them are combating crime, particularly juvenile delinquency, fighting alcoholism and prostitution, attracting young people away from religion, especially all-embracing faiths like Islam. One aspect of the use of sport for social policy is the concern that it can make some contribution to the social emancipation of women. A strong motivation here can be the desire by leaders for national recognition through international sports success.

The impact of women’s sport is even greater – though emancipation is far more protracted and painful – in communities in which women have, by law or convention, been excluded from public life and discouraged from baring face, arms and legs in public. Some multi-ethnic communist countries quite deliberately used sport to break down prejudice and gain a measure of emancipation for women. This was a conscious policy in communist states with a sizeable Muslim population, like Albania, the USSR and Afghanistan.

6. International recognition and prestige

For all young countries trying to establish themselves in the world as nations to be respected, even recognised, sport may uniquely offer them an opportunity to take the limelight in the full glare of world publicity. This is particularly important for those nations confronted by bullying, boycott and subversion from big powers in economic, military and other areas. This applied as much to the Baltic states in regard to Soviet Russia as it did to the GDR (with under 17 million people) in the shadow of the Federal Republic of Germany, with three times more people, and to Cuba and other Latin American states in regard to the United States.

This has put particular responsibility on athletes from communist nations in that they have been seen by political leaders as encouraging a sense of pride in their team, nationality, country and even political system. Not all communist athletes accepted that role, as witnessed by the post-communist outbursts in Eastern and Central Europe during 1989.

Where other channels have been closed, it does seem that success in sport helped such countries as the USSR, China, Cuba and the GDR, as well as many other states in the developing world, to attain a measure of recognition and prestige internationally, both at home and abroad. Sport here is unique in that for all communist countries, including the USSR and China, it was the *only* medium in which they were able to take on and beat the economically advanced capitalist nations (apart from the early years of space conquest). This took on added importance in view of what their leaders traditionally saw as the battle of the two ideologies for influence in the world.

Some conclusions

The rapidity of post-totalitarian change in all areas, sports included, in Eastern and Central Europe and the one-time Soviet Union would seem to indicate that the elite sports system and its attainments, far from inspiring a national pride and patriotism, tended to provoke apathy and resentment among many people. This appeared to be more evident in those states – Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and the GDR – which had ‘revolution’ and an alien sports system and values thrust upon them contrary to their indigenous traditions. A similar mood has been apparent, too, in Islamic and Baltic areas of the old USSR.

Sports stars were seen as belonging to a private, elite fiefdom within the overall domain; they were not part of a shared national achievement, let alone heritage. That is not to say that, in societies of hardship and totalitarian constraint, and in the face of Western arrogance and attitudes that were sometimes tantamount to racial prejudice, the ordinary citizen obtained no vicarious pleas-

ure in her/his champion's or team's performance. But, overall, the dominant attitude was one not entirely different from British class attitudes to sports and heroes which are not 'ours' (eg the ambivalent attitude by many British workers to Olympic show-jumpers, yachtsmen and fencers).

On the other hand, in countries like the now defunct Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, as well as the Slav regions of the old Soviet Union (Ukraine, Belarus and Russia), the patriotic pride in sporting success and heroes would appear to have been genuine. One reason for this may be that the socialist revolution of 1917 in the old Russian empire, and of 1946 and 1948 in the cases of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, came out of their own experience and had some popular support. The same might be said of China, Cuba and Vietnam.

Today the inheritors of the sports system that evolved during the communist years are faced with a choice of how sharply they should break with the past and adopt a pattern of sport based on market relations and globalisation (ie 'Americanisation'). 'Westernisers' in Eastern and Central Europe, aided by those Westerners eager to see the old communist states join the 'free' world, abandon socialism, central planning and social provision, seem bent on rejecting the past in toto and embracing its antithesis.

Others see the past as not all bad: the old system was generally open to those with talent in all sports, probably more so than in the West, and it provided opportunities for women to play and succeed, if not on equal terms with men, at least on a higher plane than Western women. It also gave an opportunity to the many ethnic minorities and relatively small states in Eastern and Central Europe to do well internationally and to help promote that pride and dignity that sports success can bring. Nowhere in the world was there since the early 1950s such reverence by governments for Olympism, a practical embodiment of which was the contribution to Olympic solidarity – the training of Third World athletes, coaches, sports officials and scholars at colleges and training camps. Much of this aid was free. None of it was disinterested. But it also went to those who were clearly exploited, as was the case with the communist-led campaign against apartheid in sport and the success in having racist South Africa banished from world sports forums and arenas.

Time will tell. For many in the erstwhile communist states, however, with the free trade unions abolished in favour of oligarch-run private clubs, bread has for the moment become more important than circuses.