

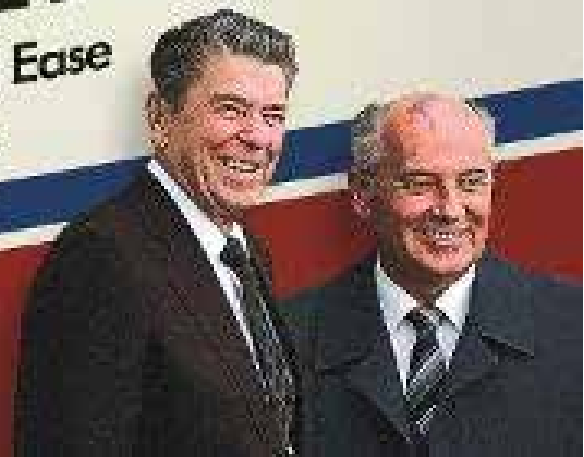


Foreword by  
Dr Ian Sanders

# DIPLOMATS IN TRACKSUITS

How Sport Helped Ease  
Cold War Tensions

Joseph Tudor



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## 1.

# The 1940s: War and Wembley

FOLLOWING THE Yalta and Potsdam conferences, during which the victorious powers of the Second World War – the US, the USSR and Great Britain – divided Europe into spheres of influence, it became apparent that the territorial and ideological disparities between the superpowers governing the Western and Eastern Blocs would swiftly manifest, heightening tensions in their diplomatic relations. The alliance between Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, US president Franklin D. Roosevelt, and British prime minister Winston Churchill, forged during the joint effort against the Third Reich, rapidly dissipated after the conclusion of the war, eventually transforming into a new kind of conflict, prompting the US and the USSR to form alliances with the nations they had set free from German oppression during the Second World War.

The US increased its influence over Western Europe states through the implementation of the Marshall Plan, a \$13bn aid programme designed to revitalise the economies of nations ravaged by the devastation of the war. In exchange, the plan would ‘provide markets for American goods, create reliable trading partners, and support the development of stable democratic governments in Western Europe’.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Washington was also granted the authority to establish

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2 Secretary of State George Marshall’s Speech, US National Archives, Economic Recovery Act (Marshall Plan), 1948.

numerous military bases, thereby expanding its comprehensive control over the western region of the European continent.<sup>3</sup>

In 1949, NATO was founded as a military alliance among nations situated between the Atlantic Ocean and Central Europe. The founding members of this alliance were the US, UK, France, Canada, Denmark, Portugal, Norway, Belgium, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The primary objective of the Atlantic Treaty was to deter potential military invasions from the USSR and its allies.

In reaction, the USSR founded the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) with the objective of extending aid and support to countries in Eastern Europe and other communist-affiliated regions, such as Cuba, Mongolia and Vietnam. Furthermore, the USSR established the Warsaw Pact, a treaty designed to facilitate economic and military cooperation between the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany, Hungary and Poland. Despite being governed by communist regimes, Albania and Yugoslavia progressively diverged from Soviet influence and asserted their independence from Moscow.

One of the primary areas of contention between the two superpowers was exemplified by the German city of Berlin. Despite its location within Soviet-controlled territory, which later evolved into East Germany, the city functioned as a microcosm of divergent forces, encompassing the Western Allied nations and the USSR. The western side of the city was divided into three sectors, each governed by France, Britain and the US, whereas the eastern portion fell under Soviet control.

Berlin became the focal point of the first significant crisis between the US and the USSR, known as the 'Berlin Blockade', which took place between 1948 and 1949. Stalin demanded that the Western coalition relinquish control of all sectors of the capital; nevertheless, when the US declined, the USSR

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3 Jonathan Stevenson, Chapter One: 'Overseas bases and US strategic posture', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 28 September 2022.

opted to impose a blockade on West Berlin by closing all road and rail routes, obstructing the delivery of vital provisions such as food, coal and medicine. The Allies effectively countered the blockade through an airlift operation, delivering essential supplies to West Berlin and thwarting Stalin's strategy.

This incident epitomised the antagonism between the two superpowers, with ramifications extending into other spheres and persisting until the late 1980s. Amid the various clashes between the US and the USSR, there was, however, an optimistic aspiration that the conflict between them would not be resolved through the utilisation of atomic weaponry. Fortunately, as we will see, their rivalry would find expression in alternative arenas, with sports emerging as one such domain.

### **Trieste, Italy's Berlin**

During the initial phases of the Cold War, the city of Trieste assumed a pivotal role. Serving as the capital of the Friuli region in the north-east of Italy, it gained prominence when referenced in the renowned speech delivered by Winston Churchill in the US in May 1946. It was in this address that Churchill first coined the term 'Iron Curtain'. According to the British statesman, 'The barrier descended upon Europe and extended from Stettin to Trieste.'<sup>4</sup>

At the close of the Second World War, Trieste became a heavily contested crossroads involving Allied forces, occupied Italians, Yugoslav partisans, communist militants and anti-communist combatants. Following the expulsion of German forces by troops under the command of Marshal Tito near the war's end, Yugoslav authorities asserted territorial claims over the city, a strategically significant seaport, a move vehemently opposed by Italian authorities. After a month and a half of diplomatic negotiations with Anglo-American forces, the region underwent a division into two zones: Zone

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4 Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2FM3\\_h33Tg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2FM3_h33Tg)

A, encompassing Trieste and its northern environs, governed by the Allies (de facto by Italy), and Zone B, comprising the Istria region, overseen by the Belgrade government. The objective of the Western forces was to designate Trieste as a free zone, effectively constituting a quasi-independent state officially recognised by the United Nations (UN).<sup>5</sup> For a span of three years, the city served as both a buffer zone and a bulwark against potential ideological incursions led by communist forces directed toward the Western world.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-1940s, approximately 75 per cent of the population in the Triestine region was of Italian descent, and there were mounting political and social pressures for the port city to align itself with Italy. The resolution of this situation was expedited through the utilisation of sports as a unifying mechanism. Sports have consistently played a pivotal role in fostering patriotic sentiments; therefore, when the inaugural post-war Serie A football tournament commenced in 1945/46, Triestina was duly included among the 20 participating clubs. This decision served as a conspicuous affirmation of the city's perceived national allegiance. Similarly, in the subsequent year, Yugoslavia admitted Amatori Ponziana, Trieste's other club, to the *Prva savezna liga*, the premier football league, for the 1946/47 season. The objective behind this decision by Yugoslavia's leader Tito was to assert a claim for authority over Trieste by associating it with the most popular sports competition. The propagandistic ramifications of such a manoeuvre would have been profoundly significant.

For the Italian government, it was imperative that Triestina be perceived as wholly Italian in every aspect, and the sporting

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5 Daniele Andreozzi, Loredana Panariti, 'L'economia di una regione nata dalla politica', in Roberto Finzi, Claudio Magris, Giovanni Miccoli, *Il Friuli Venezia Giulia, della serie Storia d'Italia, le Regioni dall'unità ad oggi*, Vol.II, Giulio Einaudi Ed., 2002.

6 Philippe Vonnard, Nicola Sbeti, Gregory Quin, *Beyond Boycotts: Sport During the Cold War in Europe*, De Gruyter, 2019.



dimension served as a vital component in fostering the connection between the port city and Rome.

When the Triestina football club competed in prominent cities such as Milan, Rome, Naples and Turin, it consistently received warm receptions characterised by a strong sense of camaraderie and enthusiastic chants imbued with a nationalistic fervour. However, despite these favourable receptions, the Friulians' season failed to meet expectations, and to the surprise of many they experienced an unexpected relegation. The unforeseen turn of events prompted concern among supporters of Italian identity in Trieste; the relegation of the club to Serie B would diminish its propaganda power compared to its presence in the top league. Consequently, immediate action was deemed necessary to salvage the club. This sentiment was underscored even during a parliamentary inquiry led by Christian Democrat MPs Salizzoni and Zaccagnini, who emphasised the national significance of Triestina's presence in Serie A.<sup>7</sup>

Concurrently, Amatori Ponziana were also relegated from the Yugoslavian top league; nevertheless, they were ultimately granted a reprieve. The FIGC, the Italian Football Federation, intervened to safeguard one of the few remaining connections Trieste had with Italy. Following a series of intense negotiations, the primary objective was to persuade the owners of Brescia and Venezia (the other relegated clubs along with Triestina) to accept a reprieve verdict that solely benefitted Triestina. In the end, the FIGC opted to rescue Triestina and expand Serie A to include 21 clubs in 1947/48. Additionally, the government clandestinely provided financial support to the Friulian club to facilitate its participation at the highest level.<sup>8</sup> The funds were employed so efficiently that, by the conclusion of the season, Triestina secured second place, trailing behind Valentino Mazzola's Torino FC, widely regarded as one of the greatest Italian clubs of all time.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Dante Di Ragona, *Undici ragazzi*, Pro Sport Editore, 1985.

Over the years, with the emergence of additional sporting events aimed at fostering a sense of unity between Italy and Trieste, such as the 1946 edition of the renowned Giro d'Italia cycling race (which included one of its stages set in the Friulian city), and the sustained diplomatic endeavours by Italian politicians and civil society, the disputed seaport gradually assumed a more Italian character.

These developments unfolded under the vigilant supervision of Anglo-American forces, which effectively deterred Tito's army from approaching Trieste. The city, serving more and more as a pivotal nexus for conflicting geopolitical interests and one of Europe's foremost ports, eventually broke free from Yugoslav influence. In 1954, the majority of Zone A was integrated into Italy. Meanwhile, Zone B and four villages from Zone A (Plavje, Spodnje Škofije, Hrvatini and Elerji) became part of Yugoslavia, partitioned between Slovenia and Croatia. The definitive border with Yugoslavia was formally established through bilateral agreements in 1975 with the signing of the Treaty of Osimo.<sup>9</sup> This demarcation today serves as the official boundary between Italy and Slovenia.

Triestina's achievements in Serie A and the gathering of numerous supporters across Italy were likely the first instance where a sporting element played a prominent role in the Cold War context. Civil society and sports authorities, guided and encouraged by prominent newspapers, plainly facilitated objectives that politics had sought to achieve covertly. The precise impact of sporting events on the broader process of Italianisation in Trieste remains difficult to quantify; however, it undeniably ignited passion among politicians and fans nationwide.

The Friulian seaport is now an integral part of Italy and retains the distinction of being the only city in the world with two clubs competing in the top leagues of different countries.

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9 'Trattato di Osimo tra la Repubblica Italiana e la Repubblica Socialista Federativa di Jugoslavia', signed by Mariano Rumor and Minos Milic, 3 April 1977.

## **The Olympic Games return**

All major sports events were suspended during the Second World War; however, following the cessation of hostilities, it did not take long for various international sporting federations to reconvene and resume their competitions. In the aftermath of such a tragic conflict, there was a strong desire to return to a semblance of normality, and sporting events played a significant role in fostering this transition. The inaugural international event of the post-war era that convened the foremost athletes of Europe was the Athletics Championships held in Oslo in August 1946. These tournaments were a significant milestone as they represented the first instance where both male and female athletes participated in the same international sporting event, establishing a precedent that would be maintained in all subsequent major competitions.<sup>10</sup>

However, the most significant event that occurred after the end of the Second World War was the 1948 London Olympic Games. The decision to choose the British capital had been made only two years earlier, during a period when numerous European cities had endured both physical and economic devastation as a result of the war. American cities such as Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Baltimore and Philadelphia were among those deemed capable of hosting the event, both structurally and organisationally. Lausanne, in neutral Switzerland, and (perhaps surprisingly) London also submitted their candidacy. Despite the challenges posed by the destructive effects of the war, London was granted a certain level of priority over other cities because it had already been assigned the Games by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the 1944 edition, which was later cancelled due to the war.

King George VI saw the Olympic Games as an opportunity to bring excitement and reinvigorate the spirit of the British people. Therefore, he urged Lord Burghley, president of

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10 'Finnish Athletes Win Three Events – Fast Time in 10,000 Metres', *Glasgow Herald*, 23 August 1946.

the British Olympic Association, to formally petition the IOC president, Sigfrid Edström, for the organisation of the event. Lord Burghley proposed suitable structures to host the competitions, primarily at Wembley Stadium, and to accommodate the athletes, mostly in Royal Air Force military bases. Despite the event being referred to as the 'Games of Austerity', Edström was impressed by the British initiative to make the most out of a difficult situation. Ultimately, the request was granted.

Not all nations were slated to participate in the event due to the political interference of a few influential IOC members. The IOC decided to exclude athletes from Germany and Japan, the nations that (along with Italy) had been heavily involved in and later defeated in the Second World War, from the competition. Somewhat oddly, Italian athletes were actually invited to the Games. The reason for this discrepancy in treatment between the Italians and the other athletes has yet to be fully understood, although it was likely due to Italy's withdrawal from its alliance with Germany in the waning months of the war, its endeavours as an anti-communist stronghold and its contribution to bolstering the Atlantic alliance, which ultimately culminated in the establishment of NATO in 1949. In this case, Italy's inclusion was likely predicated on the country's political stance at that specific juncture. Sports merit, as would typically be anticipated in a sporting event, was not taken into account. Rather, politics and international diplomacy influenced the IOC's decision to extend an invitation to Italy while excluding Germany and Japan. Such resolutions would recur in the future.

The exclusions, however, did not last for long: the West German Olympic Committee was promptly reconstituted, and the country was admitted to the IOC in 1951. Similarly, Japan was invited to the Helsinki Games in 1952.

Another political argument within the IOC centred on the admission of Israel. After declaring independence in May 1948, the Middle Eastern country sought to participate in the London Games. Despite submitting a timely application, the

request was rejected as Israel was not yet officially recognised as a state by the international community, and its presence could have sparked protests and boycotts from Arab countries. This Olympic argument presaged a contentious relationship that would define the interactions between the Middle Eastern states and Israel in the following decades.

More generally, the absence (self-imposed or prompted by the IOC) of some countries from the 1948 London Games was only the first occurrence in a long series of international sporting events that would lead to numerous controversial political decisions during the Cold War.

### **Soviet programming**

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the USSR showed no interest in participating in continental or global sporting competitions. The prevailing belief was that Soviet athletes were incapable of competing for first place and, in order to avoid potential embarrassment on the international stage, the decision was made not to take part. However, in the latter half of the 1940s, perspectives changed. If sport were to serve as a platform for comparison between the communist and capitalist blocs, victories would be used to emphasise the superiority of a country's ideology, organisation and socio-political system, while belittling that of the adversary.

Sports minister Nikolai Romanov took charge of the situation as a fervent advocate of the idea that his country should establish its own Olympic committee. Romanov believed that attaining a preeminent position in the sporting world would increase the credibility and prestige of the USSR in the eyes of other major foreign nations.<sup>11</sup> Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, on the other hand, believed that, before joining the IOC, it was imperative to narrow the gap between Soviet and American athletes. Soviet athletes were required to demonstrate a level

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11 Harry Blutstein, *Cold War Olympics*, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021, p.40.

of proficiency at least equal to that of the Americans, and any substantial losses or subpar performances on a global stage were deemed unacceptable.<sup>12</sup>

The first opportunity to showcase the Soviet physical superiority on a global scale would arise at the London Olympics. The Kremlin assigned Romanov the task of establishing the Olympic committee and assessing the fitness level and ability of the Soviet athletes. Furthermore, it was essential to consider that many Olympic disciplines were either unfamiliar or seldom practised in the USSR, necessitating that the relative sports federations organise themselves from the ground up.

Following the 1917 Revolution, the physical education programme was designed to place less emphasis on competition and more on activities deemed beneficial for the general welfare of the population. The most commonly practised sports were skiing, weightlifting, wrestling and gymnastics; nevertheless, football remained the most popular sport and was the only one that managed to maintain a high degree of competitive spirit. Encouragement was given for female participation in physical education, in line with the belief that strong women would produce robust offspring.<sup>13</sup>

Romanov's initial step was to establish a research facility where science would be focused on serving the needs of sportspeople. This innovative approach to sports marked a departure from traditional methods and firmly established the USSR as a leader in integrating technology into athletic training and performance.

The vast USSR territory, and above all the large number of its citizens, held immense potential for producing athletes capable of competing at an international level. That potential turned to success through Romanov's dedicated efforts. Within a span of two years, he effectively assembled a formidable

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12 Ibid.

13 David Lloyd Hoffmann, 'Bodies of Knowledge: Physical Culture and the New Soviet Person', *National Council for Eurasian and East European Research*, 2000, p.14.

cohort of athletes across diverse disciplines, ready to perform commendably at the Olympics. However, Stalin did not equate the concept of 'performing commendably' with 'winning'. He acknowledged that, to ensure the athletes' readiness, they needed to undergo testing through international friendly competitions first.<sup>14</sup>

Football, widely regarded as the most popular sport in the world, had a momentous occasion for the Soviets in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the latter half of 1945, a series of matches were held in London in response to an invitation from the English Football Association (FA), Dynamo Moscow was the club selected to represent the USSR. The first match was played against Chelsea, with Stamford Bridge stadium filled to capacity with spectators eager to return to a sense of normality after the recent traumatic events of the war. The Chelsea fans were stunned as they watched the Dynamo players warming up before the game, as this was an unfamiliar practice at the time, especially to the English. The final score of 3-3 was met with widespread satisfaction, as the English press spoke positively of the Russian team. Local fans showed great appreciation for a club that was identified with a community that had demonstrated valiant resistance against the Nazi advance, sacrificing millions of lives.

Following this, Dynamo achieved success in their matches against Cardiff City (10-1) and against Arsenal (4-3), and secured a draw against Glasgow Rangers (2-2). The British tour received triumphant acclaim from both the English and Soviet press. Soviet newspapers seized this opportunity to highlight the role of communism and collective teamwork in Dynamo's victories.<sup>15</sup>

However, sharp controversies arose from misunderstandings on the part of the Soviets regarding the organisation of the

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14 Jenifer Parks, *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War: Red Sport, Red Tape*, Lexington Books, 2018.

15 Harry Blutstein, *Cold War Olympics*, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021, p.45.

player transfer market. Prior to their friendly matches with Arsenal and Rangers, the British teams had recently acquired new players. The concept of 'player transfer market' was not fully grasped by the Russians; the Dynamo management assumed that these acquisitions were specifically made to enhance the British sides' strength before playing against them – Dynamo themselves, however, had borrowed Vsevolod Bobrov, a striker from CSKA Moscow and one of the greatest Soviet athletes of all time.<sup>16</sup>

Renowned journalist and essayist George Orwell expressed his opinions about the Soviet team's friendly tour, reflecting on the fact that while playing for fun might be possible in an ideal world, in reality, especially at international level, 'Sport is frankly mimic warfare. But the significant thing is not the behaviour of the players but the attitude of the spectators.'<sup>17</sup> According to Orwell, this is particularly true when winning becomes a matter of national prestige. Nevertheless, in the USSR, the tour was viewed favourably. The Soviets regarded the English as masters of football, and performing well against them served as a testament to the capabilities of Soviet players, demonstrating that, after all, they had nothing to fear from their Western counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

In relation to other disciplines, Romanov decided to arrange a series of informative exchanges with nations from the Eastern Bloc. These nations, particularly Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary, had garnered significant experience in international sporting events. Being within the Kremlin's sphere of influence, they would guarantee a certain level of confidentiality concerning the real physical conditions of the Soviet athletes.

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16 Reported in 'Red Files: An Interview with Robert Edelman', PBS, 1999, [www.pbs.org/redfiles/sports/deep/sports\\_deep\\_inter\\_frm.htm](http://www.pbs.org/redfiles/sports/deep/sports_deep_inter_frm.htm)

17 George Orwell, *The Sporting Spirit*, 1948, at [www.orwellfoundation.com](http://www.orwellfoundation.com)

18 Chris Howells, 'Dynamo Moscow's 1945 Tour of Britain: Was it Really "War Minus the Shooting?"', BBC Wales Sport, 13 November 2020.



In August 1946, with a last-minute decision, Romanov felt optimistic enough to dispatch a delegation to the European Athletics Championships in Oslo, marking the USSR's inaugural participation in an important international competition. Even the IAAF (International Association of Athletics Federations, today known as World Athletics) was taken aback, not expecting the USSR's participation and witnessing its arrival in Norway without prior notice.

The results for the Soviets were quite impressive, securing six gold medals and earning second place in the medal count, just behind Sweden. For a nation with no previous experience in international competitions, it was a triumphant debut. However, the true yardstick for comparison was certainly not represented by other European nations; the real adversaries were the US. The initial sporting showdown between the two superpowers would occur three months later, in Paris, during the World Weightlifting Championships. On this occasion, each side secured five medals, although the US won two gold medals and the USSR one. The following year, the USSR once again attained second place, in the World Wrestling Championships in Prague.

Despite the satisfactory performances in athletics, weightlifting, wrestling and football, Stalin thought that the USSR was not yet ready. The Georgian leader was incredibly demanding, to the point of clearly telling Romanov that if he was not convinced of a certain athlete or team's victory, he should not send them to compete.<sup>19</sup> The sports results started to become inextricably intertwined with the political aspect, and it was unthinkable that the Soviet people's representatives would lose on the field. Any defeat would have a detrimental effect on the international prestige of the entire nation.

The concept of victory, symbolising national pride, gained prominence with the replacement of the mild-mannered Romanov with Colonel Arkady Apollonov from the Ministry of

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<sup>19</sup> Nikolai Romanov, *Fitzkultura i Sport*, 1987.

Internal Affairs. Apollonov was handpicked by Lavrenti Beria, the infamous deputy premier who led the NKVD, the secret police. Despite the change in leadership, Romanov retained his position as vice-chair, overseeing most sports, while Apollonov was only well versed in football. In 1948, after a thorough examination of the situation, Romanov recommended not to send a delegation to the Winter Olympics in St Moritz, nor to the Summer Olympics in London. Consequently, the Olympic debut was postponed until 1952.

However, the USSR did not remain inactive. In order to closely monitor the athletic conditions of other nations, Stalin dispatched a team of observers to London under the leadership of Lieutenant Gleb Baklanov, who held the position of a physical education representative in the Red Army. The selection of a military officer somewhat symbolised the Soviet leader's belief that sport should be perceived as a form of conflict. Baklanov's mission aimed not only to report on the athletic abilities of potential rivals but also to establish contact with the IOC to endorse the USSR's candidacy as a committee member.

The proposal was met with a lack of enthusiasm by the IOC; Baklanov came to realise that he was not receiving support, even from Eastern European nations that were the USSR's allies. Stalin's intrusive interference in the internal affairs of those countries had evoked strong repulsion towards his policies. Notably, Czechoslovakia had recently been subjected to the imposition of the so-called '9 May Constitution', which mandated the supremacy of the Communist Party and the ban on other political forces, and did everything it could to prevent the Soviets from joining the IOC. Surprisingly, perhaps, joining the Olympic family was not as straightforward as the Kremlin had anticipated.<sup>20</sup>

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20 'Secret Archive of Axel Vartanyan', *Sports-Express*, 3 September 2002. [sport-express.ru/newspaper/2002-09-02/9\\_1/](http://sport-express.ru/newspaper/2002-09-02/9_1/)

## From Athens to London

The forewarning of a litigious political confrontation that would last for more than 40 years, and that would challenge the foundational principles of sports, materialised in Greece during the preparations for the London Olympics. The ritual of kindling the torch in the Temple of Hera, located on Mount Olympus, holds considerable significance in the collective consciousness of both avid sports enthusiasts and casual spectators alike. This ritual involves a complex and ancestral liturgical process where the sun's rays are focused through a parabolic mirror to ignite the torch, held steadily and gracefully by a woman adorned in the attire of a sixth-century BC priestess (Picture 1.1).

Despite the ceremony symbolising the continuity between the ancient and modern games, the concept of a torch relay from Greece to the host country was only introduced in 1936. In addition to the torch, the priestess holds an olive branch, a symbol of peace, reminding us of the Olympic truce (*ekecheirias*) that temporarily ceased hostilities during the ancient Olympic Games. This notion of peace is further underscored by the ritual of disarming a soldier. However, in 1948, the aspirations for brotherhood and peaceful coexistence clashed with the harsh reality of a politically polarised society, intensified by opposing ideologies. The conflict found poignant expression in Greece through a brutal civil war that pitted the right-wing government, supported by the US and the UK, against representatives of the Communist Party, backed by Yugoslavia and the USSR. On 17 July 1948, just hours after the Olympic torch journey to London had commenced, the Greek government suspected a potential communist guerrilla assault aimed at stealing the symbol of the Games. Following the killing of several police officers in a recent attack, a significant number of soldiers were deployed along the torchbearer's route for security reasons, while some British Spitfire fighters monitored the area from above.

The unimaginable happened: the symbol of peace and cooperation among nations was humiliated on the very soil from which it had originated, now necessitating protection

by a significant deployment of armed forces. Greece, and the Olympic torch relay, became the focus of one of the first clashes between the Western and the Eastern blocs. The original 750km route through Greek territory had to be curtailed to just 35km by the organisers, in an attempt to mitigate potential interferences or attacks by forces supported by opposing blocs. The torch was promptly embarked onto the British cruiser HMS *Whitesand Bay*, which conveyed it to Bari, in Southern Italy. The Olympic flame eventually reached London on 29 July.

The torchbearers were not the only people to reach London with difficulty. As mentioned earlier, during the Olympic Games, the Soviet delegates in London endeavoured to assess the possibility of their country's inclusion in the IOC. However, they faced opposition from the Olympic committees of Eastern Bloc nations. In this context, a not entirely unexpected incident unfolded: the defection of Marie Provazníková, a prominent figure in the Czechoslovakian Gymnastics Federation and an anti-regime activist.

Provazníková became disillusioned with the process of 'Stalinisation' occurring in her country, and there were clear indications of her potential escape, prompting the Czech government to make efforts to prevent her from obtaining a visa from the British embassy in Prague, thwarting her attempt to attend the London Games. The British embassy, aware of Provazníková's situation, took the extraordinary step of opening its offices on a Sunday to facilitate her departure for London; helping out a dissident sportswoman would certainly cause great embarrassment to the Czech authorities and, by extension, to the USSR.

The Czech government did not give up, attempting to prevent Provazníková from boarding the last available flight. The British embassy intervened again, securing her a place on a last-minute diplomatic flight. Upon her arrival in London, Provazníková was closely monitored by Miroslav Klinger, a former athlete, and spy.<sup>21</sup> After an event in which

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21 Harry Blutstein, *Cold War Olympics*, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021, p.34.

Czechoslovakia secured the gold medal, Provazníková felt the grip tighten, but she cleverly outwitted her controller and sought refuge at the American embassy. Other athletes (Jiří Kovář, Jiří Linhart, Josef Schejbal and Oszkár Czuvik) joined her and fled their respective Eastern European countries.

The Western press swiftly labelled these defections as a choice for freedom against the oppressive climate imposed by communist regimes, exploiting the London Games to intensify the East-West opposition. Western newspapers praised the dissidents and lauded their courage in leaving behind family and friends, to refuse to give in to an illiberal system.<sup>22</sup> Despite the disappointment caused by the athletes' defection, at the London Olympics Czechoslovakia had the privilege of showcasing one of the world's most exceptional athletes: Emil Zatopek (Picture 1.2), a middle-distance runner who emerged victorious in the 10,000m and secured a second-place finish in the 5,000m. As we will observe later, Zatopek became one of the most celebrated diplomats in a tracksuit for his country, but only until his services were deemed beneficial to the Prague regime.

The defection incident irritated the Kremlin. However, at that juncture, the primary focal point was the inclusion of the USSR into the IOC, an accomplishment that proved more challenging than expected. While testing his diplomatic prowess with the IOC, Gleb Baklanov concurrently compiled a technical report on the performances of the most important athletes: his conclusion was that the Soviet athletes would possess the capability to secure numerous gold medals in individual disciplines, although they would fall short of the US in several team events. Nevertheless, Baklanov spotted two vulnerabilities of the US: firstly, there were a few disciplines in which they lacked strong traditions, such as football, water polo, wrestling, fencing and long-distance track and field, making them susceptible to defeat; secondly, they notably lagged behind

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22 Daniel Clifton, 'Woman Athlete Asks Asylum Here: Leader of Czech Contingent at Olympics Refuses to Return to Her Homeland', *New York Times*, 19 August 1948.

in almost all female events. These two pivotal factors would play a crucial role in directing the training of Soviet athletes leading up to the 1952 Olympics, four years later.

Before proceeding, the USSR would have to contend with significant resistance from members of the IOC regarding the admission procedure. In this regard, in December 1950, Avery Brundage, vice-president of the IOC, sent a letter to President Sigfrid Edström, highlighting his concerns about the potential admission of the USSR. In particular, he pointed out the possible interference of the Kremlin in the sports affairs of its country, an element that went against the Olympic principle, which, in theory, mandates the independence of sports from politics. All countries of communist affiliation would likely have posed the same problem.

Additionally, Brundage was a fervent advocate of the amateur aspect of the sports movement, and he suspected that the USSR surreptitiously paid its athletes, as they were members of military forces or other government entities. On the other hand, a rejection of the admission request would have sparked a series of accusations and controversies that risked tarnishing the IOC with intransigence and unsportsmanlike behaviour. Furthermore, in the event of rejection, there could have been strong grounds for the establishment of an alternative international sports organisation in opposition to the IOC itself; the USSR was so large and powerful that it could have incorporated other communist states, possibly China as well, and created a sort of parallel 'Olympic Committee' worldwide, a scenario that had to be averted. The mixture of sports and politics worried Brundage, but his choice, eventually, was to admit the USSR; his problem was trying to persuade the other members of the committee.<sup>23</sup>

To heighten the tensions even further, Soviet authorities accused the IOC of harbouring former Nazis among its

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23 Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

members and of being managed mainly by individuals closely connected to the 'Western' world. Furthermore, they alleged that the organisation had noble or high-ranking origins, fostering an 'exclusive club' aura that was inconsistent with the spirit of brotherhood and cooperation that the IOC aimed to promote. Consequently, a lack of trust persisted between the two sides. However, in the end, diplomacy prevailed: both parties recognised that reaching an agreement was in the best interests of all. Following an extensive three-year debate, the IOC officially ratified the admission of the USSR as a member on 7 May 1951.

A few months later, in February 1952, the Winter Olympics were scheduled to take place in Oslo. However, the Soviet representative, Romanov, advised Stalin that the timing was not yet right to send a team capable of competing at the highest level. Consequently, it was decided not to participate, in order to concentrate more on preparing for the Summer Olympics. The chosen athletes underwent training in specially designated playing fields with sufficient food, technical support and modern gear. Furthermore, a military contingent was assigned the responsibility of safeguarding and maintaining control over the athletes.

On 19 July 1952, the USSR finally made its debut, at the Helsingin Stadium in Helsinki, Finland, in the most prominent sporting event in the world. The delegation sported uniforms of 'communist' red, featuring the distinctive letters 'СССР' on the chest, thus marking the official entry of the Cold War into the domain of sports and vice versa.<sup>24</sup>

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The period spanning from 1945 to 1950 witnessed the spark of a new form of connection between sports and politics, as this happened amid the backdrop of the emerging Cold War

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24 СССР, in the Cyrillic alphabet, was the abbreviation derived from Союз Советских Социалистических Республик (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics).

tensions between the US and USSR. As both superpowers sought to assert their ideological dominance on the global stage, sports became a battleground for showcasing their respective strengths and values.

Sports and politics have always been intertwined but this time their relationship expanded to a global scale and became infused with (mainly) two distinct political ideologies. Throughout the Cold War era, rivalry manifested itself in various sporting events, with each side leveraging sports as a tool for propaganda and ideological dissemination. The US and USSR did not face each other at the St Moritz and London Olympics, but their battle was fought on diplomatic ground, as the Soviets tried to become accepted as a member of the IOC.

The USSR's entry into the international sports arena marked a significant turning point, as it introduced a new dimension to the geopolitical dynamics of sports. The Soviet leadership viewed sports as a means of demonstrating the superiority of the socialist system and bolstering national pride, while the US countered with its own efforts to showcase the virtues of democracy and capitalism through sports.

From this decade on, the relationship between sports and politics during the Cold War era will be characterised by tensions, controversies and power struggles. International events, such as the Olympics, will become a favourite battleground for political manoeuvring, with boycotts, protests and diplomatic interventions shaping the course of sporting events, and vice versa. As athletes competed for victory on the field, they simultaneously became unwitting participants in a larger ideological struggle between rival superpowers, really becoming diplomats in tracksuits.