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SBORNAYA

THE MIXED FORTUNES OF THE USSR FOOTBALL TEAM

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CHAPTER 1
THE BLUEPRINT

'Football has become a school of character, discipline, and collective effort. From the factory fields and kolkhoz stadiums, it has grown into a powerful force uniting millions of Soviet citizens.'
—A Communist Party functionary addressing Kolkhozniks

LIKE EVERY good storyline around the formative years of a nation's football history, their road eventually points back in the direction of Britain. The Russia of the pre-revolutionary Bolsheviks would prove to be no different. From railway workers to merchants, from sailors to students, their influence on the growth of the sport was immeasurable. In Russia's case, it was borne out of homesick British residents who founded their opponents from the trading ships on the docks of St Petersburg. Those arriving ships would provide enough men to form a capable opposition for those pioneering athletes at that time, St Petersburg Football Club. Given that the city was often labelled as the 'window to the west', it would come as no surprise that it would be the pioneering centre for the game in the country.

Historian Steven Main, in an article for the Lunds Universitet website titled 'History of Russian Football', wrote, 'Given the lifestyle of the British residents in Russia at the time, with its increasing emphasis on sport as part of their

more leisurely pursuits, it was not to be too long before the British began organising sports' societies for their own benefit. There was a large degree of exclusiveness in the formation of these sports' societies; overall, they were the preserve of the local foreign community. However, within a few years, the Russians began forming their own sporting organisations. Hence although 1879 is the date given for the creation of the first football club in the Russian Empire, namely the St Petersburg Football Club, this was a club virtually reserved initially for the local British residents of the city. Russians were not encouraged to join. Thus, whilst the British certainly introduced the organised game into the Russian Empire, they certainly did not introduce the spirit of egalitarianism that went with it. It was to be some time before the British "allowed" the Russians to join their sports' societies and inter alia, allowing them to, literally, join the team.'

As was the case in many other countries, the pioneering British brought the game to the shores but often struggled when it came to opening the sport up to the locals. This created an initial fixture list consisting of local British against crews from cargo ships. These insular actions did little to grow the game. Only by the 1890s did the sport gain popularity, through a combination of reasons. An increasingly influential and growing British diaspora in Moscow, Crimea and St Petersburg was allied to a rising interest from local Russians in those cities. By the middle of this decade, some Muscovite teams had regular attendances of around 12,000.

The prominent Lancastrian mill-owning Charnock family formed a team out of their own workforce from the Orozov textile mills based in the Orekhovo suburb of Moscow. The Morozovtsi became arguably the strongest

side up until the beginning of the First World War. They won four titles in a row from 1910 to 1914 in the Moscow League. Highlighting both the numbers of British in the city and the rising desire for Russians to play, the squad consisted of six British and five Russians in its 1912 championship.

Main notes that the team contained a few illustrious players in their ranks, 'The National Library of Scotland has, in its possession, a championship-winning medal from the 1912 Moscow League. It was won by Sir Robert Bruce-Lockhart, then working in the British Embassy. In 1911 was one Capt Wavell, who would become better known as Field Marshall Earl Wavell after the First World War.'

From a Russian perspective, it was imperative that the most significant clubs were created by the Russians themselves. Despite early misgivings about the sport, they were beginning to get to grips with all its intricacies. The first distinctly all-Russian side was called Krushok Liubiteley Sporta. This was literally 'The Circle of Sports Lovers' and they based themselves in St Petersburg. By 1901 the city had its own burgeoning championship, the first winners being the English Nevsky Club. One prominent team in the city was Nevka, an entirely Scottish side composed of workers from the Sampson Weaving factory. Other sides of note were Victoria, an Anglo-German team, and Peterburgsky Kruzhok Sportsmanov, a Russian-organised club.

According to journalist Marianna Hunt in the *Moscow Times* in July 2018, 'The man who transformed football from an imported oddity into a national sport was a Scotsman, named Arthur MacPherson. He would become the founder and president of the all-Russian Football Union from 1912–13.'

Arthur MacPherson was both a timber merchant and a stockbroker, born in St Petersburg in 1870. He was a noted sportsman in his younger days, predominately into the rowing scene in the city. He found time to chair the St Petersburg League, firstly in 1903, before moving upwards to become the overseer for the sport on a national basis before the First World War. He was honoured for his services to sport by Tsar Nicholas II with the Order of St Stanislaus.

Beyond the Revolution in 1917, the tide turned on the clubs belonging to what was perceived as the 'bourgeois sport'. Clubs were seized and transformed into public services and sporting constitutions of the state. MacPherson was arrested later in that year. In 1919, his unrecognisable body was found under a pile of others in a Moscow prison. Once the tsunami of anti-bourgeois sentiments died down, the nation settled itself into a period of relative calm. The authorities began to view the game as a means of social order and good. Those ruling Bolsheviks realised the value of a contented workforce. Given the increasing love of the sport by the masses, it would have been political suicide to ban it completely. Just like other aspects of society, they attempted to control it instead. As no other ruling class was left within Soviet society, the authorities could use the game entirely for their own oppressive ends.

By the end of the 1920s, the USSR had become a fully functioning political entity and nation. From the game's perspective, its leading clubs came out of Moscow. All these clubs belonged in some form or other to the state mechanism. Lokomotiv belonged to the Rail Ministry while the state car manufacturer, ZIL, owned Torpedo. The army had their own team who were initially known as CDKA. Even the dreaded state police, the NKVD, had

a football side to call their own. This came in the form of Dynamo. Soon enough, this name was synonymous right across the nation. Various cities and locations had their own version of a Dynamo sports organisation. As early scepticism subsided from the ruling party, it would take some time before they would fully embrace the sport as a competitive endeavour. The authorities had initially viewed sporting activities as a way to build physical fitness and comradeship. As the nation moved into the 1930s, the game often ran at opposites to what was being pronounced from the political sphere.

Author Larry E. Holmes wrote in his book, *Win or Else*, 'As early as the mid-1930s, clubs enticed players with fictional jobs, bonuses and other benefits to include apartments or rooms. Players transferred from one team to the next in search of the best deal they could find.'

By 1935, the leading sports paper *Krasnyi Sport* openly discussed the sale and transfer of players. While basically being a publication of the Committee on Physical Culture and Sports, it freely debated the financial rewards for players and clubs alike. By the end of the year, the Konsomol's Central Committee condemned the practice. It continued nonetheless. Soviet football had become a fully fledged profession in all but name.

According to David Goldblatt in his excellent book *The Ball is Round*, the international scene was beginning to open for the USSR in those formative years, 'In keeping with the autarchic socialism-in-one-country vision of the revolution, the Soviet Union had, but for a pair of games with the Turkish republic in the early 1920s, played no international matches at all. However, on New Year's Day 1936, a combined Spartak and Dynamo select team had

been allowed to play an exhibition game in Paris against Racing Club. The Soviets were beaten … and an argument for the formation of a real national league to raise standards.'

A touring side of top-quality Basque players arrived in 1937. Their aim was to raise money for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. They hoped to achieve this by playing numerous matches across the USSR. These fixtures would turn out to be a pivotal point in how the authorities viewed their own teams. They also helped to change their perception on competitive sport in general. Having been outclassed by their highly skilled visitors, the authorities and media alike both realised the need for a more professional approach. The only defeat for the Basque collective came when a fortified Spartak side proved too strong at the end of their hectic schedule. It would be a moment of epiphany. A major overhaul in mentality was required. Better teams with better coaching also required a change to their footballing philosophy. Bearing witness to the Basques' short, intricate passing game, lessons needed to be learned to improve standards. The blueprint for future successes was set in stone.

When Dynamo Moscow went on a tour of Britain after the end of the Second World War, there would be more footballing epiphanies uncovered. The expedition was seen as a 'spirit of friendship' between two allies. The hosts had expected a slow, ponderous opponent. They witnessed a demonstration in rapid learning. Dynamo played a sharp passing game with fluid movement between positions. Their lack of shirt numbers only added to the interchangeable sense of confusion. Even the fact that their players did warm-up drills before the kick-offs gave the British public and football fraternity more to think

about. Back home, newspaper *Pravda* boasted that the USSR's 'pupils had become like teachers' towards their British counterparts.

By now, the USSR Sporting Committee was seeking 'world dominance in all major sports', setting their initial sights on Olympic glory. The 1952 games in Helsinki would be a pioneering foray for a USSR football team. High expectations were quickly vanquished and met with failure. Losing to Yugoslavia had huge political implications, given a recent spat between the two leaders. At the following Games in Melbourne, the USSR won gold by defeating Yugoslavia in the final. *Sovetsky Sport* remarked, 'The players of the two football powerhouses embraced at the end.'

It was this new era of expectation and scrutiny that saw a rise in player stardom. Already given a status above the average worker, by now the star player was living a life of comfort. Against this level of fame came jealousy and suspicion. Nikolai Starostin was a founding member of Spartak Moscow and one of the elevated names of his day. With countless run-ins on the pitch with bitter rivals Dynamo came off-the-field enmity between Starostin and Lavrentiy Beria, the latter being both a highly influential figure at Dynamo and the leader of the NKVD, the Ministry for Internal Affairs. The feud ended when dubious charges were put against Starostin and his brothers. Ten years in the gulag work camps for Nikolai, while his brothers only received their freedom once both Stalin and Beria had passed away. When a player rose above the popularity of the system, it often raised questions. In Eduard Streltsov's case, he would fall foul of rape charges being brought against him. Streltsov was an incredibly gifted player, idolised by his fans at Torpedo

Moscow, and loved across the nation. He was charged in 1958 to 12 years in prison. Many felt the charges had been the handiwork of a member of the Central Committee's Politburo. His bohemian lifestyle made him an easy target for potential enemies. He would be one of the many 'what ifs' in football. He was certainly one of the greatest players never to grace the arena of the World Cup finals.

Many players did excel through their brilliance to reach global prominence, none more than Lev Yashin. Perhaps the greatest ever to play as goalkeeper, an accolade acknowledged by *France Football* in 1963 with the Ballon d"Or. His prowess between the sticks was matched by the trademark all-black uniform. His legendary status earned him the nickname of 'Black Spider'. Alongside Yashin, Sbornaya had a captain of equal pedigree in Igor Netto, a star player for Spartak Moscow. His incredible vision was matched with great technique and a masterful array of passing abilities. All these gifts combined with a remarkable level of fair play and honesty. Joel Amorim wrote in an article for the Russian Football News website, 'Igor Netto was a player ahead of his time. He was too talented to play in defence. He turned out to be one of the most beautiful playmakers of all time. You cannot find many players these days with his passing skills and incredible vision.'

Netto was primarily a midfielder who could seamlessly drop into defensive positions or supporting roles for forward players; his elegant ball control caught the eye of match reporters and opposition coaches alike. His talent would not have been out of place in the modern-day Spanish sides due to his metronomic capacity for keeping possession. *Sovetsky Sport* described him as the 'brains' of the team. He was the true embodiment of a captain with his discipline, modesty

and the social capabilities of galvanising all sections of the USSR communities into one homogenous unit.

Sbornaya had contrasting fortunes in the two major international tournaments. The 1958 World Cup saw them progress from a tough group which contained both Brazil and England. Having beaten England in a play-off to qualify for the quarter-finals, USSR would eventually bow out to hosts Sweden after the turnaround time was too short for recovery. They equalled this feat in 1962 with another quarter-final exit to the host nation, this time losing out to Chile. Their endeavours in England would prove to be Sbornaya's best World Cup finals finish. A semi-final defeat to West Germany at Goodison Park would be as close as they would get to a place in the final. At Mexico 1970, with almost obligatory custom, they would once again exit the competition at the quarter-final stage, to Uruguay. A gap of 12 years would see the USSR go out to Poland in a game that was essentially a quarter-final in all but name in 1982. They followed this up with a second-round defeat in a barnstorming match against Belgium before meekly exiting the 1990 World Cup in Italy via the group stage.

The European Championship, however, would place the Soviet Union in the top table category of elite international sides. Winning the inaugural tournament in 1960 would be the absolute peak of their successes when they once again defeated Yugoslavia to claim their first tournament triumph. Alongside this victory were numerous other opportunities to add to their tally as winners. Their considerable degree of consistency in the competition can be seen when they returned to the final once again in 1964. Unfortunately, this time they would fall short by losing out in a double showdown of both football and political stakes.

Defeat to General Franco in any capacity would be hard to stomach for the authorities but when his beaming face handed over the trophy to the victorious Spanish side, this proved too much. In 1972, Sbornaya would once again come close before falling at the final fence, beaten by the impressive West German side of Beckenbauer, Breitner and Müller. One final hurrah occurred in 1988. A superbly organised USSR team throughout the tournament had their plans scuppered when influential defender Oleh Kusnetzov was suspended for the final. His absence upset the careful planning to contain the lively Dutch attack and, unsurprisingly, they fell short to a bullet header for Ruud Gullit and a wonder goal from Marco van Basten.

The Soviet Union's philosophy for the game was turned upside down when a visiting side showed them a style of play and the need to create more cohesive, professionally run setups. This blueprint would turn a nation often reticent to change – at least change that mirrored western ideals – into one that pressed forward with vigour. Once the ruling powers saw that the sport could be used to showcase their superior political agenda, they never looked back. However, the overarching desire to succeed came at a price. Failure was often met with harsh repercussions and the powers that be were never far away when it came to meddling in the business of club and country alike. Very few football nations had this level of subjugation pressed upon them. Sometimes the glory came despite the heavy hands. In other times, it came because of geopolitical and nationalistic fervour.

Those moments of glory would be fleeting and rare but they were always beautiful.