

“The Cold War in Spiked Shoes”: Interpreting the 1952 Helsinki Olympics

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Abstract

This paper investigates one of the more underappreciated aspects of the early Cold War period: the transnational politicization of sport. In this regard, the 1952 Helsinki Olympics are an important contributing factor in this politicization, given the presence for the first time of the Soviet Union in the Olympic Games. Popular and critical interpretations of the Soviets' entry at Helsinki, their performance, and ultimately, their athletic success demonstrate the far-reaching implications of the Cold War. Mutual hypocrisies pertaining to (not) politicizing the games reflected different perceptions of gender roles in American and Soviet societies. In the US, the minimization of sportswomen and aggrandizement of male athletes solidified traditional American norms of masculinity and femininity. The USSR, by contrast, underscored women's utility in the formation of socialist society. This is not to say that such utility necessarily emancipated women; at least in terms of sport, however, this emphasis demonstrated to them a clear superiority relative to their American counterparts. In this sense, the XV Olympiad adds more context to the early Cold War period and raises questions about the conventional 'us-versus-them' and 'good-versus-evil' framework of interpretation.

“Soviet teams are not ‘organized:’ they are assembled as parts of a great state machine. Soviet teams do not ‘play’ their sports; they work at them.”¹

—Yuri Rastvorov, defected Soviet intelligence agent, 1955

Despite historians' growing interest in Olympic history, their focus has largely been on individual athletes, specific sporting events, and other non-

¹ Yuri A. Rastvorov, “Red Amateurs Are Pros,” *Life Magazine*, June 6, 1955, 93.

political matters.² This should not come as a surprise, since the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been adamant that “the Olympic games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries.”³ Although scholars have disproved the veracity of such sentiments, the inter-relationship between sports, politics, and gender remains underexplored. In particular, while much has been made of the political undercurrents prevalent at Berlin 1936, Moscow 1980, and Los Angeles 1984,⁴ no one has yet tied the politicization of sport to the question of contrasting national or ideological views of gender norms. The events that transpired prior to, and during, Helsinki 1952—which marked the first summer Olympic appearance of the Soviet Union—not only reinforces the general interrelatedness between politics and sports, but also sheds crucial insight on this relationship and its gendered aspects in the context of the early Cold War. Before joining the IOC in 1951, the USSR harnessed sport both as a mechanism for asserting state power and as a ‘medicine’ for Tsarist-era social ills. As such, the Soviets’ presence and performance at Helsinki is best understood through popular and critical interpretations of the important role of sports in Soviet society. This paper will demonstrate how mutual duplicities with respect to the Western and Soviet media’s politicization of the 1952 games also underscored different gender norms within American and Soviet societies.

For both contemporaries and scholars alike, there is a general consensus regarding the reasons for the USSR’s *rapprochement* with the Olympic Movement. In an article published by *Life Magazine* in 1955, defected Soviet intelligence agent Yuri A. Rastvorov articulated his belief that “Soviet participation in such international competition ha[d] little to do with ‘coexistence,’ [and] certainly even less to do with recreation or sportsmanship

² ‘Non-political’ includes research on such subjects as technological influences, globalization, race, culture, and religion.

³ International Olympic Committee, “Olympic Charter,” accessed December 6, 2012, http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf.

⁴ This paper will refer to any Olympic games in such a fashion so as to avoid redundancy. There is, after all, only so many synonyms for the word ‘Olympics’ or ‘games.’

for its own sake.”⁵ For historian James Riordan, Rastvorov’s suspicions were correct. After World War Two, he noted, “domestic sport was now thought strong enough to take on the world [and] victories over the bourgeois states would demonstrate the vitality of the Soviet system.”⁶ Indeed, whereas Riordan affirmed that the Soviets therefore only entered into competitive sports in which there was a “reasonable expectation of victory,”⁷ Rastvorov had claimed their entrance would only occur if victory was “practically certain.”⁸ Regardless, any ideological qualms regarding the Soviet ‘collective’ entering into international competition—once considered “an evil deriving from bourgeois society”—were suppressed.⁹ Furthermore, according to Andrew Strenk, sport thereafter became “a tool of Soviet foreign policy designed to win friends and impress the Third World and neighbouring countries.”¹⁰ For these reasons, in 1948, the Communist Party Central Committee (CPCC) released a decree that outlined its new objective to “help Soviet sportsmen win world supremacy in the major sports in the immediate future.”¹¹ As Henry David Thoreau noted in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1952, this new emphasis on attaining world supremacy through sport created “an atmosphere which [made] athletic overemphasis in [the US] seem tame.”¹²

This lofty objective was not, however, a departure from previous Soviet policy so much as an acceleration of it. In Imperial Russia, the health care ‘system’ was described by one historian as being “woefully inadequate.”¹³

⁵ Rastvorov, “Red Amateurs Are Pros,” 93.

⁶ James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russian and the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 363.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁸ Rastvorov, “Red Amateurs Are Pros,” 94.

⁹ James Riordan, *Sport, Politics and Communism* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 31.

¹⁰ Andrew Strenk, “What Price Victory? The World of International Sports and Politics,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 445 (September 1979): 130.

¹¹ Quoted in James Riordan, “The USSR,” in *Sport Under Communism*, ed. James Riordan (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1978), 30.

¹² H. D. Thoreau, “How Good Are Russian Athletes?” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 19, 1952, 27.

¹³ William G. Rosenberg, “Introduction to ‘Socialism and Social Welfare,’” in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 127.

In 1913, Russia's mortality rate per 1,000 adults was 30.2, whereas for Britain it was 13.5, for Japan 21.6, and for the US 15.¹⁴ Russia's average life expectancy in 1913 was 32, which also compared poorly to Britain's 48, Japan's 44.2, and the US' 50.¹⁵ As well, in 1913, only 25% of all hospital beds and 22% of doctors were present in rural areas—where 82% of the population resided.¹⁶ After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks recognized the important function that sports could play to curb these alarming social problems, in addition to serving ideological goals. The resolution passed in October 1920 by the Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League was, as Riordan notes, “the first clear-cut official statement on the aims of Soviet sport.”¹⁷ This resolution stipulated that physical education was an “essential element” in the “communist upbringing” of youth and helped prepare them “for work [and] military defence of Soviet power.”¹⁸ Later, on July 13, 1925, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party issued a landmark decree that emphasized the importance of *fizkultura* (physical culture) as “an aspect of the cultural, economic, and military training of youth [and] as one of the methods of educating the masses.”¹⁹ For the rest of the 1920s and into the early 1930s, physical culture meant the harmonization of health and hygiene with sport. As Riordan notes, “[it] stood for ‘clean-living,’ progress, good health, and rationality.”²⁰ Rather uniquely, as Allen Guttmann has underscored, the Soviets “opted for the development of a sports system based on cooperative physical culture rather than the competitiveness which characterized ‘bourgeois’ sports.”²¹ For Soviet scholars, the 1920s are generally considered to be a transitional phase for the USSR. In

¹⁴ Howard M. Leichter, *A Comparative Approach to Policy Analysis: Health Care in Four Nations* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 203.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ James Riordan, “Marx, Lenin and Physical Culture,” *Journal of Sport History* 3 (Summer 1976): 159.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John N. Washburn, “Sport as a Soviet Tool,” *Foreign Affairs* 34 (April 1956): 490.

²⁰ Riordan, “The USSR,” 22.

²¹ Allen Guttmann, “The Cold War and the Olympics,” *International Journal* 43 (Autumn 1988): 554.

this regard, the *fizkultura* emphasis on health and hygiene established the necessary foundations for what Jenifer Parks refers to as “a more utilitarian attitude towards sports and physical culture” during the 1930s.²²

For Riordan, “if the [1920s] may be described as having been dominated by physical culture, the 1930s were to be a decade of competitive sport.”²³ Or, put differently, the aforementioned principles of *fizkultura* were crucial for the institutionalization of sport in the USSR. In contrast to the West, sports were not merely a leisure activity. As Soviet Olympic Committee member Constantin Andrianov later remarked, “The Soviet people understood [that] prior to participation in the Games the whole nation—and youth in particular—must engage in sport with the aim of physical perfection [to] strengthen the nation’s health.”²⁴ Organizationally, this objective translated into a mass proliferation of sports societies, primary sports collectives, sports schools, GTO (Ready for Labour and Defence) programmes, and uniform ranking systems under the auspices of the All-Union Physical Culture Council.²⁵ As Guttman notes, the “best Soviet athletes were state-supported [and] stellar performances, such as unofficial world records [in Eastern Bloc competitions] were richly rewarded with automobiles, apartments, and cash bonuses.”²⁶ To be sure, the ideologically incompatible notion of a communist government giving material rewards was treated in much the same fashion as the earlier qualms about competition—that is, it was largely ignored. Not surprisingly, the centralization of sports through the Soviet state was critiqued heavily by the Western media. A salient example of such denunciation would appear in *Life* shortly after the start of Helsinki 1952:

²² Jenifer Parks, “Red Sport, Red Tape: The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War, 1952-1980,” (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009), 23.

²³ Riordan, “The USSR,” 23.

²⁴ Constantin Andrianov, “25 Years in the Service of the Olympic Movement,” *Olympic Review* 111 (January 1977): 546.

²⁵ Riordan, op. cit., 25.

²⁶ Guttman, “The Cold War and the Olympics,” 556.

Compared to it, the German movement toward regimented athletics under Hitler, which blossomed in the 1936 Olympics, was as gentle raindrops to the roar of the Volga. Yet both programs had the same thing in common. They were short cuts to national health and physical fitness, political inspired, and designed ultimately for propaganda purposes.²⁷

It is worth emphasizing that the state centralization of athletics served different purposes in different eras under the Stalinist regime. During the 1930s, the utility of sport became a crucial component of the regime's broad drive to 'build socialism.' In addition, external fears of the growing influence of European fascism and internal fears of 'the enemy within' made sport a vital part of national defense. With the onset of the Second World War, athletes became "proficient" in the "muscular arts" that were meant more for regimental purposes than strict sporting achievement.²⁸ This fact was not unknown to Western media outlets, but for the sake of fighting fascist aggression as part of the wartime Grand Coalition, how the Soviet cultivated its armed forces was largely glossed over, not heavily criticized.

The 'Great Patriotic War' was a source of pride for Soviet citizens, and with their state's increasing influence in European affairs, the Olympic Movement became more important. As Cesar Torres and Mark Dyerson have argued, Olympic participation gave the Soviets "a significant symbolic forum for measuring their enemies."²⁹ However, for the USSR to demonstrate the 'vitality' of its system, "it would have to...comply with the [IOC's] regulations."³⁰ This meant, in particular, that it had to 'amateurize' its athletes since the IOC had barred professionals from participating in the Olympics. In

²⁷ "Muscles Pop Through Iron Curtain," *Life Magazine*, July 28, 1952, 16.

²⁸ Joseph A. Marchiony, "The Rise of Soviet Athletics," *Comparative Education Review* 7 (June 1963): 20.

²⁹ Cesar R. Torres and Mark Dyerson, "The Cold War Games," in *Global Olympics: Historical and Sociological Studies of the Modern Games*, eds. Kevin Young and Kevin B. Wamsley (Amsterdam: Elsevier B.V., 2005), 59.

³⁰ James Riordan, "The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 2 (1993): 26.

July 1947, the USSR Council of Ministers adopted and released a resolution ‘On Remuneration of the Sporting Attainments of Soviet Sportsmen’ that replaced the practice of prescribing material rewards for athletic excellence with gold, silver, and bronze badges.³¹ As well, the decree ‘officially’ forbade professional athletes from participating in Soviet sports, though these athletes, according to Vesa Tikander, “were given day jobs at the various supporting organizations and went on training full-time.”³² Hence, in the postwar period, the Soviets pursued a sports policy of “state amateurism” in order to prepare for Olympic competition.³³ These developments caused some commentators to speculate on potential Soviet involvement in the 1948 London games.³⁴ However, the All-Union Soviet Sports Committee did not form a representative Olympic Committee—which was required for IOC membership—partly due to the USSR’s poor performance at the February 1948 figure skating championships in Helsinki.³⁵ The Soviets felt that they were not sufficiently prepared, so instead looked forward to the next Olympiad. After its creation, the Soviet Olympic Committee—which was supposed to be apolitical as per IOC regulations—was nevertheless granted admission into the Movement following a May 7, 1951 unanimous vote in Vienna.³⁶

Upon the Soviets’ entry into the Olympic fold, American press outlets were unsure what to expect from the newcomers. One American IOC member proclaimed that the Soviets were “girding for a supreme effort” at Helsinki 1952 and were to be considered the “dark horse.”³⁷ The *Atlanta Daily*

³¹ Riordan, “The USSR,” 29.

³² Vesa Tikander, “Helsinki 1952,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Modern Olympic Movement*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 140.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See, for instance, “Soviet Entry is Likely: Hope Grows That Russia Will Join Olympics in 1948,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1946, 38 and “Russians Aim For Admission To 1948 Olympics in London,” *The Lewiston Daily Sun*, June 18, 1947, 9.

³⁵ Tikander, “Helsinki 1952,” 140.

³⁶ Though three members did abstain. See Ibid., 141.

³⁷ “Russia Is Building Secretly For Olympics, Official Says,” *The Washington Post*, May 22, 1952, 21.

World declared that the USSR “may dominate”³⁸ the games, while the *Spokesman-Review* predicted “an extremely strong showing”³⁹ overall. Others, however, doubted the prospect of Soviet success. An editorial in the *Washington Post* noted that the “Kremlin [was] destined [for] some disappointment.”⁴⁰ When a Russian official asked if the US team was strong, one reporter deadpanned, “you bet.”⁴¹ Furthermore, the Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Arthur Daley displayed even greater confidence, stating that the US would “whack the pants off the Russians.”⁴²

Despite these conflicting views, members of the press generally agreed that Helsinki 1952 it would be a significant event, even if there was some disagreement about the USSR’s ‘true’ intentions. For one columnist, the Soviets’ presence practically ensured that Americans’ interest would be at its “highest pitch ever.”⁴³ Another speculated that Helsinki 1952 represented the “first acid test” for Soviet athletes against international competition.⁴⁴ Rather tellingly, one newspaper reporter speculated, “Does this mean that the Kremlin has decided there is little likelihood of world war next year?”⁴⁵ Others, however, held a more cynical interpretation of the USSR’s participation. In *Reader’s Digest*, Joseph Wechsburg discussed the ways in which the Olympics represented the latest forum of Cold War confrontation. The Soviets were not in the games “for the sense of achievement it gives them,” he argued, “but because they are prepared ‘to defend the Motherland from any enemy who plans to destroy the peaceful and creative life of the Soviet people.’”⁴⁶ Another writer stated that their appearance “will not only

³⁸ “Russia May Dominate ’52 Olympics,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 23, 1952, 6.

³⁹ “Soviets Enter 1952 Olympics,” *Spokesman-Review*, April 25, 1951, 19.

⁴⁰ “The Olympics,” *The Washington Post*, July 9, 1952, 10.

⁴¹ “They Throw Camp Open At Helsinki,” *The Washington Post*, July 10, 1952, 17.

⁴² Arthur Daley, “Sports of the Times: How Stupid Can They Get?” *New York Times*, January 30, 1952, 29.

⁴³ Ted Smits, “Reds Eye Olympics,” *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, April 25, 1951, 14.

⁴⁴ “Rivalry Between U.S. and Russia to Enliven Helsinki Competition,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1952, S5.

⁴⁵ “Soviet Olympic Plans Are Eyed,” *Kentucky New Era*, April 25, 1951, 29.

⁴⁶ Joseph Wechsburg, “How Russia Hopes To Win The Olympic Games,” *Reader’s Digest*, April 1955, 51.

intensify the savagery of the competition but will increase by a thousand times the chances of an international rhubarb.”⁴⁷ As well, *Universal Newsreel*'s Ed Herlihy, commenting on the Soviet team during the opening ceremonies, acknowledged that “the political implications of their presence overshadow[ed] the sporting side.”⁴⁸ These views, it must be noted, were not emblematic of *all* press outlets. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, for one, did not think this was “evidence of a major change in Kremlin policy” but speculated instead that the Soviets were simply “tired of playing solitaire” with respect to competing internationally.⁴⁹ Indeed, though press outlets did not agree about the Soviets’ motivations, that consideration was even given to such factors foreshadowed the media’s highly politicized coverage of actual Olympic events.

These views, however, should not solely be considered in an ‘isolated’ framework, as members of the media were not autonomous actors in interpreting the XV Olympiad through a political lens. Rather than working against one another, it was mutually beneficial for press outlets and Western governments to use the Cold War to define and manage spectators’ consumption of the games. Though these governments did not always politicize the games in the same fashion, there were still some common themes, such as condemning the Soviets for their own politicization and recognizing the benefit of athletic superiority in ‘fighting’ the Cold War. In Britain, successive Conservative governments during the 1950s frequently demonstrated this point of view. After Helsinki 1952, William Sullivan, the British ambassador to Mexico City, highlighted the US’ “grim determination” to prove its “athletic superiority” since a loss to the Soviets at Melbourne 1956 “would apparently be equivalent to losing the first vital battle in the next world war.”⁵⁰ Sullivan was probably being hyperbolic, but the sentiment is

⁴⁷ Stanley Woodward, “Russian Participation Insures Bigger and Sillier Rhubarbs,” *The Washington Post*, January 1, 1952, 9.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Ray Gamache, *A History of Sports Highlights: Replayed Plays from Edison to ESPN* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 74.

⁴⁹ “Mission to Helsinki,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 9, 1952, 14.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Peter Beck, “Britain and the Cold War’s ‘Cultural Olympics’: Responding to the Political Drive of Soviet Sport, 1945-1958,” *Contemporary British History* 19 (June 2005): 170.

noteworthy. Though it was never an Olympic powerhouse, it is still worth noting that in 1952, just one of Britain's eleven medals was gold, and the poor showing at the games represented its lowest ever medal count. For a veritable empire in decline,⁵¹ sports potentially represented a key outlet for the British to maintain some semblance of international grandeur. Indeed, in 1959, the British Foreign Office reaffirmed that "the Olympic Games have immense prestige and offer a unique stage for the demonstration of national prowess."⁵²

Much like their British counterparts, the Americans also recognized the potential benefits of the summer Olympics in terms of aggrandizing national prestige. Within Congress, the Olympics were viewed by prominent Democrats and Republicans as a key arena for determining 'who was winning' the Cold War.⁵³ In what Toby Rider called the State Department's "clearest expression"⁵⁴ of opinion towards Soviet sport, an official told the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) on November 20, 1951 that a full Soviet team at the Helsinki games indicated a "gigantic cultural offensive."⁵⁵ Americans were encouraged to not "swallow the lie that the Soviet athlete is superior because he is a product of the Soviet regime."⁵⁶ In terms of pure explicitness, Rider is undoubtedly correct. However, the Truman Administration, in conjunction with the AAU and US Olympic Association, made other subversive efforts to prepare for the Soviet Olympic 'threat.' On May 16, 1952, President Truman issued 'Proclamation 2976,' which designated the seven-day period from May 18 to 25 as 'Olympic Week.' While symbolically acknowledging the US Olympic team was not an uncommon practice for presidents, Truman's

⁵¹ This view has been shared by a number of scholars. For a good example, see Jim Tomlinson, "The Decline of the Empire and the Economic 'Decline' of Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 14 (September 2003): 201.

⁵² Quoted in *ibid.*

⁵³ See Jim Nendel, "The Cold War: Emerging from the Ice at the 1956 Cortina D'Ampezzo Winter Olympics Games," in *The Global Nexus Engaged: Past, Present, Future Interdisciplinary Olympic Studies*, ed. Kevin B. Wamsley et al (London, Ontario: International Centre for Olympic Studies at the University of Western Ontario, 2002), 200.

⁵⁴ Toby Rider, "The Olympic Games and the Secret Cold War: The U.S. Government and the Propaganda Campaign Against Communist Sport, 1950-1960," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: University of Western Ontario, 2011), 133.

⁵⁵ "Russia May Be In Olympics After All," *Lewiston Evening Journal*, December 1, 1951, 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

declaration was strictly for fundraising purposes.⁵⁷ In contrast to the USSR, the US government did not directly subsidize its athletes and Truman urged Americans “to contribute as generously as possible to insure [sic] that the [US would] be fully and adequately represented” at Helsinki.⁵⁸ Yet, it was only in several newspapers that the real reason for ‘Olympic Week’ was revealed. The May 20 edition of the *Pittsburgh Press* called for donations because “a Russian victory would provide Communism with a powerful propaganda weapon to support its claims about the softness and decay inherent in a democracy such as ours.”⁵⁹ The May 21 edition of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* called for “patriotic citizens” to donate since “other countries, like Russia, finance their Olympic teams out of government funds.”⁶⁰ In the same article, Truman is quoted as saying, “This competition is not just another event...The eyes of the world will be upon us. I earnestly hope, therefore, that we fully measure up to the ideals [which] are embodied in the American way of life.”⁶¹ Hence, as much as the US media and government criticized the Soviets for politicizing the Olympics, they were guilty of similar actions and clearly did not view the competition as being only about sporting achievement.

Regarding its actual participation at Helsinki 1952, the Soviet team garnered considerable attention. Part of this was, of course, due to the athletes’ physical appearance. *Life* noted that “the sight of a Soviet sweatshirt was so unfamiliar that Westerners had trouble understanding that its red CCCP lettering stood for *Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotzialisticheskikh Respublik*.”⁶² As well, the Soviets created some controversy with their request—which was subsequently granted—for their Finnish hosts to establish a separate ‘Olympic Village’ for Eastern Bloc countries. As Kristine Toohey and Anthony James

⁵⁷ “Harry S. Truman: Proclamation 2976 – Olympic Week, 1952,” American Presidency Project, University of California, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=87330> .

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Will Russia Beat The US?” *The Pittsburgh Press*, May 20, 1952, 12.

⁶⁰ “You Can Help The U.S. Win the 1952 Olympic Games,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 21, 1952, 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² “Muscles Pop Through Iron Curtain,” 15.

Veal note, this “broke [the] tradition” that was initiated at the 1932 Los Angeles games of all Olympians “sharing facilities” with one another.⁶³ It also crucially reflected the state of Soviet-Finnish relations in the postwar period. Finland eagerly pursued a foreign policy towards the USSR that protected its independence whilst remaining non-aligned in respect of the neighbouring superpower.⁶⁴ Acquiescence to the USSR’s demand for an Eastern Bloc ‘Olympic Village’ must therefore also be understood as a continuation of Finnish foreign policy predicated on neutrality and accommodation. The Soviets’ separate location was located roughly 25 kilometres away in a village called Otaniemi, which this drew some ire from Western observers. The quality of life at Otaniemi village was an almost surreal experience for Soviet athletes. Despite numerous portraits of Stalin and the constant presence of Soviet officials, the “considerable elegance” of the residence was apparent. For instance, *Life* recounted how on one evening athletes enjoyed a vaudevillian show, treatment from doctors and masseurs, and “delicacies” such as grape juice, fresh fruits, light and dark bread, and smoked sturgeon.⁶⁵ The result of this unprecedented extravagance, as *Life* reported, was widespread “fraternization” at the village, as “muscle men indulged in the free-world luxury of acting silly.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Soviet officials soon recognized the propaganda opportunities offered by Otaniemi, and their rather abrupt change in conduct towards Western media was striking. One reporter noted that the Soviets had “been unapproachable” before the games,⁶⁷ while the *Life* correspondent characterized the Russian officials as “surly” and “standoffish.”⁶⁸ For some time, officials “strictly barred” outsiders from entering the village, with some even going so far as to “pretend to speak or

⁶³ Kristine Toohey and Anthony James Veal, *The Olympic Games: A Social Science Perspective* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: CAB International, 2007), 96.

⁶⁴ Rinna Kullaa has stated that Finnish decision-makers considered this balanced, neutral approach the “correct” approach to handling the Soviets. See Rinna Kullaa, *Non-Alignment and its Origins in Cold War Europe: Yugoslavia, Finland, and the Soviet Challenge* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011), 79.

⁶⁵ “Muscles Pop Through Iron Curtain,” 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “They Throw Camp Open At Helsinki,” 17.

⁶⁸ “Muscles Pop Through Iron Curtain,” 15.

understand no language but their own.”⁶⁹ Later, though, such restrictions were lifted to encourage more general goodwill: reporters were “invited to caviar and vodka dinners out there and left with pockets stuffed [with] these two Russian specialties.”⁷⁰ As well, foreseeing how the US’ civil rights record could damage their international prestige, the Soviets especially fraternized with African-Americans.⁷¹ Eastern Bloc athletes at Otaniemi essentially became residents of a Potemkin village. Otaniemi showcased unity amongst communist nations and, through lavish and luxurious conditions, attempted to demonstrate the superiority of communism. As such, the village did not indicate what life was *really* like under communism, nor was it apolitically-driven in the sense that such extravagant efforts were undertaken with athletes’ comfort and performance solely in mind.

The goodwill between Soviet and American athletes at Otaniemi did not extend to the actual competition itself. In this regard, American decathlon gold medalist Bob Mathias’s recollections of the Cold War atmosphere prevalent at the games are particularly enlightening:

There were many more pressures on American athletes because of the Russians...They were in a sense the real enemy. You just loved to beat ‘em. You just had to beat ‘em...This feeling was strong down through the entire team.⁷²

The prospect of such politically-tainted competitiveness spurring some kind of violent incident was implicit in the coverage of some Western press outlets. For instance, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* correspondent was careful to note during the early stages of the games that “so far, there have been no incidents involving U.S. and Russian athletes.”⁷³ Such sentiments exposed the interplay between sportswriters and ‘political’ sportswriters—the former focused solely on the results of a given event, whereas the latter were more concerned about depicting athletic results as emblematic of a ‘horse-race’ struggle between Cold

⁶⁹ “Russians at the Olympics,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1952, E6.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Quoted in Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 97.

⁷³ “U.S. Pins Olympic Track Hopes on Negro Talent,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 17, 1952.

War belligerents. In his excellent investigation of the *New York Times*' Soviet coverage at Helsinki 1952, Anthony Moretti notes that "the *Times* criticized the Soviets for [their] marriage of sports and politics and allowed its columnists to lead the assault."⁷⁴ It is pertinent to place this action in a broader historical context. During the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the *Times* did not refer to Germany's athletes as 'Nazis' or 'fascists' at all, yet during the 1952 games, Soviet athletes were frequently referred to derogatorily as "Reds."⁷⁵ Sometimes, reporters even used actual political events to analogize Olympic events: *Times* sportswriter Alison Danzig wrote that the Soviets scared "the Americans in the final [basketball] game [by] slowing down the action until it froze up like the Panmunjom truce conference."⁷⁶ Somewhat ironically, she concluded her analysis by noting that such tactics were "a portent of what to expect from them in the future."⁷⁷ In many respects, the same could be said of the *Times*' Olympic coverage. By having political columnists cover a sporting event, frequent denunciations of the Soviets' political motivations were downright hypocritical. Criticizing the Soviets for 'marrying sports and politics' was especially disingenuous because, in effect, *Times* reporters were criticizing themselves for consciously framing and approaching the games in much the same fashion.

Not surprisingly, this Western politicization was decidedly anti-communist, anti-Soviet, and pro-American. The Cold War ensured that Helsinki 1952 would be about 'us' versus 'them'—the 'American way' versus what Rastvorov called the "great state machine" of the USSR.⁷⁸ Perhaps the most glaring repercussion of these politicized Olympics was how media coverage reflected and reinforced different gender roles within the two

⁷⁴ Anthony Moretti, "New York Times Coverage of the Soviet Union's Entrance into the Olympic Games," *Sport History Review* 38 (May 2007): 67.

⁷⁵ For examples, see "Fast Finish by Americans Catches Reds With Points Down on Final Olympics Day," *The Washington Post*, August 3, 1952, C1; "Reds to Send 300 Athletes to 1952 Games," *Prescott Evening Courier*, June 4, 1952, 5; and Smits, "Reds Eye Olympics," 14.

⁷⁶ Allison Danzig, "70, 000 See Colorful Closing of Helsinki Games," *New York Times*, August 4, 1952, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Rastvorov, "Red Amateurs Are Pros," 93.

societies. Simply put, Western media outlets ‘valued’ their sportswomen less than did their Soviet counterparts. In terms of sheer results, this lack of emphasis was not terribly surprising. Female athletes accounted for 24 of the USSR’s 71 medals—or 34%. Of the forty Soviet women who competed in Helsinki, there were eighteen different medalists, which meant that 45% of them stood on the podium.⁷⁹ Comparatively speaking, this level of success is quite staggering. For the US, of its 41 female athletes, there were thirteen different medalists (32%), which accounted for at least eight of the total 76 medals collected (10.5%).⁸⁰ With regards to male athletes, the numbers decidedly favoured the US; yet interestingly, their success was proportionally similar to that of Soviet women. In their respective events, there were 111 different American male competitors who finished at or above third place. Since a total of 245 American men participated, this meant that 45% were medalists. Indeed, male athletes accounted for at least 67 of the Americans’ 76 medals—or 88%. By contrast, Soviet men were responsible for 47 of their country’s total medal tally (66%), and of the USSR’s 255 male athletes, there were only 68 different medalists (27%). Clearly, a statistically gendered analysis of Olympic participants for each country demonstrates that Soviet women were every bit as successful as American men and, alternatively, Soviet men were about as unsuccessful as American women.⁸¹ As Joseph A. Marchiony concluded, “it was the women who put Russia on the ‘athletic map.’”⁸²

While Soviet women were comparatively more successful than Soviet men—a fact not unnoticed by either the Soviet or American media—Western press coverage continued to focus on the performances of male athletes, largely ignoring the sportswomen. A *Washington Post* editorial asserted that

⁷⁹ These figures have been appropriately adjusted for multiple medalists for a single event, such as in a team setting.

⁸⁰ The phrase ‘at least’ is used here since one woman (Emelyn Whiton) was part of the six member sailing team that won gold in the Mixed 6 metres event.

⁸¹ All statistics were compiled from the official report of the 1952 Helsinki games. See Alex Matson, trans., *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the Games of the XV Olympiad Helsinki 1952* (Porvoo, Finland: The Organising Committee for the XV Olympiad Helsinki 1952, 1955).

⁸² Marchiony, “The Rise of Soviet Athletics,” 17.

Soviet success at the games resulted from the women's successful performance, which "nobody in this part of the world has ever taken seriously."⁸³ Another journalist asserted that the Soviets' strong showing was "chiefly" due to their success in "women's gymnastics events in which the United States didn't compete."⁸⁴ In this respect, the US' lack of success in women's events was overshadowed by the fact that "American male athletes clearly outshone their Soviet rivals."⁸⁵ Though the Cold War did not, of course, initiate gender hierarchies in the US, the press's politicization certainly reinforced them. As Susan Cahn has noted, "the weakness of women's track and field...stood out like a sore thumb and threatened American claims that, whether in politics, economics, or athletics, the United States could do it better."⁸⁶

A prominent authority on women's sports, University of Southern California professor Eleanor Metheny, described the conflicting relationship between traditional gender roles, press coverage, and sporting achievements in a contemporary interview with *Sports Illustrated*. She pointed out that "American girls excelled in swimming and diving" yet were "indifferent" to press coverage that focused on their "poor showing in gymnastics and track and field."⁸⁷ For Metheny, such a 'passive' attitude prevailed because American women "are—and want to be—essentially feminine human beings."⁸⁸ With respect to the era itself, this view was not an outlier. Vikki Krane et al have noted that sportswomen in the early Cold War period were expected to "perform hegemonic femininity," which emphasized "the dominant notion of an ideal feminine body as thin and toned."⁸⁹ Female

⁸³ "Olympics and Politics," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 1952, 10.

⁸⁴ Drew Pearson, "How Reds Heard The Olympics," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 12, 1952, 6.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Susan Cahn, "'Cinderellas' of Sport: Black Women in Track and Field," in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 224.

⁸⁷ Charles A. Bucher, "Are We Losing The Olympic Ideal," *Sports Illustrated*, August 5, 1955, 57.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Vikki Krane et al, "Living the Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Muscularity," in *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Jean O'Reilly and Susan K. Cahn (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 82.

athletes for the US therefore had to balance this ‘proper’ identity without “develop[ing] oversized musculature.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the physique of many Soviet female athletes was a categorical affront to this stereotype, as demonstrated by the Western media’s frequent reference to them as “husky” or “Amazons.”⁹¹ Referring to one such ‘Amazon,’ a British journalist remarked that her “peaches and cream complexion seemed more befitting an usherette than a muscle moll.”⁹²

For the majority of the games, unofficial points-scoring systems—through which several newspapers (*Pravda* included) had adopted numerical valuations for athletes’ results—put the USSR ahead of the US. On many occasions, Western newspapers qualified these point totals by explicitly illustrating that, in effect, despite the fact that they were ‘losing’ overall, the US was still dominating in the all-important men’s events.⁹³ This meant that female athletes were not only demeaned by the media but were also implicitly blamed for the entire squad’s failures. Therefore, for very different reasons, female athletes from both sides were largely neglected: for Western journalists, the success of Soviet sportswomen did not ‘count’ and the participation of American sportswomen did not ‘matter.’ “American women would be forgiven,” Helen Lenskyj has noted, “if they did not surpass the Amazons’ performances.”⁹⁴ To retain their femininity, one prominent columnist argued that American women should not be “shot-putters[,] hurdlers, sprinters[,] discuss-throwers, [and] weight-lifters” and instead “leave the muscle-bunching

⁹⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁹¹ For examples, see “Teen-Age Olympics Talent,” *Life Magazine*, June 30, 1952, 79; “Muscles Pop Through Iron Curtain,” 17; and Arthur Daley, “Sports of The Times: The Olympics Enigma,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1952.

⁹² Quoted in John Bale, “‘Oscillating Antagonism’: Soviet-British athletics relations, 1945-1960,” in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, ed. Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews (New York: Routledge, 2007), 87.

⁹³ For instance, see “Women Give Soviet Edge,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1952, 16 and Allison Danzig, “World Record Set,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1952, S1.

⁹⁴ Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1986), 86.

sports to the men.”⁹⁵ As a *Montreal Gazette* columnist put it, “if it hadn’t been for their Amazons, the [Soviets’] point-total wouldn’t have been nearly so impressive” since the US “cleaned up in men’s track and field”—what the author described as the “core” of the entire competition.⁹⁶

Much like Western media coverage, the Soviet press framed Helsinki 1952 through the context of the Cold War—in the ‘battle’ to achieve ‘world supremacy’ in sport, failure was not tolerated. In one respect, this meant defending Soviet athletes. On many occasions, the Soviet press criticized the officiating at Helsinki, calling some judges “Wall Street capitalists’ hirelings” and “filthy businessmen.”⁹⁷ As well, Raskvorov recalled “a conversation with the coach of the Dynamo basketball team in which he admitted that the buying of foreign officials and judges was a routine part of Soviet sport strategy.”⁹⁸ However, he also noted that, “Should a player’s performance fall off in a crucial game...disgrace and punishment are swift and spectacular. He is considered guilty of antistate [*sic*] activity.”⁹⁹ Harry Schwartz, a contemporary specialist of Soviet affairs, corroborated this notion of sporting failure as ‘anti-state.’ In a *New York Times* piece, he relayed how *Komosomolskaya Pravda*—the “official organ” of the Young Communist League—charged that Soviet track and field athletes and trainers had “failed their country and the Communist Party” with their inability to “win supremacy” at Helsinki 1952.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, as Schwartz recounted, this Soviet newspaper often attributed these failures to individualistic tendencies, such as the athletes’ “self-satisfaction,” lack of “will to victory,” and “conceited” attitudes.¹⁰¹ It is worth highlighting, furthermore, that a Western victory in a given event was not strictly the harbinger for public ostracism. A case in point: the treatment of

⁹⁵ William Barry Furlong, “Venus Wasn’t a Shot-Putter,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1960, SM14.

⁹⁶ Dink Carroll, “Playing the Field: Olympic Games’ Aftermath,” *Montreal Gazette*, August 5, 1952, 16.

⁹⁷ Rastvorov, “Red Amateurs Are Pros,” 106.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰⁰ Harry Schwartz, “Soviet Losers in Olympics Berated By Moscow Paper for Lax Training,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1952, 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

the Soviet national soccer team after its 3-1 loss to Yugoslavia. Following the team's loss, Stalin ordered the dissolution of the Central Army Club—for which several national team players had played. Although the loss had eliminated the Soviets from the competition and meant that they would not win any medals, this was not the sole reason for Stalin's decision. According to Riordan, Stalin's relationship with Tito (or lack thereof) caused him to feel especially embarrassed by the result.¹⁰² Stalin's actions reflected the view that sporting defeats were equated with national weakness, regardless of whether the opponent was Western. The conduct of the Soviet press and government at Helsinki 1952 reinforced the reality that politics and sports had become deeply intertwined, with the latter clearly considered an important tool to 'fight' the Cold War.

If the Soviet press was political, from a Western perspective, it was not politically *correct*. Its coverage recognized the value of Soviet sportswomen—something that had long been a special emphasis for the Soviet state. After all, Lenin once stated that “It is our urgent task to draw working women into sport...If we can achieve that and get them to make full use of the sun, water and fresh air for fortifying themselves, we shall ring an entire revolution in the Russian way of life.”¹⁰³ This is not to say that traditional forms of gender roles had disintegrated outright, but rather that the Soviets prioritized female athletes more than their American counterparts. Soviet women's efforts at Helsinki 1952 were thus vigorously defended and celebrated. For instance, on August 2, the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* noted how Western observers were “losing sleep” over the successes of Soviet sportswomen.¹⁰⁴ In particular, the *Gazeta* denounced a recommendation that women's events be worth half the number of points as men's events, stating that “this ‘theory’ can only arouse a smile.”¹⁰⁵ Since these scoring systems were, as mentioned, unofficial, this kind of support for women reflected a

¹⁰² James Riordan, “Rewriting Soviet Sports History,” *Journal of Sports History* 20 (Winter 1993): 250.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Riordan, “Marx, Lenin and Physical Culture,” 159.

¹⁰⁴ Anatoly Sofronov, “The Olympic Games—Before the Close,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 31 (September 13, 1952): 26.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

different appreciation of their worth in communist society. Unlike the in US, sportswomen in the USSR were not considered ‘passive’ or ‘unworthy’ of recognition.¹⁰⁶ Regarding gymnastics in particular, *TASS* affirmed that Soviet women’s success meant that the USSR “had taken the lead in world physical culture.”¹⁰⁷ Hence, female athletes were placed at the forefront of state success since their strong efforts at Helsinki 1952 had “struck a blow on behalf of women elsewhere, encouraging them to flout social norms and change them.”¹⁰⁸ Amidst the Cold War, this was invaluable in attempts to prove the superiority of the Soviet system. Soviet women’s success, “accelerated the creation of Olympic sportswomen as medal collectors [and showed] it was possible for a country...to make an impact on the international stage by concentrating on the medal potential of its women.”¹⁰⁹

Helsinki 1952 represented the first Russian participation in the Olympiad since the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm. At that earlier competition, Russia had failed to win a single gold medal and won just five medals in total. The US, by contrast, won 63 medals, of which 25 were gold. However, between 1952 and 1988—the last Olympics before its dissolution—the Soviets averaged 102 medals (and 39 gold) per Olympiad. This represents a staggering improvement, especially when compared to the US’ averages of 87 and 37, respectively.¹¹⁰ Despite their Cold War prejudices, various American media outlets acknowledged the Soviets’ success in 1952. *Life*, for instance, said that their performance was “exceptionally good for an Olympic beginner.”¹¹¹ *Sports Illustrated* was blunter: “Russian athletes performed far

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, “On the Results of the 15th International Olympic Games,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 30 (September 6, 1952): 10.

¹⁰⁷ “Foreign Press on Olympic Games,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 31 (September 13, 1952): 26.

¹⁰⁸ Riordan, “The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Sporting Women in Russia and the USSR,” *Journal of Sport History* 18 (Spring 1991): 195.

¹⁰⁹ Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women’s Sport* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 224.

¹¹⁰ Both averages were adjusted not to include the two countries’ boycotts of the 1980s. All statistics are from “Official Olympic Games Results,” International Olympic Committee, accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.olympic.org/olympic-results>.

¹¹¹ “U.S. and U.S.S.R. Fight It Out,” *Life Magazine*, August 4, 1952, 65.

beyond anyone's expectations, maybe even their own."¹¹² However, the XV Olympiad held special significance during the early Cold War period. For the Soviets, success in international sporting competitions could be used "as a means of showing the advantages of a socialist regime."¹¹³ Or, as Riordan bluntly put it, it was "virtually the only area" in which they were able to demonstrate superiority.¹¹⁴ Although the West not unreasonably opposed how the Soviet system developed its athletes, it is still clear that at such a prominent international sporting competition as the Olympics, the Soviet 'way' worked.

This paper has sought to shed insight on one of the more underappreciated aspects of the early Cold War period: the transnational politicization of sport. In this regard, Helsinki 1952 is an important contributing factor, given the presence for the first time of the Soviet Union at an Olympiad. This is not to say that previous Olympiads were apolitical; however, after 1952, there was a clear political dimension at successive games for the next four decades, even if one side or the other was not actually present. For the Soviets, success was a revolutionary consequence of the Bolshevik rise to power in 1917. Though physical culture was above all a fundamental tool to promote and reinforce the power of the young state, Soviet efforts did attempt to improve upon the otherwise socially backward conditions that plagued the late Tsarist period. At Helsinki, these efforts, for better or for worse, contributed to their success. As such, popular and critical interpretations of the Soviets' entry, their performance, and ultimately, their success, demonstrate the far-reaching implications of the Cold War. This analysis has not only demonstrated mutual hypocrisies pertaining to (not) politicizing the games, but also crucially reflects different gender roles and constructs within American and Soviet societies. Simply put, the minimization of sportswomen and aggrandizement of male athletes solidified traditional norms of masculinity and femininity in the US. The USSR, by contrast,

¹¹² Don Canham, "Russia Will Win The 1956 Olympics," *Sports Illustrated*, October 25, 1954, 12.

¹¹³ Victor Zilberman, "Physical education in the Soviet Union," *McGill Journal of Education* 17 (Winter 1982): 74.

¹¹⁴ Riordan, "The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions," 31.

underscored women's utility in the formation of socialist society. This is not to say that such utility necessarily reflected outright emancipation for women, but at least in terms of sport, such emphasis demonstrated a clear superiority relative to their American counterparts. In this sense, Helsinki 1952 adds more context to the early Cold War period and raises questions about the oversimplicity of the conventional 'us-versus-them' and 'good-versus-evil' framework of interpretation.

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