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Title: “Soviet Sports Culture”  
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Rachel Leap is a third year IPFW student working towards bachelor’s degrees in history and secondary education. Her interest in history is primarily focused on culture because she loves the way people in the past lived outside of their jobs or government. In the future she wants to become a high school educator or perhaps another educator of some sort.

Abstract

After years of victory in the field of sports, Russia has built a reputation as being one of the most ruthless and insincere competitors in global sport. This reputation stems from the intense culture of victory endorsed by the Soviet Union that led to numerous champions emerging between the 1970s and 1990s in the Olympics and in world competitions. These victories came at a price, sacrificing the pride and health of Soviet athletes. Winning athletes became exemplars of communism and symbols of government success, and in modern Russia, some former Soviet athletes hold government positions despite this reckless history.

The Soviet Union was not afraid of unsavory tactics in Olympic competition. The 1972 Summer Olympics basketball final round is a great example of the Soviets’ unmerciful approach to sport. The Soviets beat the Americans by one point after two, three-second intervals were added to the clock at the end of the game. The reviewing panel and referees were also largely from the Soviet bloc, adding to the accusations of misconduct. The American players on the 1972 team believe to this day that the Soviets cheated, despite the Soviet team being very strong competitors.

Another component of Soviet era sports that still scars athletes from around the Bloc is a history of doping. The results of experimental and extreme drugging left many athletes with permanent damage to their bodies. Younger athletes like Rica Reinisch, a record setting swimmer at the time of her victories, were often not even told they were being doped. Reinsich surrendered her world records; however not every athlete has made this choice. Marita Koch still holds the world record for the 400-meter dash, and refuses to say that drugs played a role in her victory. Koch claims that there is no direct evidence proving that she doped.

Athletes were victims of Soviet culture not just by doping, but also by engaging in overly strenuous and dangerous training regimens that pushed the limit of sport to gain a win. The most tragic example of this is Elena Muhkina. Muhkina was an orphan encouraged to do gymnastics by her grandmother, but she wasn’t a highly valued athlete early on. She grabbed the attention of a new coach, however, who trained her to exceed Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci, lest she be a disappointment. She overthrew Comaneci in the 1978 World Championships, but her coaches wanted a gold medal in the 1980 Moscow Olympics. During this period of intense training,
Muhkina attempted the Thomas Salto flip, and consequently broke her neck, paralyzing her from the neck down.

Today, two former gold medal winning Soviet Olympians serve in the Russian government despite the unwholesome practice of sport during the Soviet era. Irina Rodnina, one of the most decorated pairs skaters in Olympic history, has served in the Russian Duma under Putin’s party since 2008, despite having no former governing experience. She created controversy in 2013 when she tweeted a photoshopped picture of President and Michelle Obama staring at a banana that had clear racist implications. Aleksandr Karelin, a nearly undefeated former Russian and Soviet Olympic wrestler, has been a representative for Putin’s party since 1999. The unwarranted political careers of these athletes demonstrate the continued power that the culture of victory has in Russia, despite the many immoral practices of the Soviet era.

Bibliographical Note

Because of the nature of my paper, many of my sources were not from traditional academic journals or books. My most useful sources were profiles written about the athletes at the time, with many of these coming from Sports Illustrated or excerpts from Russian magazines. For more current information on athletes, I used interviews from PBS, the BBC, or other contemporary news companies. I used official Olympic videos posted on YouTube to get a sense of what the athletes accomplished. I also used a few journal articles to gain a better understanding of Russian sports culture and topics broader than individual athletes.