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Olympic Games in Time of Cold War

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Olympic Games in Time of Cold War

Cristiana Lucretia POP^{1*}

Abstract

The Cold War ran from roughly 1947 until the USSR collapse in 1991. Those years were marked by the arms race and the fear of a possible nuclear war between the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Sports were used as a vehicle for superiority of one political regime over the other. Champion athletes image and results were used as propaganda means because the international visibility, the public interest in major sports competitions and the national pride they aroused. U.S.A., after losing the top nation position in favor of Soviet Union in 1956 and 1960, considered winning in Olympic Games a matter of national prestige. The athlete for whom the flag is hoisted and the national anthem is sung, is the bearer of this prestige and his or her performance is inevitably associated with the country and system effectiveness. In the Olympics arena, the Cold War culminates in the boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Games. The main research question of this paper is if in present time we can address the sporting Cold War as an historic, past issue or a new stage of rivalry still persists influencing the Olympic movement? The changes that were made in the international political landscape since 1989 were reflected in the Olympic Games in Barcelona 1992 participation, when for the first time since 1972, no country boycotted the Olympic competition. Throughout the Cold War, U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. have used the Olympic Games and their athletes as opportunities for promoting their political agenda. The end of the Cold War could not prevent the politics to interfere in sport, especially in Olympic movement.

Keywords: Olympic movement, political tensions, boycotts, propaganda, nations top ranking.

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1. Introduction

Baron Pierre de Coubertin launched the idea of reviving the Olympic Games at a time of great cultural effervescence, while reforming geniuses struggled for affirmation and recognition. In that cultural context, in 1886 it was possible to bring into prominence the Olympics under an idealistic slogan: *The Olympic Games are competition between athletes and teams, not between countries* (Olympic Charter, rule 6). This ideal could not prevent, nevertheless the politics to interfere in sport and much more in Olympic movement. Coubertin's romantic and idealistic vision eluded the possibility that Olympic Games will always face political, economic, and social challenges ranging from nationalism, racism, terrorism, corruption or commercialization of the Games.

The modern Olympic Games were from the beginning part of world culture and modern history reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development [10].

The main research question of this paper is:

If in present time we can call the influence of the the sporting Cold War over the Olympic Games as an historic, past issue or a new stage of rivalry still persists? The historical period covered is the one between 1950 and 1990. The two sides involved in the Cold War were geographically the former communist countries of central and Eastern Europe at one hand and U.S.A., representing the most influent western nation in Olympics, on the other hand.

2. Politics Interference in Olympics

After the Second World War the former allies U.S. and U.S.S.R. relation changed from cooperation to a policy of rivalry. The differences between the two political regimes provided the framework for the Cold War which ran from roughly 1947 until the U.S.S.R. collapse in 1991. This schism was obviously manifested at every Olympic Games when these two nations met in the arena [3].

In the ideological collision of the two systems, the government of each country has used their athletes for propaganda purposes as images for the supremacy of one regime over the other, speculating their international visibility and the public interest for major sport events.

The presence of the soviet team in the 1952 Olympic Games edition was notable entitling higher expectation and nurturing the ideological rivalry with the imperialist nations. U.S.S.R. created a highly effective, centralized

system of sport management. The “physical culture and sport” system was under total political control, aiming to train elite athletes for the most important international competitions and especially for Olympic Games. A four year Olympic strategy was initiated and implemented by a special administrative structure for sports and physical culture reporting to the highest political level.

The Soviet model in physical education and sport was replicated in other countries from the Eastern Bloc like German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, or overseas, in Republic of Cuba [17]. The financial and organizational efforts of communist countries for a success in important sporting events were substantial and politically coordinated. The elite sport men and women in national and especially in Olympic sports team had special training conditions, special food supplies while in certain countries strict rationing was imposed for ordinary people. Above all they had the privilege to travel abroad while the wide majority of population was not allowed to have passport.

The athletes with promising results were semi or full professional; although officially they were considered amateurs. Those measures have proven to be really effective in promoting excellence in sports and further in achieving medals and records.

After losing the top nation position in favor of Soviet Union in 1956 and 1960, US considered winning in Olympic Games a matter of national prestige like Robert Kennedy (senator) confirmed in 1964, in Sport Illustrated [8] (the most well known sport publication in US then and now):

“Part of a nation’s prestige in the cold war is won in the Olympic Games”

President J.F. Kennedy extended the effect of the second place in the Olympic medal ranking over the entire nation vitality and energy, warning against *“the softness of a part of the individual citizens [that] can help to strip and destroy the vitality of a nation”* [7].

“the Russian are feverishly building toward what they expect to be a major Cold War victory in 1964: a massive triumph in the Tokyo Olympics” Senator H. Humphrey, 1962 [17].

Those concerns and the position of the highest political level regarding the U.S. athletes’ results as a reflection of the nation power, energy and symbol had the desirable effect. For the next two Olympic Games

editions U.S.A. ranked first not only in the total number of medals won, but also in number of gold medals (see fig. 1 and 2).

Fig. 1 Number of Olympic gold medals - 1952-1992

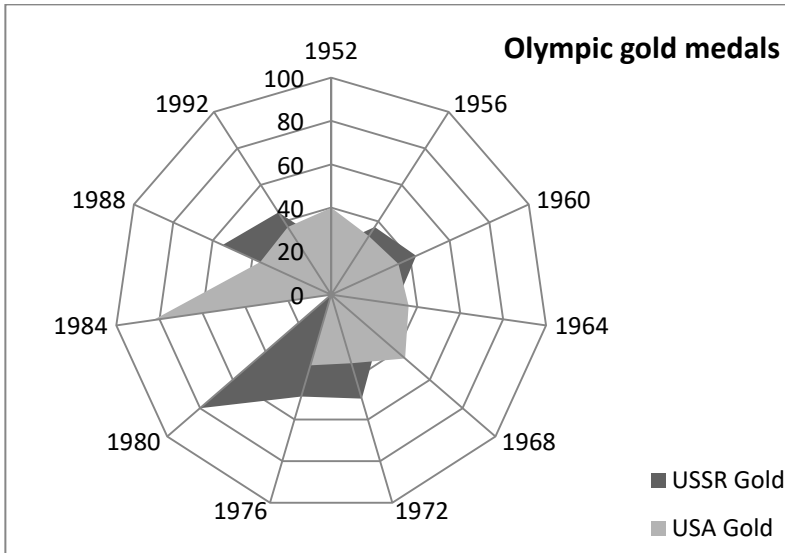
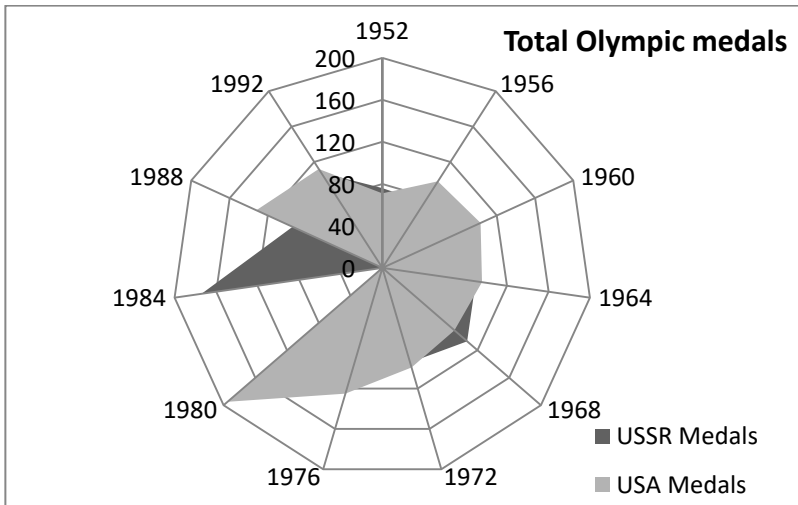


Fig. 2 Total number of Olympic medals - 1952-1992



The Sporting Cold War and the pursuit of winning with all costs determined excesses and harmful experiments over the athletes, their social

life and health. In U.S.S.R. the athletes were required to stay in training camps almost for the whole year, with short breaks to see their families after the season was over. Communist national sport federations maintained a constant pressure on trainers for winning in major competitions. This pressure was transferred on athletes' shoulders who were implicitly obliged to train in any condition: injured, famished, verbally or physically abused [18] or in insecure environment. In exchange medicines with generic name of supplements and vitamins were given daily without any previous information or consent.

In East Germany the athletes were systematically doped and the records of substances and dosage were kept in Stasi (secret service) files. An efficient strategy prioritized the resources and training capabilities towards individual sports rather than teams. In sports like athletics, swimming or weight lifting every individual is a potential winner while in team sports the result is less predictable and more resources needs to be allocated to score a success. From that time resists an exceptional result: the Marita Koch's 400m world record (47.6 s) and since 1985 no other woman has come close to break it.

The full extent of East Germany's doping program come to light after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, when Werner Franke, one of Germany's and the world's most highly regarded biochemical researchers, and his wife, Brigitte Berendonk, a former West German Olympian in discus, began having access to the official medical records and research of East Germany's Olympic athletes [2].

Because the effect of doping with androgenic hormones was so spectacular in female athletes, the abuse of such drugs rapidly spread not only to Eastern Bloc countries but also, since the mid 1970's, to countries of the western world. On that part of the iron curtain the use of banned substances appears that was more a private issue rather than official conducted or recommended by the medical staff. Nevertheless some athletes from the U.S. Olympic team publicly declared that in 1968 "a third of the men on the U.S. track and field team were using anabolic steroids at the pre-Olympic training camp"[14].

Four years later after an unofficial poll of all men track and field contestants at the Munich Olympic Games resulted that "68 percent have used some form of anabolic steroid in their training" [15]. This "popular" use of performance-enhancing drugs had a few notorious victims among the athletes like Ben Johnson, men's 100 m winner in Seoul, 1988 or Marion Johns stripped of three gold and two bronze medals she won in Sydney 2000 in sprint events and long jump [9].

Shortly prior the Rio Olympic Games the entire Russia's track and field team has been suspended for doping infractions as well the Bulgarian weightlifting team. 27 Russian athletes have been tested positive for meldonium in 2016; among them tennis player Maria Sharapova and swimming world champion Yuliya Efimova were the most well known names. There were evidence related to a systemic doping scheme that involved both sporting officials and Russia's security services and a state-run doping program meant to ensure Russian victory at the Sochi Winter Olympic Games. It looks like a recent version of the East Germany system.

4. The Cold War culminates in the boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games

The history of Olympic boycotts begins in 1956 when Spain, Switzerland and Netherlands refused to compete following the U.S.S.R. invasion in Hungary. As in reality in the water polo competition the Hungarian team defeated its Olympic title against the U.S.S.R. in the semi-finals. That match was seen as a symbolic resistance to the Soviet occupation [11]. surrounding sport phenomena. The Hungarians won with 4-0 Frustrated Soviet players responded to Hungarians, provoking action by violence and one injured player leaved the pool bleeding. Press highlighted the incident as "blood in the water". Half of the Hungarian delegation defected after the competition, avoiding the foreign oppression in their country.

"In my country, sports were one way to show national pride, one of the few safe ways" said Martina Navratilova the famous Czech tennis player. [16] For the people in the Soviet satellite countries sports competitions against the "red power" were opportunities to express their nationalist spirit and identity.

Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq refused to participate in Melbourne 1956 in response to the Suez channel crises.

One-fourth of the world population was out of the Olympic movement when China withdrew from IOC and international federations in 1956 on political reasons [5]. Popular Republic of China reappeared in Olympic arena at 1980 Winter Olympic Games and in 1984 summer Olympics, both hosted by United States.

In 1976, 23 African nations boycotted the Games in protest of New Zealand (in friendly terms with South Africa rugby team) participation. Taiwan also withdrew on political reasons [1].

The US led the largest boycott in the Olympic Game history in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It was in 1980 when for the first time a socialist country hosted the games. Following a total involvement and an active position of the president Jimmy Carter 63 nations joined the boycott [4], leaving the Games less competitive and offering the host country the opportunity to dominate the classification. The opening ceremony went on with only 81 national Olympic teams.

History is repeating itself. USA hosted in 2002 the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City while was fighting in Afghanistan itself [13].

In retaliation, the next edition, held in Los Angeles, 1984 were boycotted by USSR, who expressed doubts about security measures. 14 nations, influenced by the communist power supported the boycott. Romania had a different position and sent a delegation to Los Angeles, which was welcomed with sympathy in the opening ceremony. Eventually the Romanian team achieved a record of 20 medals of gold from a total of 53 and a second position in top nation ranking.

Following those consecutive boycotts, in 1986 have been initiated The Goodwill Games as a way to bring Soviet and American athletes back together in a competition which was aiming to replicate the Olympic final events. Before the Goodwill Games second edition in 1990, historical events have occurred in Europe:

- In June 4, 1989 Solidarity won the elections in Poland and in August Tadeusz Mazowiecki was elected prime minister;
- East Germany's president Erich Honecker resigned in October due to large street demonstrations; soon after the Berlin wall had fallen;
- In October 24, Hungarians non-violently overthrew the communist government and proclaimed the Republic;
- In Czechoslovakia, the communist government resigned in November after a general strike;
- In December Romania after violent confrontations, overthrew the communist leader, Nicolae Ceausescu;
- The Soviet Union was collapsing.

After those major geo-political changes the Goodwill Games purpose vanished in time.

Changes in the international political landscape since 1989 were observed in Barcelona Olympics participation. Among the 174 nations were: the reunified Germany, the United Team of Russia and 11 other former Soviet republics, the 3 independent Baltic republics and the former

Yugoslavian republics participated for the first time with their separate delegation. Also South Africa's ban for apartheid during since 1964 was suspended. In Barcelona for the first time since 1972 no country boycotted the summer Olympic Games.

“Communist sport policy in Eastern Europe is dead” wrote Jim Riordan in 1996 and again in 1999 [12]. Nevertheless specialists in sports like artistic and rhythmic gymnastics or skating from Eastern Europe, spread all over the world, exporting also the training system and reforming those sports in western countries.

Garry Kasparov, former chess world champion, criticized the political power campaign to host the Olympics in Sochi 2014, suggesting that it was more a personal image benefit for the political leader than a gain for Russian people's prestige and well being. Moreover the former chess world champion drew a parallel between Sochi Winter Olympics and Hitler's Berlin Olympic Games (1936) considering both similar cases in which “a despot confuses himself with the state after too long in power” [6].

5. Conclusions

Political interference in the modern Olympic Games is an indisputable reality, which leads us to the conclusion that the noble ideal of Coubertin “The Olympic Games are competition between athletes and teams, not between countries” felt into desuetude.

Throughout the Cold War, U.S.A. and U.S.S.R., as leading countries of two different political systems, have used the Olympic Games and their athletes as propaganda means for promoting their political agenda. After the two major boycotts in the '80s Olympic Games didn't perish, but certainly have been significantly transformed. After the U.S.S.R. team crumble the United States won the most medals in every Summer Olympics since 1996.

There are similarities and differences between the former communist countries and these are reflected even in the evolution and results of national teams in major competitions. In the summer Olympic medal table Hungary, for example, has a relatively constant position between 1992 and 2016 (the last edition) and it seems that training quality and athlete's results have not been affected by the political changes, transition, reforms or economic crisis. Romania had a progressive, positive evolution after 1952 in the Olympic competitions, but in the last three editions the national team dropped significantly in ranking. Romania has been consistently in gymnastics, winning medals in the team competition in every Olympics since 1976. But

that run has already ended in 2016, when the team failed to qualify and only sent one gymnast to Rio.

Looking back at the last winter Games in Sochi and at the Rio summer edition, remembering the meldonium scandal and its implications for Russian athletes, it seems that “Sporting Cold War” is entering in a new era, reinventing and adjusting old methods to cope with actual social, cultural, political and technological context.

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