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978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

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Introduction

My desire to undertake this study springs from a long-standing involvement in sport and a more recent interest in the study of Soviet society. In 1961, I was able to combine the two by going to the USSR, where I lived and worked for five years and had an opportunity to observe and engage in Soviet sport.

In my first period of residence in the USSR, from July 1961 to August 1965, I was initially a postgraduate student (for 18 months) and subsequently an employee of a publishing house in Moscow. While a student, I took an active part in student sporting activities as a member of student football and tennis teams and as a participant in less organised pursuits – e.g. weekend rambles, fishing and skiing excursions. As a Soviet employee and trade union member, I engaged in sporting activities (summer and winter fishing, shooting and chess) organised from my workplace and then became a member of the *Spartak* Sports Society, playing regularly for the Moscow *Spartak* badminton team (1963–1965). I also pursued a wide range of sports activities that included soccer most Sunday mornings in summer at the Lenin Stadium (and often, too, in the yard of my block of flats), tennis, swimming, skiing and chess.

As a spectator, I watched a great variety of sporting contests at levels from backyard to international matches, in Moscow and Leningrad, the Baltic republics, the Transcaucasus and Central Asia.

Finally, as the part-time Moscow correspondent (1961–1965 and 1970–1971) of the journal of the British Olympic Association, I was able to see sports organisations and amenities in different parts of the country, making special sports tours of the three Baltic republics in 1964 and of Central Asia and Kazakhstan

Cambridge University Press

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James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Sport in Soviet society

in 1965, which afforded an opportunity to discuss sport widely with administrators and athletes and to see sport at various levels: school, children's sports club, trade union society, factory circle and collective farm.

In my second period of residence in the USSR, from October 1970 to March 1971, I was again a resident employee of the same publishing house, though I then had specific research purposes in mind in revisiting Moscow. Largely because I was a Soviet employee, I gained access to primary sources normally inaccessible to Western scholars: materials in the Sports Archives of the Central State Institute of Physical Culture and Sport as well as in sports libraries and museums both at the Central State Institute of Physical Culture and the Lenin Stadium. I became a regular member of a 'Keep Fit' (*Bodrost' i zdorov'ye*) group which met twice weekly at the Lenin Stadium. I also managed to visit, through the good offices of the USSR–Great Britain Society, two sports boarding schools (one in Tallinn and one in Kiev) and other sports complexes and to interview a number of sports officials, sportsmen and physical educationalists. Some of these meetings developed into extensive, less formal contacts. For example, an international sportsman played host at his town and country homes, took me to training sessions and sports events and on a tour of his former institute. Since this second period of residence, I have managed to spend at least a month of each year in the Soviet Union, and I led a sports tour to Moscow and Leningrad during 1975.

This residential and first-hand experience provided me with opportunities for gaining some insight into an area of social activity little known in the West, revealing not only the workings of sports institutions but also something of the motives, attitudes and values of those who work within them. It also led me to the belief that a historical account of sport could contribute to an understanding of the nature of Soviet society – looking at it from a different angle, as it were – and of the place of sport in society in general.

Soviet views on sport and physical culture

In the official Soviet view, sport is considered to be part of physical culture which has four components: (a) organised

Cambridge University Press

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James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

physical education; (b) playful activities or games; (c) all forms of (socially approved) active leisure-pursuits; and, (d) organised sport.¹ Organised physical education consists of general physical exercises with a therapeutic motive uppermost, e.g. morning exercises or physical education in school; physical exercises with a sporting bias, such as gymnastics and acrobatics; physical exercises for utilitarian work purposes, e.g. 'production gymnastics'; and physical exercises for mass artistic or aesthetic display. Playful activities may be individual, group or mass games which, although not as a strictly regulated obligation, are based on generally accepted rules and relatively stable conditions of conduct. Active leisure pursuits are included in physical culture as long as they are considered to add to the mental and physical well-being of the individual or to that of the community in general. Some pursuits are at times referred to more narrowly as 'tourism' – which consists of a variety of organised outdoor activities including hiking, camping and rock climbing. Organised sport is regarded as a playful, competitive physical or mental activity, based on rules and norms, with the object of achieving a result.

In Soviet writings, the word 'sport' is sometimes interpreted differently. As a leading Soviet sport theorist, Professor N. I. Ponomaryov, has noted, 'some writers take sport as the dominant form of expression of physical culture; they therefore use the concept "sport" as a synonym for the concept "physical culture"'.² Moreover, the combined expression 'physical culture and sport' is commonly found in Soviet writings on sport although, strictly speaking, it is incorrect – since, in terms of the categories of widely accepted Soviet theory, sport is a component of physical culture and not something separate.

For some Soviet authors, sport is also a 'societal institution with a socialising function'.³ Others see it in an even broader per-

¹ These definitions are largely based on those provided in A. D. Novikov and L. P. Matveyev (eds.), *Teoriya fizicheskovo vospitaniya* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 95–136.

² N. I. Ponomaryov, 'K voprosu o predmete marksistkoi sotsiologii fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta', *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury*, 1973, No. 1, p. 63.

³ N. I. Ponomaryov, 'Fenomen igry i sporta', *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury*, 1972, No. 8, p. 6.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Sport in Soviet society

spective. Thus, 'Sport is an important and complex social phenomenon. It may be viewed as *physical exercise* for the purpose of attaining top results and victories in competition; as a unique *social movement* involving millions of people and consistently confirming lofty human ideals; as the sum total of state and public *institutions* that help a vital social sphere to function; and as a complex and lofty *art form* that inspires sportsmen and provides spectators with real aesthetic enjoyment.'⁴

The four components in the Soviet framework – organised physical education, playful activities, active leisure pursuits and sport – together comprise physical culture which, itself, is regarded as part of the overall culture of a society. It is 'the sum total of social achievements connected with man's physical development and education . . . [it is] part of the overall culture of society and represents all measures taken to make people healthy and to improve their physical abilities'.⁵ This rather broad and explicitly instrumental definition, perhaps predictable in a planned 'conscious' society, implies that sport may be a separate sector of culture but is regarded as an integral part of a broadly conceived sphere of cultural life. In terms of its social significance, it is seen, to use the Marxist terms current in the USSR, as part of the cultural 'superstructure' of society resting on the 'base' of the (ownership) relations of production; it is therefore expected to vary in nature and function in different types of society.

Figure 1 represents an attempt to portray the Soviet view of the component parts of physical culture and their inter-relationship.

Given this conceptual framework, sport in the Soviet Union is by no means a matter of fun and games; it is not the 'garden' of human activities. Physical culture is on a par with mental culture and has important functions to discharge: 'The ultimate goal of physical culture in our state is to prepare the younger generation for a long and happy life, highly productive labour for the benefit of society and for defence of their socialist homeland.'⁶ Professor

⁴ V. B. Kuchevsky, 'Sport kak sovokupnost' obshchestvennykh otnoshenii', *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury*, 1972, No. 9, p. 5.

⁵ *Entsiklopedichesky slovar' po fizicheskoi kul'ture i sportu*, Vol. III (Moscow, 1963), p. 226.

⁶ V. V. Belorusova, *Pedagogika* (Moscow, 1972), pp. 182–183.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

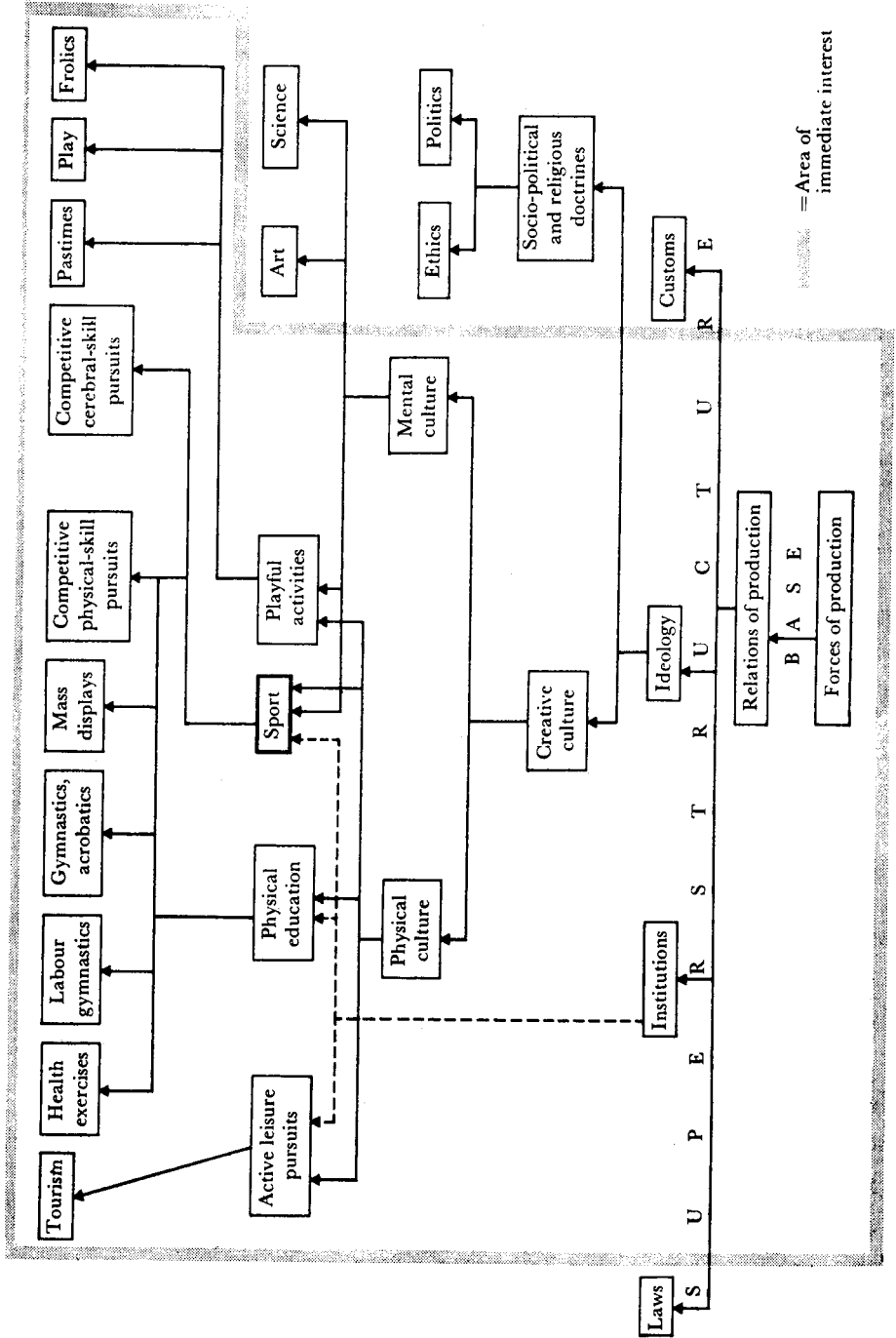


Fig. 1. Sport in society: the Soviet view

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Ponomaryov is even more explicit: ‘Physical culture and sport in socialist society have a number of social functions: to contribute to the formation of a harmonious personality, to socialisation and integration, to political, moral, mental and aesthetic education, to health protection, to the development of people’s physical capabilities, to the accumulation and transmission of knowledge and experience in motor activity, to rational utilisation of free time, to the forging of international cultural contacts, to greater international representation [i.e. more Soviet representatives on international sports bodies], to the fight for peace and friendship among peoples, etc.’⁷

A problem in trying to identify the penumbra of meaning surrounding the word ‘sport’ is that nuances change in usage – in different cultures, among various social groups, and at different times within a single culture. In the USSR during the 1920s, for example, as we shall see below, not only did the state and members of the public tend to see sport in differing ways, but so did various competing official and semi-official groups. Thus, an army group thought of sport mainly in terms of paramilitary games and exercises; the minds of members of a trade union group turned to ‘production gymnastics’ and newly invented ‘socialist workers’ games’ in the first place; a strong health group thought only in terms of ‘physical culture’ and used the word ‘sport’ itself to denigrate physical competition as an evil deriving from bourgeois society; while to the *Proletkul’tists*, it conjured up dreams of socialist pageants and spectacles. (Of course, diverging notions in the search for the ideal, for the forms appropriate to the new society, emerged, in the years immediately following the revolution, in all fields of culture – in literature and theatre as much as in sport.)

Although official views of what constituted physical culture and sport became more uniform with the onset of full-scale industrialisation at the end of the 1920s, the terms have remained loosely defined to the present day. On the whole, official conceptualising has been governed by normative considerations – i.e. promotion of state-favoured activities. While countenancing chess and draughts, for example, the state stops short of including

⁷ N. I. Ponomaryov, ‘Sport i obshchestvo’, *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kul’tury*, 1973, No. 6, p. 72.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

such activities as dominoes and card playing in the Soviet sports movement (see above, p. 202). Sometimes it draws distinctions within a sport: men's soccer and wrestling are included in the sports movement, women's soccer and wrestling are not (see pp. 320–322); body building and boxing are recognised as Soviet 'sports' as long as they keep within certain officially prescribed limits – which are not static. In yet other 'sports', the state appears to be less motivated by functional than by political factors, tolerating activities such as horse racing and folk games, which involve gambling and which imply values that go against the official ethos, as a concession to popular tastes.

For practical reasons, I have, in the body of this book, generally adopted the Soviet interpretation of physical culture and sport.

Social significance of sport in Soviet society

While not wishing to overstate the importance of sport in Soviet society, it is my belief that sport has had particular social significance in the development of the USSR. This is all the more so because the place of sport is evidently more central in the Soviet social system. Suffice it here to make the point that sport is one of the most far-reaching social activities in the USSR; it extends to and unites wider sections of the population than probably any other social activity, transcending nationality, sex, age, social position, rural/urban location and political attitudes. It has proved to be of utility by reason of its inherent qualities of being easily understood and enjoyed, being capable of developing mass enthusiasm, being apolitical (at least superficially), and permitting safe self-expression. It has had an advantage over sex, drinking, religious ritual and other forms of emotional release and companionship formation by being officially approved, and therefore less guilt-inducing, yet being relatively free of rigid official sanctions. It has had an advantage over literature, theatre and other forms of cultural expression in being more readily comprehensible to the mass public as well as less amenable to direct political control over style and content. It has had the advantage over political meetings and parades by being less demanding on intellect and patience.

These advantages have been particularly marked in a society

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

Sport in Soviet society

which has, in a short span of time, lived through such shattering events as three revolutions, a civil war, rapid industrialisation, forced collectivisation of agriculture, purges, mass terror, and two world wars. In such a society, hard work, discipline, self-censorship and periodically necessary acute readjustments seem to have needed a counterpart in sport, which offers a broad channel for the discharge of emotional tensions.

The study of sport in a centrally planned and communist-governed society may therefore be revealing because it deals with such a wide range of social processes and investigable forms of activity, within which a whole nexus of social phenomena has found fairly open expression.

Cambridge University Press

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James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The beginnings of
an organised sports movement,
1861–1917

As team sports spread from England throughout Europe and the world, and as the various schools of gymnastics gained in popularity, they gradually made their way into a Russia that, in the 1860s, was becoming more and more receptive to new modes of entertainment and physical education. With serfdom abolished in 1861, the way was open for industrial and urban development at a much higher tempo than hitherto. Members of the well-to-do middle class and liberal noblemen began to organise private clubs in the major cities for the pursuit of such sports as yachting, tennis, skating, fencing, cricket, croquet and gymnastics – even billiards and snooker.¹ For their entertainment as spectators and punters, professionals and promoters were providing horse racing, boxing, cycling, soccer and various displays of strength. In Table 1 are listed the earliest sporting organisations formed in Russia.

This brief sketch of the development of individual sports cannot be taken as presenting a fully balanced picture of sporting life in Russia prior to 1917. It is intended as a source of background information to the Soviet period and, in part, as a corrective to the Soviet tendency to play down the extent and quality of pre-revolutionary participation in sport.

Aquatic sports

The first sports club of a new type was the St Petersburg River Yacht Club, formed in 1860. Its members were not drawn

¹ For example, the 'English Club' in Moscow, founded by Russian and foreign merchants in the 1860s, catered exclusively for billiards and snooker. With the change of political fortunes, it became the Museum of the Revolution, as it is today, on Gorky Street.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28023-5 - Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR

James Riordan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

*Sport in Soviet society*TABLE I *The organisation of Russian sporting activities in the 18th and 19th centuries*

Period	Sport	Earliest organisation set up	Date founded	Class
1700–1799	Yachting	Neva Flotilla	1718	Military
1800–1824	Shooting	Amateur Shooting Society	1800 ^a	Aristocracy
1825–1849	Horse racing	St Petersburg Horse Racing Society	1826	Aristocracy
	Swimming Yachting	Neva School of Swimming Imperial Yacht Club	1834 1846	
1850–1879	Chess	St Petersburg Chess Club	1853	Gentry
	Fencing	Officers' Fencing Gymnasium	1857	
	Boating	St Petersburg River Yacht Club	1860	
	Lawn tennis	Neva Lawn Tennis Circle	1860	
	Gymnastics	Pal'ma Gymnastics Society	1863	
	Ice skating	Amateur Skating Society	1864	
	Cricket	St Petersburg Tennis and Cricket Club	1868	
1880–1889	Cycling	Tsar'skoye Selo Cycling Circle	1880	Middle class
	Heavy athletics ^b	Krayevsky Heavy Athletics Circle	1885	
	Athletics	Petrov Amateur Running Society ^c	1886	
		St Petersburg Circle of Amateur Sportsmen ^c	1888	
1890–1899	Soccer	Victoria Football Club ^d	1894	Middle class
	Boxing	Baron Kister's English Boxing Arena	1895	
	Skiing	Moscow Skiers' Club	1895	
	Ice hockey	St Petersburg Circle of Amateur Sportsmen	1898	

^a Approximately.^b Heavy athletics comprised a wide range of strongman feats and exercises: weightlifting, wrestling, body building and various circus acts. Dr Krayevsky's Circle was followed by *The Hercules Club* in 1896 and *Sanitas* in 1897.^c The Petrov Society's members confined themselves to running, mainly cross country; the St Petersburg Circle at first engaged in a number of athletics events, then branched out into other sports, such as soccer, cycling, ice-hockey and lawn tennis.