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Barbara Keys

## Soviet Sport and Transnational Mass Culture in the 1930s

‘Life has become universalised’, José Ortega y Gasset declared in 1930, describing the new transportation and communications technologies that seemed to knit the farthest reaches of the globe into a single entity. In the new ‘age of the masses’, the world, rather than the local community, constituted the frame of reference for determining life’s potentialities.<sup>1</sup> This ‘universalization’ was especially visible in the cultural life of interwar Europe and the USA, where the new mass culture was shaped increasingly by distant influences, as films, fashion, popular music like jazz, and dances like the foxtrot travelled across increasingly porous frontiers. The power of these transnational cultural flows to transform social relationships and entrenched mores, while eluding political control, represented a challenge to nations seeking to mould culture in nationalist forms. The dilemma was particularly acute for the dictatorships, both fascist and communist, which aimed at tight political control over culture for the purposes of mass mobilization. Both fascist Italy and nazi Germany attempted, with limited success, to build autarkic alternatives to internationalized forms of mass culture.<sup>2</sup> The same was true in the Soviet Union, where contacts with foreigners, travel abroad, and the importation of foreign products, literature and films were strictly circumscribed in an effort to build a new, internally-controlled culture. Yet despite an extraordinary level of isolation, the regime’s effort to seal the country off from international cultural currents was only partially successful, leaving the Soviet Union susceptible in significant ways to trans-European influences.<sup>3</sup>

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1 José Ortega y Gasset, trans. Anthony Kerrigan, *The Revolt of the Masses* (Notre Dame 1985 [1930]), 29.

2 Victoria De Grazia, ‘Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinemas, 1920–1960’, *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (March 1989), 53–87.

3 Jazz, for example, was popular and even officially patronized in the mid-1930s; French fashion magazines were published; and although foreign films, which had been widely popular in the 1920s, were sharply restricted in the 1930s, Soviet film-makers sought to emulate western techniques and ideas, producing what one historian calls a ‘Stalinization of Hollywood style’. S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917–1980* (New York 1983), 107–80; Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions* (New York 2000), 190–3, 217; Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge 1992), 174, 213. In the 1920s, the Soviet Union continued to share in an international

One of the most popular forms of the new mass culture in interwar Europe was modern sport, the competitive, rule-bound variety of physical recreation that originated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Measured by popular followings and by its growing political significance, sport arguably represented the most powerful and far-reaching of the period's vibrant transnational cultural flows.<sup>4</sup> In the years after the first world war, both mass and élite sport burgeoned across the continent. At the élite level, the spread of spectator sports like football and boxing and the growth of bi- and multi-national competitions created a transnational sport culture, as major stars developed international reputations, coaches and trainers traded expertise and innovations, and the best teams and athletes ranked their achievements by international standards. This international culture was overseen by a network of private international organizations that came to exercise tight control over rules, eligibility, certification of records and world championships. Although scholars have emphasized the extent to which governments readily manipulated participation in this international system for nationalist ends, it is also true that sport, as a form of culture steeped in an ethos of individualism, competition and achievement that reflected its origins as an offshoot of capitalism, challenged national cultural sovereignty in ways similar to other forms of mass culture.

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union largely opted out of the western system of international sport, condemning it as inherently capitalist and exploitative. Instead, the Soviet Union attempted to build an alternative international system based on a distinctly 'proletarian' brand of sport and physical culture that eschewed individualism and record-seeking. Like other efforts to develop nationalist mass sport, however, the Soviet attempt to develop a domestic and international system of physical culture that was class-based, collectivist and mass-oriented was ultimately overtaken by the expanding powers of the capitalist, consumer-oriented and élite-centred transnational sport culture.<sup>5</sup> As

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culture, and western films, books and other elements of 'low-brow' culture were popular. Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA 1995), 165–80; Jeffrey Brooks, 'Official Xenophobia and Popular Cosmopolitanism in Early Soviet Russia', *American Historical Review*, 97, 5 (December 1992), 1431–48. More broadly, as Stephen Kotkin has recently argued, despite its pursuit of a distinctively illiberal version of modernity, the Soviet Union was enmeshed in the international modernizing trends that propelled the spread of mass politics, mass production, mass culture and mass consumption throughout Europe and the USA. Stephen Kotkin, 'Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Interwar Conjunction', *Kritika*, 2, 1 (Winter 2001), 111–64.

4 Because 'international' implies flows between nations and privileges the nation state as actor, I use the term 'transnational' to indicate flows both above and below as well as between nations. On the distinction see also David Thelen, 'The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History', *Journal of American History*, 86, 3 (December 1999), 967–8.

5 In fascist Italy, for example, the government promoted non-competitive, mass-participation sport designed to discourage aggressive individuality and to prepare participants for work and war, a system with many elements in common with early Soviet physical culture. To avoid 'contamination', a separate organ supervised high-level competitive sport, including preparation for

a result, in the early 1930s the Soviet regime dropped its opposition to 'bourgeois' sport and moved toward integration into the international sport system it had previously denounced.<sup>6</sup>

In explaining the Soviet Union's shift from rejection to acceptance of this form of transnational mass culture, this article suggests that nationalist impulses helped to fuel the internationalization of culture. The Soviet move toward engagement with western international sport was partly a product of a new orientation in Soviet foreign policy: the introduction of the Popular Front and Soviet entrance into the League of Nations in 1934, which signalled a new willingness to work with the 'bourgeoisie' to combat the fascist threat. Internally, the shift toward a competitive, high-achievement sport system modelled on western lines was consonant with the regime's 'Great Retreat' from radical toward more conservative social and cultural policies, and with its effort to overtake capitalist achievements in other spheres, such as industry and agriculture.<sup>7</sup> But in a deeper sense it was also a reflection of the ways the Soviet Union was caught up in broader modernizing processes that affected all of Europe in this period. State regulation and supervision of populations expanded dramatically after the first world war, as efforts to regulate leisure activities and develop productive soldiers and workers — through sport and physical education programmes amongst other ways, became an essential part of the repertoire of practices employed by the modern state.<sup>8</sup> In a similar way, participation in elite international sport became a marker of national power. In an era obsessed with quantification and comparison, competition in international sport seemed to offer an equitable basis for quantifiable comparisons

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the Olympics and professional competitions. In the 1930s, however, elite sport triumphed over mass sport. Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge 1981), 172–7.

6 The Soviet shift from mass to elite sport in the 1930s has long been recognized by historians of Soviet sport (see the earliest account in Henry Morton, *Soviet Sport: Mirror of Soviet Society* [New York 1963], 35). This article addresses the causes and consequences of this shift, and its international dimension, based on the recently-opened records of the main government organ for sport (the All-Union Committee on Physical Culture and Sport and its Predecessors). Despite the opening of the Russian archives, however, it remains difficult to elucidate sports-related decision-making at the highest levels of party and state because key collections were destroyed. In particular, the pre-war secret documents of the Committee on Physical Culture — including most of its correspondence with the highest levels of party and state — were burned in the months following the German invasion in 1941. See the lists of burned documents in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow [hereafter GARF], f. 7576, op. 29, d. 2.

7 The classic statement on the Great Retreat is Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York 1946).

8 David Hoffmann similarly situates Stalinist population politics in European context, arguing that Stalinist pronatalism reflected a new type of population politics practised in the modern era and that Stalinist policies, though shaped by culture and ideology, should be seen as part of a broader trend toward state management of population. Hoffmann, 'Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in its Pan-European Context', *Journal of Social History*, 34, 1 (Fall 2000), 35–54.

of national success in harnessing population resources — a political lure that proved irresistible even to a Stalinist mentality deeply hostile to capitalist forms of internationalism.

The Soviet rapprochement with international sport remained tentative and incomplete; the forces drawing the regime into engagement were offset by suspicion of the West and by fears of weakness and ideological contamination. Yet the significance of the shift should not be underestimated. To an extent that would have been unthinkable in the 1920s, the Soviet regime accepted the authority of 'bourgeois' organizations based in liberal democratic countries in determining much of the form and content of the sports played in the Soviet Union. It accepted a vision of global sport, defined not by political or ideological parameters but by ostensibly universal membership, inclusive of all countries and all classes. Although modern western sport was modified in the process of adaptation to the Soviet context — it was, in other words, Sovietized — it retained a core set of values resistant to Soviet ideological transformation.<sup>9</sup> Nationalist aspirations propelled the Soviet Union into participation in the western sport world, but at the price of opening Soviet culture to internationalist currents often subversive of broader regime goals.

It was in the late nineteenth century that the brand of modern sport pioneered in Britain first began to appear on the European continent, including in Russia. The *fin-de-siècle* fads for body-building, professional wrestling and bicycling that swept Europe also appeared in Russia, where in the years before the first world war private groups formed hundreds of sports clubs. When new international sports competitions were established, tsarist Russia was an early participant. In 1894 Russians were among the founding members of the International Olympic Committee, in 1908 a handful of Russian athletes competed in the Olympic Games in London, and in 1912 the All-Russian Football Union joined the International Football Federation. Recognizing the value of sport and physical education for international prestige and for the health and fitness of the population, the tsarist government provided a generous subsidy for the 1912 Olympic team and opened an office to promote physical fitness.<sup>10</sup> The level of state interest and of working-class involvement in sport were lower than elsewhere in Europe, but Russia was nonetheless part of the internationalizing world of sport.

<sup>9</sup> While most scholars emphasize sport's capacity to be indigenized, Arjun Appadurai has suggested that rule-bound sport is a 'hard' cultural form, one that comes with 'a set of links between value, meaning, and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform' and that therefore 'changes those who are socialized into it more readily than it is itself changed'. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis 1996), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (eds), *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution, 1881–1940* (Oxford 1998), 75–7; James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge 1977), 31–7.

The Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing civil war created a rupture in Russia's cultural relations with the West, in sport as in other realms. By disbanding tsarist-era sports organizations and replacing them with new Soviet organs, the Bolsheviks severed the relationships that had been established between Russian and western organizations. Although the All-Russian Football Union, for example, continued a shadowy existence until the mid-1920s and the International Football Federation continued to list it as an official member until 1932, Soviet authorities showed no interest in using tsarist-era bodies as conduits to western organizations or in establishing relations through new ones. Instead, the Bolsheviks set out to create their own separate and distinctive structure for 'proletarian sport'.

Bolshevik policy toward western sport reflected a principled rejection of 'bourgeois' culture. In the 1920s, Soviet theorists sought to dismantle the remnants of 'decadent' capitalist culture and to create new cultural forms appropriate for the new proletarian state. In physical culture, as in art, music, cinema, theatre and literature, the search for proletarian cultural forms generated controversy. The new Soviet physical culture, all sides agreed, ought to increase labour productivity, prepare workers for defence, and inculcate habits of collectivism, good hygiene and discipline. To achieve these goals, physical educators created widely-divergent systems combining labour gymnastics, corrective exercises, games, pageants and excursions. Some theorists rejected competitive sport altogether as inherently capitalist and corrupt, whereas others believed that certain sports could be used in moderation to draw the masses into a regimen of hygiene and exercise. All agreed, however, that individualism, record-seeking and competitive habits were vices to be discouraged.<sup>11</sup>

Internationally as well as domestically, the Soviet Union sought to build an alternative to the capitalist sports system. The Red Sport International (or Sportintern), formed in 1921 as an adjunct to the Comintern, oversaw an international 'proletarian sports' culture that posed as an alternative both to the workers' sports system run by the larger and better-organized Socialist Workers' Sport International (founded in 1920) and to the still larger and more popular capitalist sports model advanced by the International Olympic Committee and international sports federations. By sponsoring parades, demonstrations and meetings, as well as athletic competitions between Soviet athletes and European workers, the Sportintern tried to advance revolutionary goals through political education directed at members of communist (and socialist) sports clubs. At various times during its 16-year existence, the Sportintern claimed member sections in Europe, Latin America and North America, but its total membership never exceeded several hundred thousand workers outside the Soviet Union — a small fraction of the working class interested in sport. Even at its peak it remained a marginal organization, poorly funded, poorly organized and often ignored by the Comintern. In its

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11 A.V. Lunacharskii, *Mysli o sporte* (Moscow 1930), 24–6, 40–2; Riordan, op. cit., 94–105.

main task — bringing the socialist workers' sports movement under communist control — it was spectacularly unsuccessful.<sup>12</sup>

Despite occasional denunciations of the Olympic Games and other international competitions as militaristic and exploitative, the Sportintern devoted little attention to 'bourgeois' sport. Although most European workers who participated in sport belonged to non-political sports organizations (in Soviet parlance, 'bourgeois' organizations), Sportintern policy largely ignored them.<sup>13</sup> The main government body for sport, the Supreme Council for Physical Culture and its successors, displayed greater interest in western sport.<sup>14</sup> Technically the Sportintern's Soviet section, the Council often pursued its own line in international sports relations and frequently clashed with the Sportintern. Although there were factions within both the Sportintern and the Council, as a rule Council officials were less concerned with the international workers' sports movement than with raising the level of Soviet sport. They therefore tended to look more favourably on Soviet relations with non-workers' clubs in Europe. Whereas the Comintern and the Sportintern opposed meetings with non-workers' clubs except in countries where no proletarian organizations existed, the Council argued in the mid-1920s that Soviet athletes could benefit from competition with the stronger 'bourgeois' clubs and that victories in such competitions would confer more prestige.<sup>15</sup> Stalin, then in the process of manoeuvring toward dictatorial power, is reported to have remarked: 'We compete with the bourgeoisie economically, politically, and not without success. We compete everywhere possible. Why not compete in sport?'<sup>16</sup> Despite Stalin's endorsement, for most of the 1920s competitions

12 For an overview of the relationship between the Sportintern and the socialist sport international, see David Steinberg, 'The Workers' Sport Internationals, 1920–1928', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13, 2 (April 1978), 233–51.

13 For a brief overview of Sportintern policy, see André Gounot, 'Between Revolutionary Demands and Diplomatic Necessity: The Uneasy Relationship between Soviet Sport and Worker and Bourgeois Sport in Europe from 1920 to 1937' in Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan (eds), *Sport and International Politics: The Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport* (London 1998), 184–209.

14 The Supreme Council for Physical Culture, established in 1923, was replaced in 1930 by the All-Union Council of Physical Culture attached to the Central Executive Committee. In 1936 the Council was reconstituted as the All-Union Committee on Physical Culture and Sport, its enhanced standing reflected in its direct subordination to the Council of People's Commissars (or Sovnarkom, the highest executive organ of the government). (For ease of reference, both the Council and the Committee are referred to here as the 'Physical Culture Council'.) Similar, but not equivalent to the ministries for sport established in many European countries in this period, the Council's powers were limited and its authority was contested by the Komsomol, the Central Trade Union Council, and the Commissariats of Health, Education and Defence, which also had important independent roles in sports policy.

15 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, Moscow [hereafter RGASPI], f. 537, op. 1, d. 105, l. 79; RGASPI, f. 537, op. 1, d. 126, ll. 64–5; RGASPI, f. 537, op. 1, d. 75, l. 70; RGASPI, f. 537, op. 1, d. 125, l. 93. For one Sportintern official's criticisms of 'bourgeois' deviations within the Sportintern, see Bruno Lieske to the Sportintern Presidium, August 1925, RGASPI, f. 537, op. 1, d. 104, ll. 26–57.

16 Boris Bazhanov, *Vospominaniia byvshego sekretaria Stalina* ([Paris] 1980), 235. Bazhanov

with non-workers' organizations were discouraged; only a small handful were permitted under exceptional circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

Conflicts over the role of sport in the system of physical culture, over the proper balance between collectivism and competition, and over the relationship with 'bourgeois' sport were never definitively settled, and contradictory tendencies co-existed throughout the 1920s. From the beginning, one of the aims of Soviet participation in international meets was to showcase the achievements of the Soviet physical culture movement — a goal that fostered elements of competitiveness.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as the popularity of competitive sports like football grew within the USSR, manifestations of professionalism emerged.<sup>19</sup> On the whole, however, the main thrust of Soviet international engagement in the 1920s centred on mass sport and revolutionary agitation in European workers' clubs, not on athletic achievement. The emphasis remained on promoting collectivism and discouraging individualism and record-seeking.<sup>20</sup> Despite occasional contacts with 'bourgeois' sport, there was little sense that the successes of Soviet sport should be measured against the results achieved in western sport.

The emphasis on disengagement from mainstream western sport underwent a dramatic transformation beginning in 1930, as the main aim of Soviet international sports contacts shifted from revolutionary agitation within an independent sports system to results-oriented competition within the western sports system.<sup>21</sup> Frustrated by the weakness of the communist sports movement and impressed with the growing power of mainstream sport, the regime came to see western international sport as a useful means of reaching large numbers of foreign workers and of impressing foreign governments with Soviet strength. The Sportintern, cut off from contacts with socialist clubs as a result of a disastrous policy of confrontation, moved to increase its influence in Europe by devoting more attention to the large numbers of workers in non-workers' organizations.<sup>22</sup> By 1933, the Physical Culture Council was debating

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was a member of the Physical Culture Council and a secretary to Stalin who fled the USSR in the late 1920s. He claimed (many years later) to have interceded with Stalin, who cared little about sport, when this dispute arose in 1925–26.

17 See, for example, Gounot, *op. cit.*, 191–2.

18 See, for example, a 1921 Sportintern report calling for international matches to showcase 'achieved successes'; RGASPI, f. 537, op. 1, d. 71, ll. 39–40.

19 V.I. Koloskov (ed.), *Sto let rossiiskomu futbolu* (Moscow 1997), 56–8; Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York 1993), 51–3.

20 See, for example, M. Kedrov, *Boevye zadachi Krasnogo Sportinterna* (Moscow 1930), 38, 41.

21 Some physical culture activists felt betrayed by the reversal in policy and criticized the new line as a *smena vekh*, or a retreat from revolutionary principles in the name of nationalism. Stenogram of meeting of representatives of physical culture soviets, 12 April 1934, GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 186, ll. 32–3.

22 Kedrov, *op. cit.*, 21. In advocating meets with members of bourgeois clubs, Kedrov noted that 'even raising the issue of joint competitions with workers from bourgeois groups undoubtedly will provoke heated debate within our ranks'.

whether to offer general sanction to competitions between Soviet athletes and athletes from non-workers' clubs.<sup>23</sup>

Official hostility toward the western model of competitive, achievement-oriented sport was reversed. The idea of surpassing capitalist sport first appeared in the Soviet press in late 1933, and the slogan 'Catch up with and overtake bourgeois records in sport' was officially launched in 1934. The aim was 'to bring worldwide glory to Soviet sport' and 'to win first place in the world for Soviet sport. We want victories, records, success.'<sup>24</sup> Initially, the calls were to surpass half of all world records within two to three years, but even as the impossibility of achieving that goal became apparent, the mantra became 'All world sports records should belong to the USSR.'<sup>25</sup> Paralleling the introduction of social hierarchies in other areas, as in the creation of a privileged class of high-achieving 'Stakhanovite' workers, in 1934 the regime introduced a new category of elite athlete, the 'distinguished master of sport'.<sup>26</sup>

New channels of information flow and direct contacts with European and American sport established connections that drew the USSR into the world of transnational sport. The Physical Culture Council set up a Foreign Department that carefully monitored western sport, acquiring and translating training manuals, rule books, physical education journals, films and newspapers. It began publishing informational bulletins summarizing developments, achievements and methods in foreign sport.<sup>27</sup> The Council hired foreign trainers, like French tennis star André Cochet, to come to the Soviet Union as teachers, and it organized tours of Europe for its own trainers and coaches to study the latest techniques.<sup>28</sup> The Soviet press began to devote more space and more favourable coverage to international competitions and to sports achievements and events in foreign countries.

As the Council acknowledged, direct contact in the form of face-to-face meetings with 'bourgeois' opponents was the critical element necessary for the success of the new policy. Thus, in the most visible aspect of the new programme, the regime arranged high-profile competitions between Soviet athletes and top-level western athletes (often professionals or record-holders) in

23 Physical Culture Council to Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, 13 August 1933, GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 137.

24 *Krasnyi sport*, 31 December 1933, 1; *ibid.*, 24 July 1934, 3; *ibid.*, 21 June 1934, 1.

25 *Krasnyi sport*, 31 July 1934, 1; *ibid.*, 22 October 1934, 3–4; *ibid.*, 1 January 1937, 1. (Emphasis added.) See also *Pravda*, 13 April 1935: 'In the near future we must make the USSR the country of all world records.'

26 On Stakhanovism, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (New York 1988).

27 See GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 108.

28 One former Physical Culture Council official who later emigrated recalled that employees of the Foreign Department were carefully screened because they worked with foreign materials; nevertheless, foreign newspapers and journals arrived at the department with articles and photos already cut out by censors, who feared that such publications revealed too much about life abroad. F. Legostaev, *Fizicheskoe vospitanie i sport v SSSR* (Munich 1952), 28.

select sports. Soviet athletes would reach the highest levels, authorities agreed, only by competing against the strongest opponents — those formerly denounced as ‘bourgeois’. As one sports official put it: ‘Raising our sporting class and accomplishing the goal of “catching up with and overtaking world records” depend to a large degree on the existence of systematic meetings between Soviet athletes and the best representatives of foreign sport’, in which Soviet athletes could both test their skills and learn first-hand the latest tactics and techniques.<sup>29</sup>

What officials called Soviet sport’s ‘entry into the world arena’ was fixed for the year 1934.<sup>30</sup> ‘Never before’, Council chairman Nikolai Antipov said, ‘has there been such a sharp turn in our international work.’<sup>31</sup> Marking the Soviet debut on the world stage was a trip to Czechoslovakia by a delegation of Soviet boxers, runners and football players, sent to compete against Czech professionals in October. The visit — the first major exchange with ‘bourgeois’ clubs — was part of an effort to consolidate improved relations after Czechoslovakia extended official recognition to the USSR in June. The highlight was a football match played between Spartak Moscow and Zidenice Brno, a highly-ranked Czech professional side, which drew extraordinary public interest both at home and in Czechoslovakia. It was the first time a Soviet team had met a top-flight European professional team: the Czechs were among the top football powers on the continent and just a few months earlier had narrowly lost to Italy in the second World Cup final.<sup>32</sup>

For Soviet football players and their fans, the transition to competition against top athletes produced high levels of both excitement and anxiety. Soviet fans greeted the Czech match with tremendous enthusiasm precisely because it represented a new, higher level of competition. As the team’s captain observed:

No foreign trip of Soviet sportsmen has generated as much interest in sporting circles as the trip to Czechoslovakia. . . . We still know little about foreign football, and therefore all kinds of legends about professional teams were often created. . . . Just the word ‘professionals’ inspired in some people a kind of admiration that had absolutely no basis.<sup>33</sup>

Both players and officials hoped for success but feared that European professionals would outclass them. Nikolai Starostin, the team coach and head of the Spartak sports society, recalled that the players were so nervous that no

<sup>29</sup> Karpov and Polliak to Zelikov (1938), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 32–3.

<sup>30</sup> Stenogram of meeting of Council Presidium, 28 November 1934, GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 182, l. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Krasnyi sport*, 22 October 1934, 3.

<sup>32</sup> As a condition of permitting the trip, Czech authorities insisted that Soviet athletes refrain from participating in political demonstrations of any kind. When some track-and-field athletes who were also part of the delegation did participate in a protest, they were arrested and deported. Aleksandr Starostin, *Rasskaz kapitana* (Moscow 1935), 9, 67–9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

one slept before the match. The onus of their mission — ‘to defend the honour of Soviet sport’ — weighed heavily.<sup>34</sup>

For the Soviet football world, the Soviet victory in a close match against the Czech ‘capitalists’ offered the ultimate validation of the strength of Soviet football. From the Czech point of view, Soviet success was modest. As the head of the Czech football federation put it: ‘The Russians behaved like correct and capable sportsmen, without in any way having shown any extraordinary qualities.’<sup>35</sup> For the Soviets, however, the intoxicating victory led to overstated assessments. Players and officials quickly claimed that the match proved that Soviet football ranked among Europe’s best. In Starostin’s view: ‘We had firmly secured our right to be considered first-class football players in international estimation.’<sup>36</sup> The delegation’s leaders likewise reported: ‘To the general surprise of all circles of Czech society, in football our team showed that Soviet football players, who had never been seen before in a serious international match, had an international class of game that set them at the same level as the best clubs of Europe.’<sup>37</sup>

The victory and the successful debut of Soviet sport that it marked led to more matches against top European athletes, resulting in an exchange of information and experience that proved highly influential in shaping Soviet sport. The following year marked the high point of Soviet international exchanges, as more than 150 Soviet swimmers, wrestlers, skaters, weightlifters, cyclists, tennis players, fencers, boxers and runners sallied forth to Scandinavia, Turkey, France and Belgium. French tennis stars and Norwegian skaters and skiers competed in the USSR, and a Prague professional football team toured Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev (winning or drawing a tie in all matches). Helping to cement friendly relations with France after the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet mutual-assistance pact in May 1935, a Ukrainian football team played Red Star, the twelfth-ranked team in the French league, in Paris; the Ukrainians won easily. In women’s basketball, a Soviet team played the French national team. In a major event in January 1936, a Moscow football team lost a close match to Racing Club, the team that had just won the French championship, in front of 60,000 spectators at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris.<sup>38</sup>

34 Stenogram of meeting of players who went to Czechoslovakia, 22 November 1934, GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 160, ll. 2, 8, 16–18.

35 Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité Exécutif, Paris, 17 November 1934, Fédération Internationale de Football Association Archives, Zürich (hereafter FIFA), Executive Committee Agendas and Minutes, 1927–1943.

36 Ibid., l. 53.

37 Kharchenko and Demin to Antipov, Kosarev, Shvernik and Iagoda, RGASPI, f. 1–m, op. 21, d. 250, l. 3.

38 List of international sports contacts, GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 197, ll. 20–35; *Krasnyi sport*, 9 August 1935, 1; *ibid.*, 31 August 1935, 1. For a detailed description of the 1935 meets, including tables comparing Soviet and world records in various sports, see Ivan Kharchenko, *Sovetskii sport na pod’eme* (Moscow 1936).

Although Soviet athletes continued to compete occasionally against workers' clubs, such meets were of marginal importance in the new scheme favouring western over workers' sport. While Soviet sports officials turned unrelenting criticism of western sport into modulated admiration, the Sportintern, with its revolutionary, anti-capitalist stance and focus on workers' sport, slipped into irrelevance.<sup>39</sup> As the Physical Culture Council assumed primary control of international sports contacts in the mid-1930s, the Sportintern was relegated to insignificance, and in 1937 the Comintern officially dissolved it.<sup>40</sup> A Sportintern secretary explained in 1937: 'The form of independent workers' sports organizations, isolated from the general large [i.e. 'bourgeois'] organizations, is no longer satisfactory for us. We must find a new form of organizing our influence in the general sports movement in each country.' Rather than focusing their attention on workers' organizations, communists were now instructed to work within 'bourgeois' organizations. Instead of condemning sports events like the Olympics as imperialist and militarist spectacles, communist parties now celebrated the ideals and traditions of modern sport. The communist campaign to boycott the 1936 'Nazi Olympics' in Berlin accepted as genuine the Olympic ideals of pacifism and racial equality and denounced the nazis for violating these principles.<sup>41</sup> A Comintern commission on the sports question recommended that communist parties use 'the strong Olympic traditions which exist in the sporting world' to strengthen 'peace and friendship among peoples' and to secure 'the progressive and cultured development of sport'. Where possible, communists were to reinforce national Olympic committees with democratic and progressive members.<sup>42</sup>

Despite these substantial moves toward rapprochement with western sport, the relationship remained unconsummated in one key respect: the USSR did not become a participant in the Olympic Games or a member of the international sports federations that exerted increasingly tight control over international competition. Part of the problem lay in the attitude of these organizations toward the Soviet Union. The International Olympic Committee

39 The Popular Front policy of conciliation with the 'bourgeoisie' also rendered superfluous the Red International of Labour Unions (or Profintern), another Comintern auxiliary. It began the process of dissolution in 1936.

40 On 23 May 1937, calling the continued existence of the Sportintern 'inexpedient', the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern transferred responsibility for sports work directly to national communist parties and established a special sports commission under the Secretariat of the Executive Committee. The Secretariat of the Sportintern was relegated to 'an auxiliary organ of the Comintern for sports activity', whose main duty was to collect information and issue a sports journal. Resolution on the transformation of the Sportintern Secretariat into an auxiliary organ of the Comintern for sport, 23 May 1937, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 255, ll. 4, 15–16. On Dimitrov's orders, the disbanding of the Sportintern was kept secret. That the Sportintern had ceased to function was therefore not publicly known at the time, and scholars have sometimes erroneously suggested that the organization lasted into the war years.

41 Stenogram of meeting of Presidium of Comintern Executive Committee, 22 March 1937, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 251, ll. 10–20, 77.

42 Draft resolution of the Secretariat of Comintern Executive Committee on tasks of the Sportintern (c. April 1937), RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 252, l. 51.

(IOC), for example, claimed to be a universalist organization that ignored politics, but it was disinclined to extend membership to the Soviet Union. In 1934, the IOC's founder and retired president, Pierre de Coubertin, privately protested that the failure to invite the Soviet Union to the 1936 Olympic Games violated the Olympic spirit of universalism. The Soviets, he said, 'had long abandoned the idea' of holding separate international events and now 'would be favourable to participation' in the Olympics. IOC president Henri de Baillet-Latour, however, refused to consider Soviet participation. 'I am absolutely opposed', he wrote to an associate, 'not wanting at any price to facilitate the corruption of the youth of the entire world by putting them in contact with these reds, who would take advantage [of participation] to make wild propaganda. Let's not lapse into the errors of the League of Nations.'<sup>43</sup> Available evidence suggests that Soviet officials, though likely resentful of their exclusion, did not give serious consideration to the major expenditure of energy and resources that an Olympic entry would have entailed.

Several of the international federations governing international sports were more welcoming of Soviet membership than was the IOC. The federations, whose monopolistic powers had grown substantially over the interwar years in tandem with the growth of international competition, typically prohibited their members from engaging in matches against non-members. But when national associations, often for their own political reasons, began to clamour for contacts with the Soviets in the early 1930s, several federations made exceptions to allow competitions with Soviet athletes. In October 1934, for example, the international football federation (FIFA) granted permission to the Czech national football association for a match against a Soviet team; the result was the Spartak-Zidenice match already described. In their deliberations, FIFA's leaders noted that contact with the Soviets was 'a delicate question', because Soviet sports organizations maintained relations with workers' sports organizations that were antagonistic toward FIFA's national associations. Nevertheless, genuinely desirous of securing Soviet membership, FIFA officials decided to grant 'provisional' authorization for meets in the interest of 'studying the possibility of a rapprochement' with Soviet football.<sup>44</sup> The policy of granting 'exceptional' permission for Soviet matches was extended to April 1936, when the Soviets appeared to renege on a promise to join FIFA during negotiations to bring a Scottish team to the USSR. FIFA's leadership then

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43 Berdez to Baillet-Latour, 7 January 1934, and Baillet-Latour to Berdez, 17 January 1934, International Olympic Committee Archives, Lausanne, Switzerland, Correspondence of Baillet-Latour. For a highly-critical assessment of the IOC's flirtation with fascism in the 1930s, see John Hoberman, 'Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism', *Journal of Sport History*, 22, 1 (Spring 1995), 1-37.

44 Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité d'Urgence, Paris, 7 October 1934, FIFA, Comité d'Urgence, Correspondence, 1932-50; Circular from Schrickler to members of the Executive Committee, 19 October 1934, FIFA, Executive Committee Agendas and Minutes, 1927-1943. See also Peter Beck, *Scoring for Britain: International Football and International Politics, 1900-1939* (London 1999), 231.

decided that further matches would not be permitted until the Soviets joined, and no further matches between Soviet teams and FIFA members took place until 1940.<sup>45</sup> The international track federation (IAAF) similarly voted to allow meets with Soviet teams beginning in 1934 and then discontinued the practice in 1937.<sup>46</sup> The result was that the boom in Soviet–western contacts in 1935–36 had slowed to a trickle by 1937.

The ‘blockade’ — as Soviet officials saw it — quickly took its toll on their efforts to achieve first-class sports results. In 1938, the Physical Culture Council expressed frustration that, despite the imperative to increase the number of international meets, efforts to do so ‘in recent years have run into a very serious obstacle’ — the exclusivity of international federations. As an official wrote:

In view of the fact that the Soviet Union is not a member of a single one of these associations, it has found itself in recent years in a position of isolation, with extremely rare opportunities to invite individual, technically strong sportsmen (out of the small number who have the right to compete without special permission from international associations), and without any opportunities to invite in systematic order the strongest national teams.<sup>47</sup>

To ensure continued progress in élite sport, the Council considered joining a number of federations, including those for football, tennis, weightlifting, swimming, track and field, and skating — all sports in which Soviet athletes could claim respectable, if not top-level, results. In the second half of the 1930s, the Council initiated exchanges of information, acquired statutes and rule books, and opened informal or indirect negotiations on membership. When Council chairman Ivan Kharchenko was in Paris for the match against Racing, for example, he met informally with FIFA head Jules Rimet.<sup>48</sup> Within the Council, the view seems to have been that membership was both necessary and inevitable, and the Council began to adopt many federation rules in order to bring Soviet practices into line with international standards. At a 1937 Comintern meeting, Kharchenko declared: ‘We evidently are going to participate in international organizations.’<sup>49</sup>

The Soviet tango with FIFA illuminates both the suspicion and the ignorance of the West that plagued the Soviet rapprochement with western sport.

45 Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité Exécutif, 28 November 1936, Frankfurt, Annexe No. II.1, FIFA, Executive Committee Agendas and Minutes, 1927–1943. The Basque professionals who visited the USSR in 1937 (see below) played without FIFA sanction.

46 Translated excerpts from Vienna’s *Sport-Tageblatt* and *Prager Tageblatt*, 17 July 1937, in GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 328, ll. 4–5. In 1944 Sigfrid Eström, the head of the IAAF, wrote that ‘the Russians have been invited several times in earlier years to become members of IAAF but have refused’. Edström to Brundage, 19 May 1944, Avery Brundage Collection, University of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, Box 42.

47 Karpov and Polliak to Zelikov (1938), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 32–3.

48 Translation of article from *L’Auto*, 24 January 1936, in RGASPI, f. 1–m, op. 21, d. 283, ll. 36–7.

49 Stenogram of meeting of Presidium of Comintern Executive Committee, 22 March 1937, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 251, l. 110.

Because football was the country's most popular sport and one of the USSR's strongest, Soviet officials were most eager to join FIFA, but they hesitated because they viewed FIFA's leadership as hostile. FIFA, according to the Council, was 'led by fascist elements' who had 'a clearly unfriendly attitude toward the USSR' — a reference to FIFA secretary Ivo Schricker, a German with close ties to the Nazi sports establishment.<sup>50</sup> Although FIFA's internal correspondence indicates that it was genuinely interested in Soviet membership, the Soviets likely feared that a request to join would be publicly rejected or that onerous conditions would be attached. In an effort to bridge the impasse, in mid-1938 Soviet sports authorities held talks with Rudolf Pelikan, a member of FIFA's Executive Committee and the president of the Czech football association whose contacts with Soviet sport dated back to 1934.<sup>51</sup> Pelikan proposed a technical agreement, evidently short of full membership, that would allow the Soviet Union to compete against FIFA members of its own choosing. The Council then sought permission from the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) to join FIFA under the terms of the technical agreement, as well as the federations for track and field, skating, weightlifting and swimming. In its application, the Committee noted that the initiative for Soviet entry came from FIFA, which had virtually guaranteed admission, and that Klement Gottwald, head of the Czech Communist Party, supported the agreement.<sup>52</sup>

50 Karpov and Polliak to Zelikov (1938), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 32–3. On Soviet views of Schricker see RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 251, l. 33, and RGASPI, f. 495, op. 20, d. 871, ll. 156–7.

51 According to Swedish press reports, Pelikan visited Moscow and proposed that the Soviet Union join FIFA and compete in the 1940 Helsinki Olympic Games, on condition that the regime agreed to join the International Olympic Committee, to respect amateur rules, to uphold the regulations of international federations in refraining from the use of sport as political propaganda, and to maintain ties with workers' sports associations only as permitted on a case-by-case basis by international federations. Kristina Exner-Carl, *Sport und Politik in den Beziehungen Finnlands zur Sowjetunion, 1940–1952* (Wiesbaden 1997), 55–8, summarizing a report in the Stockholm sports paper *Idrottsbladet* from 12 October 1938, with the headline 'The Soviet Union breaks its isolation! It will be allowed to start in Helsinki and become a member of FIFA when it meets four conditions.' The newspaper article also claimed that Soviet authorities had discussed the participation of a Soviet soccer team at the Olympics with the Finnish Olympic Committee, but Exner-Carl found no reports of any such discussions in the Committee's protocols.

52 Zelikov to Kosior, 10 September 1938, GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 377, ll. 77–8. The text of the technical agreement is not in the Council's files, but according to the assessment offered by the Council's Foreign Department, it offered the Soviet Union 'the opportunity to meet with the strongest representatives of international football (the most popular sport in the USSR), without depending politically or practically on the leadership of FIFA'. The Department also recommended joining the international federations for track and field and for skating, because 'Soviet sportsmen occupy a respected place in these sports and the Scandinavian leadership of these associations is friendly toward the USSR'. Karpov and Polliak to Zelikov (1938), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 32–3.

The Politburo had discussed joining the International Shooting Union as early as 1935 (the result is unknown). Protocol no. 31, 28 July 1935, and no. 32, 31 August 1935, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 969.

In the end, the Sovnarkom and the Politburo — the ultimate authority in determining international sports contacts<sup>53</sup> — chose not to grant permission, possibly fearing that subordination to international bodies would entail too great a loss of control over Soviet sport. The timing was also inopportune, as international tensions mounted and the internal purges of the Soviet leadership reached their peak. Another obstacle was the restrictions that membership of federations would have imposed on competitions with workers' sports organizations. Although such meetings had diminished in importance by 1938, renouncing them altogether would have been politically difficult. Soviet authorities probably hesitated, too, because of doubts about the strength of Soviet sport. Where Soviet achievements were indisputably at world-class level, the regime was willing to join 'bourgeois' international structures. In aviation, a field akin to sport but one accorded higher priority by the regime, the Soviet Union joined the international federation in 1936 immediately after famed pilot Valerii Chkalov's world distance record was refused official standing in the record books because Chkalov did not belong to a federation member country. From then on, Soviet authorities followed federation requirements for certifying records and soon held a commanding lead in world aviation records.<sup>54</sup> In sport, however, where direct contacts with foreigners were required and where federations imposed more stringent requirements for participation, submission to international authorities entailed greater sacrifice.

The Soviet regime, then, did not become a full member of the western sports club, but its efforts to emulate western sport had significant internal consequences. In football, for example, the high-profile loss to Racing in 1936 led to a substantial organizational restructuring that mirrored developments elsewhere in Europe. Across the continent, football was rising to new heights of popularity in the interwar years; previously limited to middle classes in major cities, it now became a mass phenomenon. One reason for the increase in popularity was the creation of leagues in most European countries. Before the systematization of competition within leagues, it was impossible to document the relative progress of teams, and fan enthusiasm was consequently short-lived.<sup>55</sup> Leagues brought fixed schedules and regular championships. Results and rankings were published regularly in the new sports sections of newspapers and in new sports dailies, and fans increasingly identified with 'their' teams. With spectators willing to pay to see matches, clubs became profitable,

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53 Proposals for international sports matches had to be approved by the Politburo; see, for example, the resolution approving the match against Racing Club: RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 974, l. 11.

54 John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932–1939* (New York 1998), 70, 96–8; Protocol of 20 April 1936 Politburo meeting, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 976, l. 49.

55 Christiane Eisenberg, 'Football in Germany: Beginnings, 1890–1914', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 8, 2 (1991), 206.

and the pressures for players to devote more time to the game increased as well, resulting in the professionalization of the game. Hungary and Austria created professional leagues in 1924, Czechoslovakia in 1925, Spain in 1928, France in 1932, Switzerland in 1933–34.<sup>56</sup>

As in Europe before the advent of leagues, Soviet football lacked a framework for regular, organized competition before 1936. City and national championships were sometimes held, but there was no fixed structure for such competitions.<sup>57</sup> The 1936 loss in Paris prompted Nikolai Starostin to propose a radical restructuring around an openly professional league, quite deliberately modelled on those in Europe. In a memo to the Council and the Komsomol in February 1936, Starostin wrote:

In the last two or three years Soviet football has shown that it stands at the level of the best European teams. . . . At the same time, a better acquaintance with working conditions for foreign professional football players — and all the best teams in Europe consist of professionals — showed us that professional football has a number of advantages over amateur.

Professionals, he explained, practised daily, had ‘absolute discipline’ and gained ‘colossal experience’ from frequent international matches. He proposed establishing eight professional club teams in six cities around the country, with two championship seasons per year. This system, he argued, would simply ‘legalize the professionalism that already exists in our football’. Setting up a league comparable to what existed in the West, Starostin felt, would inevitably lead to a higher class of Soviet football.<sup>58</sup> The memo — striking in its uncritical admiration of western, commercialized sport, the absence of any effort to distance Soviet sport ideologically from the western version, and the assumption that the best way to advance Soviet sport was to implant western practices and structures — represented a dramatic departure from the discourse of earlier years.

The Council accepted most of Starostin’s proposals, remodelling football along western lines. Replacing the haphazard organization of previous years, the Council created a league similar to those in Europe, consisting of ‘demonstration teams of masters’ under the sponsorship of individual sports societies and factories.<sup>59</sup> Although they were never officially acknowledged as professional teams, players and coaches received wages, a fact that was openly

56 Bill Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game* (Aldershot 1994), 90; Alfred Wahl and Pierre Lanfranchi, *Les footballeurs professionnels des années trente à nos jours* (Paris 1995), 41.

57 Koloskov, op. cit., 60–1; Edelman, op. cit., 44–7.

58 Starostin to Kosarev and Mantsev (15 February 1936), GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 275, ll. 33–4. See also the description of press accounts of a meeting of the Komsomol’s Central Committee at which Starostin presented his proposal, in Edelman, op. cit., 60.

59 Koloskov, op. cit., 77–8. On the formation of the league, see also Edelman, op. cit., 51, 57–62. Sport societies were established in 1935 and organized sport along production (rather than territorial or sports) principles: thus, individual trade unions organized multi-sport societies. Societies were also run by the secret police (Dinamo), the Red Army (Central House), and the producers’ co-operatives (Spartak).

discussed in the press.<sup>60</sup> In accordance with Starostin's recommendation, two annual championships were held, as well as a USSR Cup, open to any team and organized according to the Olympic system — very much like the national cup competitions that had become common in the West. As in the rest of Europe, the league system helped to expand football's popularity, and by 1939 the USSR Cup matches attracted 10,000,000 spectators.<sup>61</sup> Similar leagues were also established in basketball, wrestling, shooting, ice hockey and boxing.<sup>62</sup>

Soviet sport came to resemble the European variety in other important ways. The Council adapted rules in various sports to conform to western standards, and it studied and emulated European and American tactics and training techniques. In football, for example, the matches in Czechoslovakia and France prompted Spartak to adopt the 'W' formation, a defensive tactical innovation practised by some English and continental clubs. It soon became standard among Soviet teams.<sup>63</sup> Competing within the western sports system, moreover, placed limits on Soviet sport. In 1938, for example, Lavrentii Beria, a serious football fan who was then the secretary of the Georgian party but would soon head the secret police, pushed for several changes to 'Sovietize' the organization of football, including redesigning the league around one team per Soviet republic. The Council rebuffed his efforts on the grounds that the requirements of international competition would not allow them.<sup>64</sup> The westernization of Soviet sport also had broader social consequences, including competition among clubs for the best athletes that led to the buying and selling of athletes, violence and corruption, and the creation of a class of privileged, professional athletes who often failed to demonstrate proper 'Soviet' behaviour both on and off the field.<sup>65</sup>

The effort to remodel Soviet sport along western lines and to compete on western terms produced tensions and conflicts. One symptom of discontent was the conflict that erupted in 1937 and 1938 between the Council and the Komsomol (along with Spartak, the Komsomol-supported sports society). Driven by the dynamics of the ongoing purges, the conflict was also a reaction to the effort to create an élite sports system capable of competing with the West. When a visiting professional football team from the Basque region of Spain, on an international tour to raise funds for the Republican cause, easily beat the best Soviet football teams in six out of seven games in July 1937, the party and the Komsomol attacked the Council for the failings of its sports

60 Edelman, op. cit., 66.

61 *Krasnyi sport*, 25 March 1940, 3.

62 Riordan, op. cit., 127, 133.

63 M.D. Romm, 'Sistema 'Dubl'-ve' v futbole, ee voznikovenie i vliianie na taktiku igry', *Teoriia i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury*, May 1938, 40; Starostin, op. cit., 59–60.

64 Beria to Stalin, 16 August 1938, GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 375, ll. 13–14; Zelikov to Molotov, 7 October 1938, GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 375, ll. 3–3ob, 6–7; Zelikov to Sovnarkom (1938), GARF, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 375, ll. 8–11.

65 These problems were widely discussed in the press and were the subject of many Komsomol discussions in 1939; see the reports in RGASPI, f. 1–m, op. 23, d. 1365.

policy. *Pravda* sharply criticized the Council for failing to produce ‘the best sportsmen in the world’, but — demonstrating the contradictions within Soviet sport — ascribed blame to the Council’s neglect of mass work and its over-emphasis on élite sport.<sup>66</sup> In defence, the Council’s leadership instituted sundry organizational changes; it also initiated an investigation into Spartak. Nikolai Starostin and his brothers were accused of buying and selling players, doing insufficient political–educational work, squandering state funds, placing too little emphasis on militarized sports, bringing back foreign goods from trips abroad, using Spartak funds to pay for apartments and — most important — ‘of introducing bourgeois methods of work into sport’.<sup>67</sup> Spartak track stars Serafim and Georgii Znamenskii wrote denunciations accusing the Starostin brothers of corruption. They also criticized Nikolai’s management style, which they regarded as too close to what they had seen in capitalist sport. As Georgii wrote, ‘Starostin’s leadership and his education of sportsmen are directed to the exact opposite of a social–cultural organization . . . [His] method is similar to an entrepreneurial, private sports club.’<sup>68</sup> Serafim echoed this sentiment: ‘Nikolai Starostin’s manner is not like that of a leader of a Soviet sports society, but is like that of the owner of a private sports club, like the owner of the Palais de Sport in Paris.’ In visits abroad, Serafim suggested, Starostin felt all too at ease with capitalist sportsmen.<sup>69</sup>

Reflecting the unresolved tension between élite and mass sport, criticism of Spartak often centred on its deficiencies in promoting mass-participation and defence-related sport. Yet the press was also full of calls to eradicate ‘self-seeking frames of mind’, ‘parasitic attitudes’ and ‘bourgeois customs’, and to root out ‘enemies of the people’ who were ‘contaminating’ the spirit of Soviet sportsmen by paying stipends and promoting ‘bourgeois professionalism’, all of which suggest a deeper unease with the effects of cultural transfer resulting from the engagement with western sport.<sup>70</sup> It was, after all, precisely Starostin’s ‘bourgeois methods of work’ that had made Spartak one of the two most successful sports societies in the country (along with Dinamo, the sports society run by the secret police). Starostin paid players well, gave them contracts, lured good players from other teams with promises of higher salaries, and provided privileges such as apartments, dachas and hard currency to buy foreign goods during trips abroad. These practices were employed by other sports societies, but they were used most effectively by Spartak, and the

66 *Pravda*, 5 August 1937, 4.

67 Nikolai, Aleksandr, Andrei and Petr Starostin to Molotov, 3 September 1937, RGASPI, f. 1–m, op. 23, d. 1268, ll. 11–13.

68 G.I. Znamenskii to Knopova, 18 September 1937, RGASPI, f. 1–m, op. 23, d. 1268, ll. 22–3.

69 S. Znamenskii to Knopova (September 1937), RGASPI, f. 1–m, op. 23, d. 1268, ll. 29–31. Nikolai Starostin was finally arrested during the war. He claimed that Beria, an avid fan of Spartak’s major rival, the Dinamo society of the secret police, was irked by Spartak’s success in the late 1930s but could not take revenge until the war. See Nikolai Starostin, *Futbol skvoz’ gody* (Moscow 1989), 49ff. See also Edelman, op. cit., 77; and James Riordan, ‘The Strange Story of Nikolai Starostin, Football and Lavrentii Beria’, *Europe–Asia Studies*, 46, 4 (1994), 681–90.

70 *Krasnyi sport*, 1 February 1938, 1.

society's very success made it a target for Soviet officials uncomfortable with the necessary by-products of the quest for records. Despite complaints that 'the planting of elements of bourgeois professionalism in Soviet sport' was hindering 'the battle for world records',<sup>71</sup> Soviet sport would not have achieved the results it did without the introduction of élitism, salaries and privileges.

Official discomfort with the unintended effects of cultural transfer eventually intersected with the onset of the purges temporarily to suspend the programme to tighten Soviet–western sports contacts. In 1938 and 1939 the Soviets did not participate in any major international matches.<sup>72</sup> In 1938 the only Soviet athletes to travel abroad were sent to France: ten runners, two swimmers and the Torpedo football team.<sup>73</sup> The Council continued to propose exchanges, but the Sovnarkom refused to permit them.<sup>74</sup> In late 1939, after the Nazi–Soviet Pact, the Council drew up an ambitious proposal for sports exchanges in 1940, primarily with Germany and the Baltic republics, but again the Sovnarkom refused to approve the plan.<sup>75</sup> The only high-profile meets to take place in the years immediately preceding the German invasion of the USSR were football matches with Bulgaria in the autumn of 1940, which were used as a diplomatic tool in the German–Soviet struggle for influence in the Balkans.<sup>76</sup>

The Soviet Union's contacts with international sport in the 1930s laid the basis for its rapid move to full membership after the second world war. Emerging from the war with its international standing greatly enhanced, the regime now placed a much higher priority on the use of sport to project and enhance its great-power status. It chose first to enter the federations governing those sports in which it was most confident of international success: football and weightlifting (both in 1946). Track and field, basketball, wrestling, swimming, volleyball, skating, skiing, boxing and gymnastics quickly followed.<sup>77</sup> The

71 Ibid., 3 January 1939, 1, 3.

72 Ibid., 15 September 1940, 3, noted the lack of serious international matches in 1938 and 1939.

73 *Pravda*, 6 July 1938, 6; list of sports contacts, GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 197, ll. 20–35. French, Czech and Norwegian athletes in various sports visited the USSR in 1938.

74 Memo to Vyshinskii (June 1939), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 192, l. 5.

75 Plan of international sports meetings for 1940 (1939), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2, d. 205, ll. 3–4; Legostaev, op. cit., 27.

76 The large number of meets described for the years 1938–40 in F.I. Samoukov, V.V. Stolbov and N.I. Toropov (eds), *Fizicheskaia kul'tura i sport v SSSR* (Moscow 1967), 158, most likely refers to matches proposed, not held. The assessment that in 1939–40 'some 250 German athletes competed in the USSR and 175 Soviet athletes competed in Germany' and that 'more sports contests took place between Soviet and German athletes during 1940 than between the athletes of the USSR and all "bourgeois" states in all the preceding years since 1917' is incorrect; James Riordan, 'The Sports Policy of the Soviet Union, 1917–1941' in Arnaud and Riordan, op. cit., 77. The thrust of nazi foreign sports policy in these years was directed toward other countries; see Hans Joachim Teichler, *Internationale Sportpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Schorndorf 1991), pt. 3.

77 See the list of dates of Politburo resolutions permitting entry into various federations, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 99, l. 97.

regime now felt confident enough not simply to petition for membership in federations but to negotiate concessions. The policy adopted in 1947 was to request that a Soviet official be given a position in the federation's governing body (typically a vice presidency or membership of the executive committee), that Russian be made an official language, and that fascist Spain be excluded. Federations generally acceded to the first request, but the Soviets had less success with the latter two. Soviet officials also tried to include Ukraine and Belorussia as separate members and to create European groupings within federations to counter American influence.<sup>78</sup>

By devoting new resources and attention to élite sport, the regime quickly registered impressive gains. Although the Soviets declined to participate in the 1948 London Olympics, a delegation sent to observe the Games concluded that the Soviet Union would have been second only to the USA.<sup>79</sup> In the late 1940s, however, the regime made it a priority to engage in international competitions mainly in sports with wide popular followings, where the effects on public opinion would be greatest, and to participate only when Soviet athletes were guaranteed success — a policy that (not surprisingly) led to relatively few matches.<sup>80</sup>

Although the foundations of what became 'the big red sports machine' can be traced to the 1930s, the Soviet Union could not then have claimed status as a major sports power. Its achievements in particular sports — notably football, where the best Soviet teams were roughly equivalent to high-ranking professional teams in the West, and weightlifting, where Soviet athletes had set marks exceeding 22 of the 35 world records then in place<sup>81</sup> — were impressive, but in most sports Soviet athletes lagged far behind world levels. Over the course of the 1930s the regime devoted greater attention to sport, particularly as a form of paramilitary training, but it was not yet the state priority it became during the Cold War. Funding, except for a few élite sports societies, was low. Facilities and equipment tended to be of poor quality and in short supply, and low standards of living and poor nutrition affected athletic performance.<sup>82</sup>

In these years, the global hegemony of modern western sport and its international institutional structures, achieved with astonishing rapidity in the postwar years, was not a foregone conclusion. Alternative visions of modern body cultures, including an international workers' sports movement, remained

78 Apollonov to Suslov, 7 July 1948, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 99, ll. 1–2; report of Soviet sports delegation to London, 25 August 1948, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 99, ll. 44–59; Sobolev to Klochko, 4 October 1948, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 99, ll. 87–90.

79 Report of Soviet sports delegation to London, 25 August 1948, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 99, ll. 44–59. On Soviet entry into the Olympics see also N.N. Romanov, *Trudnye dorogi k olimpu* (Moscow 1987).

80 See, for example, Mikhailov's complaints to Malenkov, 4 June 1949, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 267, ll. 40–1.

81 Snegov to Vyshinskii (June 1939), GARF, f. 7576, op. 2., d. 192, l. 8; A.P. Pustovalov, *Za mirovye sportivnye rekordy* (Moscow 1941), 6.

82 Legostaev, op cit., 26.

viable. That the Soviet Union abandoned the quest for an independent system of physical culture in favour of adapting to the western international sports system is related to other shifts noted earlier, including Stalin's move away from proletarian internationalism toward a more statist and security-oriented approach to both domestic and foreign policy. It can also be explained, however, in part by the growing appeal of internationalized forms of mass culture. The spread of modern western sport was propelled in part by its demonstrated popularity among the masses. By the 1930s, governments had also come to see it as a pre-eminent means of rationalizing the body — of producing better workers and, especially, better soldiers. It was, however, in elite sports that modern states came to see the greatest political benefits to participation in international culture. By the 1930s, participation in the contests run by international federations was increasingly considered an essential feature of a modern state, an identification fuelled partly by the rigidity sport offered as an international system. Precisely because of the uniformity of the rules and the universalistic pretensions of sport, it seemed to offer a uniquely objective and quantifiable marker of national success. Thus, nationalist motives and cultural internationalism served to reinforce each other.

Soviet authorities consistently portrayed Soviet sport as intrinsically different from capitalist sport, and there were indeed differences, both real and rhetorical. 'Physical culture', notably in the form of mass gymnastics demonstrations highlighted in the annual 'day of physical culture' parades on Red Square, continued to exist alongside competitive sport. Within sport, authorities continued to inculcate a collectivist ethos. Individual stars, though they were celebrated and received privileges, never attained the level of fame or idolatry (or riches) that became common elsewhere in Europe and the USA. Popular media stressed the message that the achievements of Soviet athletes were the product of, and a tribute to, the Soviet system, downplaying the western notion that achievements primarily reflected individual effort and will. State funding and control of sport within a planned economy, moreover, gave Soviet sport a distinctly different character from its highly commercialized western counterpart.

Yet the Sovietization of competitive sport should not obscure a reciprocal westernization of Soviet physical culture. By setting as its goal the overtaking of western sport, the Soviet sports establishment opened the door to widespread imitation of western practices. Competing on western terms involved changes not just in rules, tactics, training methods and the organization of a competitive system of leagues and championships, but in the promotion of management styles and patterns of thought that clashed with communist ideology — and hence were condemned as 'bourgeois' even as they produced success. Many of the growing pains experienced in Soviet sport — player misbehaviour, player transfers, salary disputes, fighting on the field, and poor officiating — mirrored those that were occurring in the rest of Europe.<sup>83</sup> Even

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83 Many reports and meetings on such issues were sponsored by the Komsomol in 1939; see the

the exhortations to create new Soviet styles, different from foreign canons, echoed similar calls across Europe to nationalize and domesticate international sport.<sup>84</sup> Participation in international sport hardly constituted a westernization of Soviet society, but it did connect an important element of Soviet culture to an increasingly global cultural form. Modern western sport involved the Soviet public in new consumption patterns and cultural habits that were shaped by distinctly Soviet mentalities and practices, but that also implicitly situated the Soviet Union within an international and avowedly universalist culture.

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report to the Party Central Committee, 19 October 1939, RGASPI, f. 1-m, op. 23, d. 1365, ll. 36-42; and the report of 19 November 1939, RGASPI, f. 1-m, op. 23, d. 1365, ll. 58-62.

84 *Krasnyi sport*, 25 March 1940, 3.