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Communism, Post-Communism, Sport, and Patriotism in 1980s-1990s Hungary

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Thesis

We will argue that Communism left long lasting effects on the ways in which patriotism was perceived and executed through labor. Specifically we will look into the ways in which laborers, namely athletes, both intentionally and unintentionally used their work to gain privileges.
Valter Kalaus

- Kalaus was born on August 12, 1970 in Budapest, Hungary. (1)
- His mother worked as a doctor and still does, and his father was employed by the military as a ranked officer. (2)
- He “was a kid with a lot of energy," so his parents tried a lot of activities before he gravitated toward swimming. (3)
- Kalaus would go on to swim for Honvéd, which was the Army swim team. (4)
- A talented swimmer, he went to compete at the Seoul Olympics in 1988 in the 1500-meter freestyle. This is a year before the fall of Communism, so Hungary is still under a Communist government at the time. (5)
- However, he had an interest in going to college in the U.S., and after a lot of paperwork and ruminating, he settled on the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1990-1991, where he would go on to earn All-American. He generally enjoyed his time there, though he was not ever allowed to swim with the Hungarian team again, despite qualifying for the 1992 Olympics. (6)
- Kalaus worked in Chicago for several years before he decided to move back to Hungary. (7)
- Even today, he notes that swimming has changed radically since he swam in Hungary. (8)
• The Cold War began in 1947, shortly after the horrific events of World War II. (1)

• Whereas both World War I and World War II are remembered for intense bloodshed and total destruction, the Cold War is often remembered as being more of a political power struggle between Communist and Anti-Communist nations. (2)

• Both Communist and Anti-Communist nations attempted to gain control and influence in other nations in order to spread their “superior” ideologies and project power. (3)

• The 1956 Revolution occurs during which, “Communist rulers were still traumatizing society by subjecting it to counterrevolutionary (red) terror.” (4) (György Péteri)
  
  − This is important to note, because the memory of this revolution does impact how individuals respond to future policy and propaganda efforts by Communist and Post-Communist officials.

• During the time Kalaus was swimming, Hungary made a transition from a Communist to a Post-Communist country in 1989, which is important to note for the rest of this analysis. (5)

• According to David Blanchflower and Richard Freeman, the “decades of government-dominated economic life” left an imprint on countries — such as Kalaus’ Hungary — that produced “different attitudes towards state interventions” than societies with a capitalist background. (6)
- **Context:** Even after the shift to a Post-Communist era, Hungary was still trying to work through decades of Communist ideological practices economically, and through that, the labor force.

- Even after Communism falls, it doesn’t necessarily leave in full. Pieces stayed behind and influenced economic and labor attitudes.

What are the Main Ways to Project Power?

**Propaganda Through Patriotism**

- Important public figures were used as representatives who would “advertise their world-view and way of life,” or spread propaganda in the form of “patriotism” in order to improve the appearance of their home countries. (1)

- Patriotic propaganda made both Communist and Anti-Communist Cold War nations appear to be more supported by their citizens than they actually were because representatives would often enthusiastically proclaim their country’s greatness. (2)

- **Example:** Hungarian Academy of Sciences
  - During the ‘40s, the Academy became a means through which Communist officials in Hungary could push Communist-backed scientific concepts. (3)
  - As can be seen, propaganda spanned multiple disciplines and fields.
What is Communist Patriotism?

**Argument:** Labor was the centerpiece of communist citizenship during and even after the Cold War, and athletes themselves, whose "labor" benefited the state in the same way, were therefore also laborers for their respective countries. Since labor was how states could monitor whether an individual was a good citizen, athletes were therefore also judged as patriotic or not depending on if and how they competed.

Labor: What Is It?

- According to Lebow, labor was a tool to knit together societies under a common identity (1)
- Kalaus was a vehicle through which post-Communist Hungary could assert its superiority. His labor becomes tied to one’s ability to represent one’s country—therefore one’s perceived patriotism.
- His work was just as much of a “job” as more traditional forms of labor
- This is also related to labor competitions, which Lebow mentions, were a way of expressing one’s patriotism through increased labor output. (2)

Were Athletes Considered Patriotic Laborers?

- Communist athletes were ruthlessly trained to succeed in their respective events and then taken to foreign sport meets where they were then expected to represent and express their love for their Communist home countries. (1)
They served the larger propaganda image by performing well and therefore providing a positive image of superiority for their states. Kalaus himself notes awareness of this fact. (2)

What is the Incentive to be a Patriotic Laborer?

Argument: Every athlete had a different reason for competing: for some it was perhaps out of pure love for one’s nation, but it could also be to attain benefits or avoid punishment. Therefore, one can never truly uncover the motives athletes had for their actions.

Love For Country

https://sway.office.com/Den3siAgVBrAOyDR#content=q8iHfmxnEQ9GnN

1 - “They said, ah, I’m the worst person. I, um, I am this and that. All the bad, the bad names. Um, I betrayed my country. I betrayed my club. I betrayed my, my friends. Everything. So, I should go and, and I should never come back.” (1)

– Context: Kalaus had recently decided to leave his sports team to go to college in the United States. (2)

° The team members list their country first, followed by the club, and then friendship. This idea suggests a hierarchy of importance where the country is loved above all else.

° By putting the country ahead of everything else, the team was expressing their deep-rooted love for their country, or their legitimate patriotism.

• Unfinished Utopia by Katherine Lebow: “By his own admission, youth brigade member Edmund Chmieliński was a true believer who wore his ZMP badge proudly and pored over the works of Engels, Marx, and Lenin in his leisure time.” (3)

– Context: Chmieliński was a Polish farmer who left home to become a laborer in Poland’s “first socialist city” of Nowa Huta. (4)

° Chmieliński’s willingness to wear his workers’ union badge expresses that he had real pride in his organization.
His eagerness to spend his spare time reading over the different interpretations of the government that ruled over him also show that he had a true, deep-seated love for Communism.

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Context: Kalaus, as was mentioned, decided to leave Hungary (6)

- One incentive for his teammates wanting Kalaus to leave, mainly the fact that he was betraying his country, stems more from the incentive they might have had to get rid of competition.

- As Lebow mentions, labor competitions were a central part of the Stalinist system. This expended in sport, because if there were incentives to be the best there were also incentives to get rid of competition in order to procure one’s ability to be the most patriotic. (4)
3 - “But I got to go to, ah, Rome, to Paris, to, ah, some German cities. Um, and it was great because, you know, no one else at my age or very few people at my age got to see the world, so to speak, outside of Hungary.” (8)

- **Context:** Kalaus was being asked by the interviewer if there were any advantages of being an athlete in Communist Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s. He lists several, like the ability to buy a car, get an interest-free loan, and buy foreign goods. (9)
  - Since Hungary at the time had heavy travel restrictions, being able to leave the country at all was a huge deal. (10)
  - This concept alludes to the idea that some athletes may have become athletes/patriotic laborers specifically to gain these privileges.

- “Yuri Gagarin and Celebrity Masculinity in Soviet Culture,” by Erica L. Fraser: “Khrushchev praised her “courage” and “great soul” in supporting her husband unconditionally...Other cosmonaut wives were not as supportive, a transgression for which they were publically judged.” (11)

- **Context:** Valentina Gagarina was the wife of the first cosmonaut to orbit the Earth and was praised for embodying the “ideal soviet women” and being fully dedicated to her husband’s job and the nation. (12)
  - By seeming patriotic, Gagarina was gaining two thing: public praise and public invisibility. She was both honored for her ability to promote her husband and the nation and seemingly ignored for her ability to conform to social norms. (13)
  - Since she was gaining the good-graces of her nation and being spared from public ridicule, she may have been using her perceived patriotism less for promoting her love for her country and more to gain societal advantages. (14)

What are the Disadvantages of Being a Patriotic Laborer?

**Argument:** Being an athlete came with a multitude of disadvantages, ranging from surveillance to physical punishment. Even so, athletes engaged in complicated relationships with their teammates, their coaches, and their state that entailed a balancing of fear and respect at times.
Harsh Punishments and Increased Surveillance

4 - “No matter how good and how bad you were, um, there is always one guy on the team who’s the superstar for a week or for two weeks. Then he switches to another guy, you know, and then superstar you’re dropped. And that was very tough. They did it on purpose, but back then we didn’t know that.” (1)

- **Context:** Kalaus was describing how his coach would behave during practice and the various methods he used to get the swim team into shape. (2)
  - Kalaus states that individual members of the swim team were praised for a while and then arbitrarily dropped and replaced by other team members. (3)
  - This action represents a form of mental abuse that was used to keep the athletes in line and as a method of improving their skills. Every member of the team had an equal chance of becoming the “superstar,” which then inspired competition and improvement among the athletes. (4)
  - This abusive training method reflects the importance of athletes and other representatives of Communist and Post-Communist nations. If athletes, who were international representatives, performed poorly in meets, they would be reflecting a week image onto the nation. (5)
“He’d beat you up with a stick...whatever he had in his mind. I mean, he wouldn’t beat you up with his hands, but there was always something...goofy and painful enough that you didn’t like it, but not overly painful. As a teenager you were kinda scared. He wanted to pull out the last half a person of your energy from whatever you could pull it out so you could do your practice and do it right.” (6)

- **Context:** Here Kalaus discusses the punishments given to male swimmers who did not perform up to par in the ways his coach, Tamás Széchy, thought he could. (7)

- If swimming was a form of labor, his coach could also be viewed an enforcer of state standards. Tamás Széchy, in a way, was either an unknowing or knowing measurer of patriotic standards. (8)

- However, Kalaus highlights a confused and complex relationship with his coach. He both recognizing that some of Széchy’s actions were extreme, but he also makes a point of noting that Széchy was trying to get the best out of his swimmers. (9)

- Széchy is said to have been "eccentric" and that his "swimmers feared him, but they all trusted him." (10)

- **Oral History of Erdős Gábor conducted by Johanna Mellis:** “Everyone was controlled a bit. Who was important, it was more controlled people. Who was not so important people, when you were a worker, it was not interesting for the state or for the police.” (11)

- **Context:** Erdős Gábor was a fencer for Communist Hungary in the 1950s through the 1970s and was responding to a question about what the disadvantages were of being a Communist athlete. (12)

- The quote states that the people who were regarded as public figures, like international representatives like athletes, were subject to more surveillance than average people (13)

- Like with Kalaus’ increased punishment, Gábor’s depiction of increased surveillance solidifies the concept that perceived patriotism under Communism was filled with hardship.

- As a person enhanced their apparent patriotism, they were granted with more perks, which also came with more restrictions because the leaders of the nation wanted their country to be promoted in a very specific way. (14)
So What is the Answer?

In the end, when analyzing Valter Kalaus' story alongside other pieces of textual evidence, one will never know why athletes chose to perform the patriotic labor that they did, though there are a various number of reasons why. However, Kalaus' story complicated our understanding of what life was like under the transition from Communism to Post-Communism in Hungary, allowing us to see many competing components of patriotic labor.

_Why does this narrative matter to the non-historian today?_

Kalaus' story is a complex one, and it highlights how nations can use various identities, such as the athlete and laborer, to covertly monitor one's dedication to the state itself. This is important to think about today. How does a state enforce social norms? What are those norms? Thinking about these things allows one to be more aware of their current and historical identities, which is imperative in trying to build a better state and world. Peeling back the layers of patriotism in such a way also promotes self-awareness and prevents blind nationalism, which would be a positive step in learning from the past.
Source Information

Our project primarily focuses on an oral history that was conducted by Johanna Mellis. We used this primary sources as the main example and driving force for the project and used other secondary readings and one other oral history conducted by Dr. Mellis to emphasize our points. Since the oral history is only a single person's experiences, we are well aware that Kalaus could possibly hold some biases, have left out information, and could have remembered the information incorrectly. To counteract these possible shortcomings, we have emphasized the idea that further study is needed on this topic in order to reach a fully developed conclusion. The conclusions we have drawn are in no way fixed. For specific source information and citations, please visit the following link:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ex8ei0CeQtw1_Ir28FAzUiwVsOt0f8PvsnJomgDJL-A/edit?usp=sharing