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How Politics Can Shape Sports and the Athletes Who Perform: A Case Study of Hungarian Gymnastics During the Cold War

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How Politics can Shape Sports and the Athletes Who Perform: a Case Study of Hungarian Gymnastics During the Cold War

Cold War Historical Context



Hungary is an eastern bloc country

- under Soviet-influenced leadership
- Communist policies
 - Collectivization of agriculture- portions given to government kept increasing [1]

Salinization in the 1950s

- Food Shortages- lack of resources, little outside trade
- Formal religion was censored
 - forced to support communist policies and ideas
- Political oppression
 - illegal imprisonment, 1951-52: over 40,000 people detained [2]
 - reeducation programs for dissidents
 - 1.3 million brought to Court on political charges between 1948-1953 [3]

1956 revolution-October-November

- Nationwide revolution against the Soviet- imposed policies in Hungary [4]
 - 200,000 Hungarians fled
 - thousands died
 - tens of thousands were persecuted
- like other athletes, Bodó leaves and she's able to go because she's an athlete abroad and has mobility
- unlike other nations, Hungarian desalinization was interrupted by a return to power by leaders who had oppressed the people in the 1940s [5]
 - other countries' victories of new leadership was not achieved

Andrea Bodó-Schmidt Schapiro



- Olympic Gymnast from Hungary
- Fled to the United States after the Olympic games in Melbourne
- Felt influence of communist politics and east v. west tension through her profession
- oral history documents her experience in Hungary, defection, and life as an international official in the United States
 - Problems associated with memory
 - Possibilities: forgetting, falsifying, romanticizing (rose-colored lens)

Our Purpose and Argument

The purpose of the project is to juxtapose how politics and government structure shape the world of sports, as well as the progress of individual sports, with the isolation of athletes from the political realities of their respective nations.

We assert that contemporary politics is directly reflected in the sports community through the way athletes interact and the ways other nations perceive athletes' treatment.

We argue that around the Hungarian Revolution, Eastern countries like Hungary attempted to perform their strength by giving privileges that allowed athletes to excel while western nations like the United States focused on fostering their savior complexes by "saving" and subsequently parading around eastern athletes who were convinced to defect.

This narrative is complicated by the disparity between the sports community acknowledging how domestic and international politics influences each sport and the utopia view that governments were able to craft among their athlete populations about the government's actions.

Athletes' Privileges



Purpose:

Establish the high quality of life that professional athletes enjoyed, especially those whose ability qualified them for international competition.

Argument:

Eastern bloc athletes enjoyed privileges as a means of creating loyalty to their governments and favorable representation of their country's interest when competing abroad

Examples of Privilege, as told by Andrea Bodó-Schmidt Schapiro

Standards of Living in Hungarian Society

Bodó detailed the state of Hungarian society as “very poor” with people having “very little money for food” [1]

- demonstrates government's motive for awarding privileges

While Training: Food Security as a Privilege

Bodó recounted:

“...AS: we went out to lunch to, like, a five-star hotel, and you could order anything you want. I had frog legs, and I had what else was, you know, special then? Soup with eggs in it, you know, beef stew, and many—what you just wanted to order, you could order from the menu. So, that was nice. So, that was a privilege, yeah.”[2]

Athletes valued the nourishment

- allowed for rigorous training while decreasing the chance of accidental injury
- quality of the food and the dining options increases extent of privilege

While Competing: Privilege to Travel and Compete Abroad

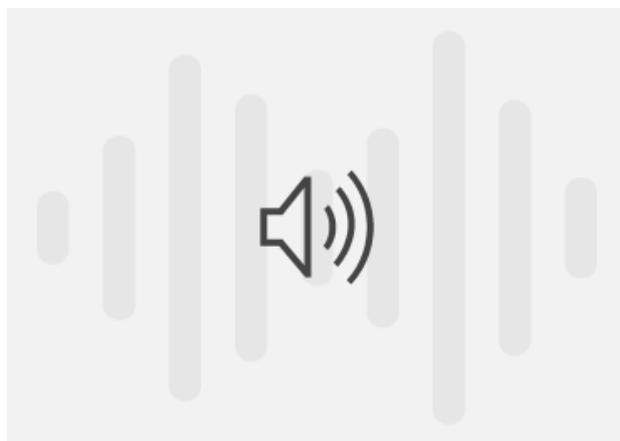
Context: Many Hungarian citizens fled the country before the 1956 revolution in response to increasing tensions and poor living conditions, which caused the government to severely limit international travel because of fear that more Hungarian citizens would defect while abroad.[3]

- Differentiation between eastern bloc and outside travel

Bodó was unable to obtain a visa in order to compete at her first international meet in Poland because of her father’s actions:

“AS: I remember the first time I qualified for a meet to go into Poland...and I went out to the station and I didn’t get the visa, they said, because of my father. And, I had to go home. I was absolutely—I thought, That’s it. How will I go to Helsinki, a Western state, when they don’t allow me to an Eastern state? And but, the big communists said I will come back, to guarantee and I could go out.”[4]

- Her privilege as an athlete and the inherent connections to the government from being good enough to compete internationally ensured approval for all subsequent trips abroad.
- paperwork was likely expedited and approved based on her ability to improve Hungary’s prestige in gymnastics, even overlooking whatever apparent transgressions her father committed in the eyes of the Communist State



<https://sway.office.com/PSrYFfRwyEW5QIBr#content=JYboZTwkFgEcG8>

While Abroad: Access to International Markets

- athletes were often taken by government-affiliated guides to shop in stores that had western goods and permitted to purchase desired items.

Bodó purchased a floor waxing machine while abroad at a competition in Russia. She did not seem to understand the significance of her foreign purchase;

- Bodó insisted that the machine was “normal size” and it was “no problem to bring it back. It wasn’t. It wasn’t drugs.”[5]
- When questioned about possible smuggling, she either truly did not consider her purchase and transport to constitute smuggling or did not equate the severity.
- Discrepancy between relating the event to drug smuggling and claiming her own transportation was harmless
- possible source bias: influenced by decades living in the U.S. or possibly witnessed a vast network of smuggling among athletes- either could cause her to view personal actions as less severe

Government Motivations for Bestowing Privileges:

- Willingness to pamper their professional athletes because the country was focused on bolstering its international image through performance in competitive sports
- Fostered a favorable image of the government in the athletes' minds - makes athletes want to perform better in repayment
- athletes reporting positive living conditions bolsters international legitimacy and social capital

Politics Affecting Athletes

Purpose:

Establish how, due to their treatment from their communist state, athletes rarely had the opportunity to participate or experience politics like the average citizen would have.

Argument:

While athletes were used as political propaganda by Hungary, because of their busy lifestyles dedicated to training and competing, athletes were virtually unaware of their country's political state.

Examples of Politics Affecting Athletes

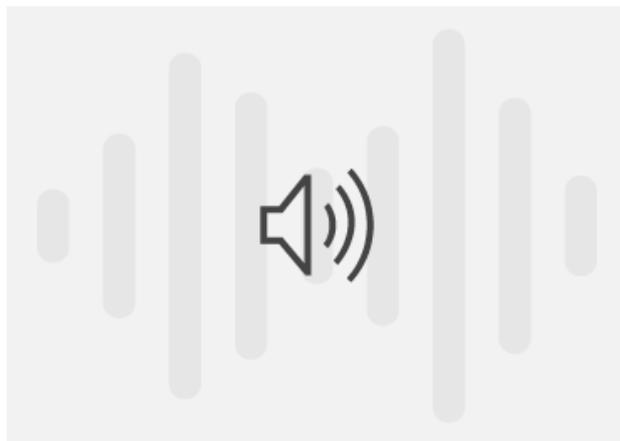
Athletes did not experience the political state of Hungary as average citizens did

- Bodó detailed how her lifestyle as an athlete kept her busy training and competing which prevented her from having too much political knowledge

Bodó recalls...

"It wasn't cell phone to phone and immediately you have answer. You know, it was—we just didn't know what's going on, and we heard the Russian came in, yes, and it was—we just—we didn't know where we are—and what to believe" [1]

- Without cell phones or internet, it was hard to know what was going on unless you were specifically living it
 - This is important to remember as I argue why an athletes' experience varied from the average citizen
 - Their perceptions of the communist state or the revolution were not the same because they were not experiencing the same things



<https://sway.office.com/PSrYFfRwyEW5QlBr#content=vfe4vQifunWJfZ>

2 - Andrea Bodó audio 2

Surveillance

Context:

- When Hungarian athletes were away at competition, they would be followed by people from the state. This ensured athletes would censor athletes from speaking negatively about the negative state or falling into western influences.

Evidence:

Bodó: "You didn't move very much alone. You always had someone watching over you. Like, in Helsinki, you know, you couldn't leave the camp without a so-called person watching over you" [2]

- Here, Bodó admits that Hungarian athletes were watched by their government, even when abroad

- This shows that while athletes were treated differently than the average citizens, they still felt the burdens of communism
- this surveillance, though, ensured that athletes were not as aware of how different their communist state is, from say, a western state

Isolation

Context:

- One can imagine that athletes at the top of their sport spend the majority of their days training or strategizing for their next competition. This was the case for Bodó, she and other athletes spent so much time training and competing, that they were isolated from a lot of what was occurring in Hungary
- Evidence:

Bodó: "You know, we were—that's what we decided, to compete, and we were with the revolutionary—and I don't know everybody was. I, at least, was, and many of my friends were, and even it was such a chaos we didn't—you know, it's not this good—you didn't know what's going on".

- athletes spent most of their time training, competing, maybe even working or studying.
- Many times, they were not privy to what was occurring in their state because they were not experiencing it like others. They were fed and they were busy with work. This was not the case for many people other than athletes.

Education

Context:

- Some communist states required their athletes to take political education class but Hungary did not.
- While athletes were probably not taught about how their communist government operates, they were probably educated on how to portray communism when competing abroad. Or they were taught about communism on the surface level.

Evidence:

JM: Um-hm, did you—did they—did you have to go to political education classes before—

AS: No.

JM: No, I know in other countries that, like, the Soviet Union athletes had to, but I don't think in Hungary—

AS: No.

Bodó: “We had meetings. I remember meeting in Czechoslovakia in this so-called Villa Rosa, Villa Rosa, Prague, in a place where you couldn’t move anywhere, in a camp or what was it, separated from everything, and we had a meeting there and discussed”

- These two quotes are examples of how athletes were not actually educated on politics.
- Further, athletes had to even hold meeting in order to educate one another and devise plans on how to represent their nation at competitions

U.S. Historical Context



History of Propaganda to Establish Western Savior Complex

- dates back to at least the U.S.’s 1899 intervention in Cuba.[1]
- Cold War’s Truman Doctrine- direct call for intervention to save those in the east
 - “we [the U.S.] must assist free peoples to work toward their own destinies in their own way.”[2]

Anti-eastern Bloc Propaganda

- Used as justification for western intervention
- U.S. Government crafted specialized means of subversion during the Cold War to influence the international community’s opinions of the east. [3]
- played into the imperial mindset of many Americans- thought their country could save the athletes from the poor standards of living or coopted performances when competing that the propaganda portrayed

CIA Intervention & Mission

- Codenamed "Operation Griffin"
- plan to cause 38 Olympians' defections from the east after the 1956 Melbourne Games

Western Savior Complex

Purpose:

Explain the Western Savior Complex as the primary reason why the west intervened in the affairs of eastern countries and their athletes.

Argument:

The bias inherent in Cold War Era western intelligence inaccurately assessed the standard of living that many professional eastern athletes enjoyed, which caused the United States to organize an illegitimate humanitarian mission which bolstered their own status in the international community rather than saving 'oppressed' athletes.

Operation Griffin Demonstrating the Western Savior Complex



- coordinated publicly by *Sports Illustrated* in conjunction with the U.S. government as a silent partner conveniently within weeks of the Hungarian Revolution's outbreak.[1]
- U.S. sought to promote independence through freeing the athletes from their "outside pressures," i.e., their oppressive governments, would "keep [the necessary] hope [for freedom] alive"[2]

Freedom Tour Perpetuates Western Superiority

- defected athletes paraded around the U.S. for public to see
- athletes felt constrained about what they could say and how to act
- paraded as trophies of western superiority- perceived as choosing to come to U.S. because of conditions in east
- Given U.S.'s promise to relocate the athletes anywhere they wanted after the actual Freedom Tour, likely thought that it was providing oppressed athletes with an opportunity for freedom.[3]

Efforts fostered the superiority of the western bloc, specifically the U.S., over the eastern bloc

U.S. Intervention Countered by Bodó- Not All Athletes Were Oppressed

Bodó's hesitation to leave Hungary shows the government's success at creating a favorable opinion by granting privileges

"AS: I never wanted to leave Hungary. I loved my Hungary. I loved where I grew up in the same house... and it's - my family was there, you know... and, I had a good life in Hungary, better than others, I guess, and I just loved Hungary, you know"[4]

- Bodó's narrative calls into question whether the CIA and *Sports Illustrated* attempted to confirm the validity of the western intelligence concerning the athlete's wellbeing before planning their extraction mission
 - Language barrier could have prevented dialogue [5] - Why did the U.S. continue without confirmation?
- chose to still defect over international employment opportunities in U.S.

What does this show?

Political tensions between the western and eastern blocs clashed in the arena of international sports

- both blocs focused on improving their respective images to the international community
- supports an interpretation that U.S. was more concerned about impressing international community of their ability to save athletes from coerced performances or poor living situations than genuinely trying to help the athletes

Politics Inspiring Change Within Gymnastics



Argument:

- Both domestic and international politics can shape the trajectory of an individual sport
- Gymnastics drastically changed once the Cold War ended
- This had to do with those who took over running the sport and which countries began to dominate

Evidence:

- **Bodó on America...** "You know, it wasn't really gymnastics here at that time, very—gymnastic level was I would say pretty low and not very popular for girls [1]
- **Bodó on the steps of changing gymnastics in the US/ internationally...** "First, we wrote a book, coauthored the book *Gymnastics for Women*, which became a best seller, and you could see every high school teacher had it in the country and how to do gymnastics. And, I also had the book of judging it for other people, *Judging Women's Gymnastics* book, and which had how to judge". [2]
- **Bodó on international tensions competitively**
 - she mentions earlier that while she was competing, soviet gymnasts did not even know how to mount a beam...

AS: "okay, they were here '89 was the first World Championship when the Romanian beat the Russian. My gosh, that was—I was there celebrating with them. (laughs)

JM: (laughs) There was a celebration for beating the Soviets?

AS: Of course! Of course, there was a celebration. It's not easy". [3]

More evidence...

- **Bodó on how a country may want to influence changes within the sport...**

JM: Um-hm, um-hm, so during the Cold War was there, like, did you feel like there was a lot of pressure coming from, say, the Soviets, that the sports should move in a different direction, or was politics not an issue and—

AS: You know that—for instance, rhythmic gymnastics, the big question is, are we emphasizing the rhythmic gymnastic itself or the difficulty, you know? And, we want to have it more artistic. Some people want to have it more artistic, and some people want to have it more difficulty, so that is always hard. Did we balance it? And certainly, the—now the Soviet Union is excellent. It's not—it's Russia now. Russia is excellent. It is. *The gymnasts is fantastic, ballet background, you know, and they can really—they are all solo dancers of ballet, a big company, (laughs) all the rhythmic gymnasts. They are fantastic, and other—the other nation who don't have that kind of ballet niche wants to keep it more rhythmical and not going in that direction.* But, if you are a good ballet dancer, and you can perform all these skills, then you know, they want to have more apparatus handling skills, for instance, the rhythmic gymnastics and don't emphasize the dance part so much. *So, this is a balance thing, and the technical committee is working on it to keep it in balance.* [4]

Bodó on the politics of gymnastics

"And, I just gave the score, (laughs) what I felt she deserved, so these are politics. And, many countries have this kind of pressure on their judge, that if you don't give—you don't help this gymnast, you know, my gymnast. And but, they start to get better, hopefully"

"Mostly were the communist countries, and I think also Asian countries have pressure, that kind of pressure"

"Like, well like, this is very common. You're in Japan. It's automatically they give you a little gift, right? You should go there and give a little gift. But sometimes, a little gift gets better, is bigger, and now it became a rule that absolutely you cannot accept anything, which is good." [5]

Politics Affecting the International Gymnastics Community



Purpose:

Bodó documents change between 1980-2000 from the perspective of an international judge representing the U.S. for the International Federation of Gymnastics

Argument:

Both domestic and international politics can shape the relationships needing navigation in the sports community, as well as influence the way officials view their role in their sport's community

Gift-Giving and Regional Favoritism

these exchanges were bribes intended to obtain a more favorable score for gymnasts from the judge's home country by countries with an Eastern mindset- promote country's status and strength

- Mostly completed by judges from Russia, Asian countries, and small Eastern European countries
 - Bodó did not participate- shows her western mindset
- Called "too fair"

she was known for being far "too fair" by her colleagues, especially given her refusal to participate in gift-giving that often occurred between judges.[1]

Importance of Scores for International Reputation



Bribes and judge's influencing scores demonstrates the pressure countries place on the rankings of their athletes because they want to improve the reputation of their country

Bodó acknowledges how gymnastics specifically and the international sports community at large are subject to the influence of domestic and global politics [2]

- Connects to Cold War and east v. west strength - both countries want to prove superiority