

• Author: [Denis Grekov](#)

[The Olympics as an Allegory of War](#)



The International Olympic Committee (IOC) recently banned Russian athletes from representing their country at the Olympics (they can still compete there as individual athletes.) Making matters worse for Russia, a number of Russian sports officials have had their accreditation revoked.

The historical and political context creates an impression that there is a pattern behind those developments. It also points to an unhealthy structural relationship with other spheres of Russia's reality.

The founder of the Olympic movement in Russia, General Alexei Butovsky, was a very close associate of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the IOC, and was one of the co-founding committee members. As an enthusiast of physical education in military educational institutions, Butovsky, a member of the ministerial commission, introduced 'military gymnastics' in civilian schools. He then actively promoted Pierre de Coubertin's ideas. He published his impressions of the first Olympic Games in Athens, and it was his efforts that helped to create the Russian Olympic Committee in 1912. Butovsky was almost forgotten after the revolution, though. At least until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the very idea and methods of mass paramilitary sports that he promoted ultimately proved to be in demand in the Soviet Union. His ideas acquired serious domestic political significance, especially after the emergence of Stalin's totalitarianism in the pre-war period.

Stalin's Olympians

The main reason for this was the totalitarian structure of the Soviet Union, which developed a mass physical culture movement as part of its ideology and a form of preparing for war. The logic of this approach is clearly expressed in Stalin's reply to a letter from someone by the name of Ivan Ivanov, published on 12 February 1938 in 'Pravda' and in a number of other publications.

"... Leninism teaches us that 'the final victory of socialism in the sense of complete security from the restoration of bourgeois relations is possible only on an international scale' (see the well-known resolution adopted by the Fourteenth Conference of the All-Union Communist Party). ... Assistance from the international proletariat must be combined with our own work to strengthen our country's defence, to strengthen the Red Army and the Red Fleet, and to mobilise the entire country to combat the military attack and attempts to restore bourgeois relations. In fact, it would be ridiculous and stupid to turn a blind eye to the fact that we are surrounded by capitalism and to think that our external enemies, for example, the fascists, will not attempt to make an armed attack on the USSR if an opportunity arises. This kind of thinking is only possible among blind braggards or hidden enemies who want to put our people to sleep. ...Only knuckleheads or hidden enemies, who want to cover their hostility with bragging and who try to demobilise the people, can deny the danger of military intervention and attempts at restoration of the old relations in the presence of capitalism around our country. But can we consider the victory of socialism in one country as final if this country is surrounded by the capitalist environment and not fully secured against the danger of intervention and restoration? Of course we cannot.

This is the situation with the victory of socialism in one country. It turns out that this question contains two different problems:

a) the problem of INTERNAL relations within our country, that is, the problem of defeating its bourgeoisie and building full-scale socialism, and b) the problem of our country's EXTERNAL relations, that is, the problem of fully securing our country against the dangers of military intervention and restoration. (...) The latter problem can only be resolved by combining 'serious efforts by the international proletariat with even more serious efforts of all the Soviet people. It is necessary to strengthen and reinforce the international proletarian ties between the working class of the USSR with the working class of bourgeois countries; it is necessary to organise political assistance of the working class of bourgeois countries to the working class of our country in the event our country is under a military attack, and it is necessary to organise all kinds of assistance from the working class of our country to the working class of bourgeois countries; it is necessary to strengthen and reinforce our Red Army, Red Fleet, Red Aviation, and OSOAVIAHIM in every possible way. We must keep all our people in a state of mobilisation in the face of the threat of a military attack, to make sure that no accidents and no tricks played by our external enemies could take us by surprise..."

Stalin obsessively repeats this element of totalitarian ideology — i.e. the historical inevitability of aggression by the 'global bourgeoisie'. This turned military training, which incorporated mass sports, into ideological preparation for war. Equally obsessively, he calls anyone who disagrees with the inevitability of aggression either a fool or a hidden enemy: in mass physical culture, this view means that the power of the state spreads over to the body, to one's own way of life, views and personality.

By their actions, Soviet athletes manifested their political loyalty, mobilisation and readiness to become a resource for future conflicts. And that resource was enormous. The pre-war infrastructure of the paramilitary sports organisation [OSOAVIAHIM](#) (the Society for the Promotion of Aviation and Chemical Defence) consisted of 83,000 sports facilities and 62,000 sports organisations, with about 5 million individual members. By mid-1939, the total number of OSOAVIAHIM members was about 10 million. The organisation trained about 80% of the army personnel and 100% of the Soviet air force during the war. In order to understand the scale of these figures, we can compare them with the size of the largest modern army — the Chinese army, which, [according to the official data](#) from its Ministry of Defence, consists of just under 1.5 million people.

On the other side of the coin, mass sports were politicised as a symbol of collectivism and the facade of 'building socialism in a single country'. In other words, being an athlete was a depersonalised function aimed to demonstrate the successes of the Soviet political regime through victories of the human body. Mass sports became an obvious and, as such, convincing proof of all Soviet ideologies: from the rising proletarian class

consciousness to the rising living standards for Soviet citizens. The country actively built its military and sports infrastructure: people might have been living in shoddy houses, without water and amenities, but they could attend a modern flying club, practice athletics, skiing, etc.

[Photographs of that time](#) clearly show this strange mixture of mechanistic collectivism and militarism with carefree leisure, sometimes bordering on the bourgeois style, and sometimes filled with quite very unexpected eroticism. In fact, the Soviet Union was not alone in this approach: Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany did not lag behind, sometimes surpassing the Soviet Union but hardly ever reaching such a scale.

The politicisation of Soviet sports was reshaped by the war. The totalitarian regime demonstrated its complete inability to use its own human potential in the Finnish campaign of 1939 and in the tragic German invasion against the USSR in 1941-1942. In addition to the enormous losses and traumatic experience of the war, the awareness of the Soviet society was hugely influenced by the emergence of nuclear weapons and the onset of the Cold War. At both ends of the Iron Curtain, it was clear that any large-scale military invasion would start an Armageddon. Nuclear weapons turned the largest armies into an instrument of passive intimidation and political pressure. The stalemate increasingly shifted the political confrontation into a symbolic space, which is why things that were not quite real sometimes acquired real political significance. The perception of sport in the USSR also shifted towards a confrontation with the West at the level of meanings, ideologies and political influence.

It can be assumed that at some point the Soviet political leadership gave sporting successes the status of real foreign policy victories and perceived them as one of the mechanisms of 'great power management'. This was a way to conduct offensive actions in the sphere of foreign policy and there was no military escalation when the rules of the game were observed. When presenting this picture of the world, the Soviet propaganda changed the internal political significance of sports: ordinary citizens began to see sports as an indicator of progress and international influence of their country. Sport competitions as a 'symbolic war' became part of the Soviet identity. In fact, the list of medals at the Olympics showed how much political influence 'we' have taken from the USA and its allies this time. During the Moscow Olympics of 1980, which the United States and several other countries boycotted to protest against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, the mere existence of the boycott and its political motivation convinced the Soviet leadership that sports achievements were a powerful lever of political influence.

The growing political significance of sports achievements resulted in the post-war transition of Soviet sports from the mass scale to the elites. In parallel to the publicly accessible infrastructure, the country built a relatively closed and self-sufficient infrastructure, consisting of sports-focused boarding schools, 'Olympic reserve schools', club training facilities, etc. The effectiveness of this structure was measured in terms of achieving political goals, such as the number of victories.

Following the collapse of the USSR, the sports infrastructure and the quality of athletic training in Russia suffered greatly. However, athletes and party officials, including Vitaly Mutko, a former middle-ranking party functionary, inherited the idea of symbolic struggle with the West. However, the world has become multipolar and Russia is no longer perceived as a full-fledged superpower. In the situation of resentments, as well as the disappearing economic, cultural, military and technological superiority, sport has remained virtually the only sphere where success is still possible. More importantly, in the post-Soviet society, the 'big sport' is an attribute of the empire and an indicator of its power. However, neither Russian officials nor Russian athletes can deliver the desired level of victories. The modern 'high-performance sport' has become a meta-technology, i.e. a conglomerate of technologies used to manufacture sports equipment and outfits with medical science and biotechnologies, with all this being supported by highly flexible financing as well as interests of private investors, large companies, and start-ups in various industries. Post-Soviet bureaucrats do not realise that this structure and its efficiency have evolved in a post-industrial democratic society that guarantees freedom, the rule of law, and the protection of financial and intellectual rights. Post-Soviet managers who work in this field but follow sluggish centralised schemes within a vertical bureaucratic structure are simply unable to compete. Moreover, the presence of deeply rooted corruption in the Russian sports structures and government bureaucracy makes it all the more difficult. As a result, the lag is aggravated while the political appetite for victories grows stronger. Russian sports officials (as well as other officials) have forgotten how to compete on an equal footing. They are used to winning when they can violate the rules with impunity or even rewrite them to fit their needs. As a result, they are trying to do the same at the international level.

This is exactly why the Russian regime has been putting trillions of roubles into sports shows which are absolutely useless from the economic or social perspective, such as the Sochi Olympics or the FIFA World Cup in football, to be organised in Russia in the summer of 2018. And this is also why Russian special forces are [involved in doping scandals](#), and why Russian sports officials are trying to [organise](#) state support for [mass doping](#) instead of trying to optimise Russian sports, and they are also [suspected](#) of trying to bribe international sports [officials](#). Russia is waging war for the preservation of imperial consciousness and Russian sports are expected to perform propaganda-building roles and political tasks.

Thus, neither Russian officials nor the Russian propaganda will ever admit that the IOC's ban on Russia's official participation in the Olympic Games is not a case of political pressure on Russia or even an answer to the use of doping. The IOC's [decision](#) is, in fact, a reaction of a community of equal players to another player's attempts to gain an advantage by breaking common agreements and manipulating the rules of the game. If we look at Russia's actions in other spheres of international relations over the past 5-8 years, we will see many examples where it tried to obtain advantages by applying similar methods.

This case is part of a general trend of restructuring Russia's participation in international organisations. This is painful for the Russian people with their imperial resentments, although the propaganda will assure them that these are aggressive actions of the Western powers. More importantly, this story shows that Russia increasingly resorts to 'playing a game against the rules', breaking the boundaries of norms and values that have shaped the modern global community. However, this is not an indicator of strength but, rather, a result of the fact that Russia can no longer win by adhering to the rules as it is unable to compete on a level playing field. If Russia cannot abandon its imperial ambitions, its set of available actions is narrowed down to manoeuvres leading to greater self-isolation, curtailed international cooperation, further reduction of competitive opportunities and increased likelihood of large-scale conflicts since the country is going to have 'little else to lose'.

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