

Cold War sport, film and propaganda: A comparative analysis of the superpowers

By Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood

Introduction

“It’s the bell,” says the American television commentator excitedly, “and the war is on.”

As the two boxers enter the final round of what has been a grueling, vicious encounter, the noise in the Moscow arena is deafening. Each fighter simply must win, as much for ideological as personal reasons. The giant Russian, Ivan Drago, is the supreme communist athlete, a robotic brute programmed to kill; the American, Rocky Balboa, personifies the capitalist rags-to-riches dream, the ghetto underdog made good. As the pugilists pummel one another to a frenzied climax, and the movie’s rock theme-tune builds to a crescendo, it is, of course, Rocky who prevails.

Moments after his victory, wrapped in a Stars-and-Stripes flag in the ring, Rocky magnanimously issues a heartfelt plea for peace. “In here there were two guys killin’ each other but I guess that’s better than twenty million,” the American declares. “What I’m sayin’ is that if I can change, and you can change, everybody can change.” The film ends with everyone in the crowd, even the Soviet Politburo, rising to their feet to applaud.

Ask people today, a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, about Cold War sports films and they will invariably speak about this one from 1985, *Rocky IV*. We should not be surprised. *Rocky IV* is, for one thing, younger than most Cold War films—its director and star, Sylvester Stallone, is still in the film business. *Rocky IV* was a bone fide worldwide hit and ranks, in fact, as the biggest-selling Cold War sports film of all. Nowadays *Rocky IV* is seen as a classic film of its era, an iconic slice of crude Reaganite kitsch that sees good triumphing over evil and points to an end to the long-running East-West conflict. In the movie's final sequence, described above, the heroic Rocky not only shows us why the West needs to fight the Cold War but also how it can win—by challenging Soviet communism on its home soil and appealing to the Russian people directly over the heads of their political masters.

Rocky IV may well be the best-known Cold War sports film, but how representative of that sub-genre is it? Did most other Hollywood sports movies that focused on the Cold War carry such overtly propagandistic messages? Which particular sports did American filmmakers tie into the Cold War and which audiences did their films target? How prominent a theme in Hollywood's Cold War output was sport overall? Did the Soviet film industry also deploy sport as a propaganda tool? If so, why exactly, in what ways and to what effect? What role did the American and Soviet governments play in determining how the two film industries portrayed sport during the

Cold War? And what light does any of this shed on the wider subject of sport during the Cold War or on what scholars have come to call the Cultural Cold War?

This article will address all of these questions. Using a combination of primary and secondary sources, its aim is to provide the first comparative overview of how the American and Soviet film industries—particularly through the feature film—employed sport as an instrument of propaganda during the Cold War. The article is divided into two main sections, the first concentrating on Hollywood and the second on Soviet film. Each section will start by providing a brief outline of that film industry’s relationship to the state during the Cold War, the popularity of sports films as a genre, which particular sports predominated on screen, and what the general trajectory of the films’ ideological messages was throughout the conflict. The article will then analyze in depth the range of propaganda styles that American and Soviet sports films adopted and the different propaganda functions they served. The similarities and differences will be highlighted, using a selection of representative films in order to provide a sharp focus. The article closes by assessing what Cold War sports cinema can tell us about political culture in the US and Soviet Union after 1945 and about the complex battle for hearts and minds that was so important to the East-West conflict.

Part One: American Sports Cinema

Sport has long been a popular subject in American cinema, dating back even to before “Hollywood” itself came into being in the 1910s. After 1945, of the many sports

Americans played and watched, baseball, boxing, auto racing and American football tended to predominate on the American screen, followed by basketball, ice hockey and horse racing. Some of these sports featured more highly than others in Cold War films, as we shall see. Though the majority of Hollywood sports films were melodramas, biopics or short documentaries, sport also cropped up in comedies, musicals and even science fiction fantasies. During the Cold War, sports films regularly enjoyed major commercial success and a few even garnered Academy Awards. In line with this, sports films were made by or starred some of the biggest names in the American movie business.¹

Unlike its Soviet counterpart, the American film industry was never a straightforward instrument of the state during the Cold War. As scholars have recently demonstrated, however, important links developed between American filmmakers and various US government agencies during the conflict. The Defense Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, State Department and United States Information Agency, among others, were all able to use Hollywood for recruitment and other propaganda purposes. Audiences generally knew nothing about this, with the result that the United States' reputation for having a free and independent media—an important propaganda

¹ Demetrius Pearson, Russell L. Curtis, C. Allen Haney and James J. Zhang, "Sport Films: Social Dimensions Over Time, 1930–1995," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, Vol. 27, 2003, pp. 145–161; Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke and Deborah A. Carmichael, eds., *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Sean Crosson, *Sport and Film* (London: Routledge, 2013).

theme in itself during the Cold War—largely remained intact.² It would be erroneous to see the hand of government behind each and every Cold War sports film to come out of Hollywood after 1945, yet there are notable examples—as, again, we shall see—of sports films that benefitted from significant official input.

Because Hollywood was less beholden to state guidance and censorship, it is more difficult to delineate particular ideological trends in American sports films during the Cold War compared with Soviet films. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify certain changes in the political messages that films conveyed across phases of the Cold War and in their thematic approaches towards the conflict. Sometimes these changes appear to have been in response to shifts in East-West relations, on other occasions due to structural or political movements within Hollywood. Putting things very simply, Hollywood moved to the political right during the Cold War's early years, then slightly to the left in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally back to the right when the former college footballer and radio show sports presenter Ronald Reagan was in the White House in the 1980s.

Surprisingly perhaps, not a single U.S. sports film focused explicitly on the Cold War during the conflict's formative phase, from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s. This

² Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007); Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); John Sbardellati, *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012); Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

period was characterized instead by oblique references to the existential threat that communism posed to the United States, combined with a cycle of movies that exposed corruption in American sport. The institutionalization of the Cold War in the United States in the mid- to late-1950s generally led to a narrowing of views on the conflict on the big screen. This was the era in which powerful elements within Hollywood, sometimes in tandem with government, prioritized positive over negative propaganda, effectively to sell the virtues of liberal capitalism at home and abroad. Sports films played only a minor role in this campaign though one or two of them were major box office hits. Coterminous with films that used sport to advertise the virtues of freedom and liberty were others that countered what official Cold War propagandists saw as America's Achilles heel, race relations.

By the mid-1960s, the US Cold War consensus had started to weaken. As proof of this, a small number of movies began to satirize what might be called America's "military-sports complex," as if the Pentagon and sports coaches shared an interest in militarizing American culture. Simultaneously, other films and television series cashed in on the success of the James Bond franchise by portraying American athletes as smart-suited spies saving the West from a new enemy, Mao Zedong's China. By the mid-1970s, elements within what was termed New Hollywood were launching a full-scale assault on America's whole approach to the Cold War—and attacking the nation's sports culture in the process. By and large, Hollywood's sports films then conducted a volte-face in the 1980s. The Cold War was "hot" business again, revitalized by President Ronald Reagan's quest to win the conflict outright. Docudramas celebrated Olympic victories over the

Soviet Union, B features condemned the Eastern bloc for dragooning child gymnasts, and blockbusters portrayed Americans and Russians brutally fighting each other almost to the death.

'Soft' Propaganda: Selling American Values Through Sport

Hollywood sports films have over generations consistently promoted traditional American values, movie historians argue, by mainly focusing on brilliant athletes who gain from the benefits of a meritocratic, capitalist democracy and by endorsing self-reliance rather than fundamental societal change as the best response to social disadvantage. By dwelling, even in films ostensibly about team sports, on “star performers” (both in the screen sense and on the field of play), Hollywood has, historians further claim, strongly affirmed Americans’ belief in individualism. By suggesting that sport also provides a model for social mobility, writes sports historian Ron Briley, in which “hard work will prevail in the best traditions of Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger,” Hollywood has played—and continues to play—an important role in supporting the political and economic status quo.³

This form of what might be called “soft” propaganda was an integral component of many US sports films made during the Cold War, its positive, subliminal messages

³ Aaron Baker, *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Ron Briley, “Sports in Film, Television, and History: Introduction,” *Film & History*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2005, pp. 17–18.

rendered all the more powerful perhaps by falling under most people's political radar. Such celluloid propaganda came in a variety of forms. Technicolor musicals like *Good News* (1947), about a college footballer in the Roaring Twenties who chooses the ordinary girl over the snobby vamp, told audiences that, as one of its songs put it, "The Best Things in Life Are Free." Biopics like *Follow the Sun* (1951) celebrated the fame and fortune of real-life golfers like the Texan Ben Hogan, who, the film shows us, started his career as a lowly caddy. Melodramas like *The Square Jungle* (1956) saw down-at-heel boxers overcome poverty and alcoholism to find success inside and outside the ring. And dramas like *Hoosiers* (1986) told nostalgic, feel-good parables about big-city basketball coaches learning the importance of teamwork and community in 1950s rural backwaters.⁴

Where soft propaganda films often carried a slightly more overt political edge was when sport was tied to stories about the U.S. military. This was particularly the case during the fifties, when the need to engender a patriotic "team spirit" in the face of perceived internal and external communist aggression was at its height. Two particularly interesting examples of this sort of film are *The Long Gray Line* and *Strategic Air Command*, both released in 1955. Neither of these productions were conventional sports movies but each carried a clear message—supported by the U.S. Defense

⁴ Doug McVay, 'Charles Walters', *Focus on Film*, 27, 1977, 30-40; 'The Top Box Office Hits of 1951', *Variety*, 2 January 1952; 'The Top Box-Office Hits of 1956', *Variety Weekly*, 2 January 1957; Ron Briley, 'Basketball's Great White Hope and Ronald Reagan's America: *Hoosiers* (1986)', *Film & History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2005, pp. 12–19.

Department—about the relationship between sport, family, the military, and traditional American values.

The Long Gray Line is a paean to the United States' famous military academy at West Point, told through the eyes of the real-life Irish boxer-cum-athletic trainer Marty Maher (played by Tyrone Power). Maher had enjoyed a fifty-year career at West Point during which, the film shows us, the former dishwasher earned the love and respect of cadets who rose to the very top of their profession, including the famous general George Patton and future US president Dwight Eisenhower. Maher's wife Mary (Maureen O'Hara) adopts these and other cadets as her children, while Marty teaches them the codes of honor, patriotism and manliness on the football field and in the swimming pool. Shot on location at West Point, *The Long Gray Line* was made by the acclaimed director John Ford. Best known for his Westerns, Ford was a key figure in the secret Militant Liberty program run by the Pentagon and CIA in the 1950s. Militant Liberty sought to sell the United State's Cold War strategy discreetly, not by aggressive anti-communist propaganda, but through novels, newspaper stories and movies that explained "the principles upon which the Free World way of life is based." *The Long Gray Line* also starred another Militant Liberty activist, the actor Ward Bond, who played West Point's revered director of physical education Herman Koehler.⁵

⁵ Bosley Crowther, "Long Gray Line' Tinted Green; Movie of West Point Honors Irish Hero," *The New York Times*, 11 February 1955, p. 19; Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, pp. 202–205; Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), pp. 284–186.

Strategic Air Command fuses sport, right-wing patriotism and nuclear preparedness in a melodrama about a baseball star who decides to put service in the military above fame and fortune on the diamond. Instigated by the famous actor and US Air Force reservist, James Stewart, *Strategic Air Command* casts Stewart as 'Dutch' Holland, a St. Louis Cardinals player and former World War II bomber pilot who is recalled to active duty. Dutch is initially opposed to the military interfering in his life in what he sees as peacetime but slowly realizes that serving with SAC, the nation's long-range nuclear bomber fleet, is far more important than a lucrative career on the sports field. The film's narrative is divided between Dutch's duties as an aircraft commander and the demands his job places on his marriage. The story culminates in a daring, non-stop flight from Florida to a U.S. base in Japan, which tests to the full both Holland's health and his wife Sally's loyalties. *Strategic Air Command* was the sixth highest-grossing film at the US box office in 1955 and apparently led to a spike in Air Force enlistments.⁶

'Hard' propaganda: Combating communism through sport

Overall, throughout the Cold War, Hollywood spent little time documenting or depicting superpower sporting clashes. This might have something to do with the fact that neither

⁶ Ron Briley, *The Baseball Film in Postwar America: A Critical Study, 1948–1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2011), pp. 12–15, 131–141; Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (London: Pluto, 1983), p. 64–69; Meyers K. Jacobsen, *Convair B-36: A Comprehensive History of America's "Big Stick"* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1997), p. 297–308.

the Russians nor Chinese played America's favorite team sports, baseball and football, and that cinema could not hope to compete with prime-time television's nationalistic coverage of East-West sporting encounters at such events as the Olympics.⁷ A number of American films featuring sport did nonetheless pedal "hard" propaganda, the sort which demonized communism and told audiences in no uncertain terms that they were at war. Boxing and, as the Cold War progressed, martial arts featured relatively highly in this category. Other sports, like football and tennis, also appeared but often in more interesting, roundabout ways.

Typical of the latter was the use of footballing metaphors in Leo McCarey's infamous Red-baiting melodrama from 1952, *My Son John*. During the McCarthy era, several movies equated a hatred of sport with a love for communism. McCarey's film went one step further by suggesting that sport could inoculate against virtually all forms of deviance—political, social and sexual. In *My Son John*, Robert Walker plays John Jefferson, a young, arrogant, atheistic closet-homosexual who is using his government job in Washington DC to spy for the Soviet Union. Unlike his brothers, two Korean War heroes who we see enthusiastically throwing a football in an early scene, John preferred books to sports when he was a child. John's mother (Helen Hayes) discovers his treachery and, in a key sequence in which she reminisces about cheering on her other boys at football, pleads with her son to re-join her "team," but to no avail; ultimately,

⁷ On U.S. television's coverage of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, for instance, see Joshua Lieser, "Los Angeles and the 1984 Olympic Games: Cultural Commodification, Corporate Sponsorship, and the Cold War," Ph.D. diss., University of California Riverside, 2014.

when John sees the error of his ways, he is shot dead by his handlers. For many viewers, the lesson of the Oscar-nominated *My Son John* would have been crystal clear—sport teaches manliness, a love of god and respect for the nation, all things that communism seeks to destroy.⁸

By no means all U.S. screen productions portrayed the United States as a passive target of Cold War espionage. Others showed American secret agents taking the fight to the opposition and winning what came to be known, significantly perhaps, as the “spying game.” One of the most popular television espionage series of the mid-1960s was NBC’s *I-Spy*. In it, Robert Culp and Bill Cosby played two Pentagon agents who travel the world masquerading as a tennis player-and-coach duo. Though it had light-hearted dialogue, *I-Spy* was a great deal more sober than contemporary programs like *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, with stories invariably focusing on the gritty, ugly side of the espionage business. Fleet of foot and mind, Culp and Cosby’s characters had no qualms about killing enemy agents, especially those from Red China. Some episodes of *I-Spy* focused explicitly on sport’s role in the Cold War; the pilot episode (“So Long, Patrick Henry”), for instance, centered on an African American athlete’s defection to China and Beijing’s efforts to infiltrate the developing world by sponsoring a communist alternative to the

⁸ Glen M. Johnson, “Sharper than an Irish Serpent’s Tooth: Leo McCarey’s ‘My Son John,’” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1980, pp. 44–9; Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, CA, 1987), pp. 240–246, 250–53.

Olympics, an Afro-Asian Games. *I-Spy* was one of the few U.S. television series of the sixties to set an episode (“The Tiger”) in the then-taboo country of Vietnam.⁹

I-Spy’s protagonists would invariably defeat their opponents out in the espionage “field” by improvising, by using their sporting proficiency, among other things, to think on their feet. This tied in with the theme, promulgated widely by official U.S. propagandists during the Cold War, that whereas athletes in the West performed freely and ultimately for themselves, those in the communist world were part of a “machine” run by the state. This dichotomy served several propaganda functions: it highlighted the degree of control the Party exerted over people’s lives; it obscured the professionalization of Western sport and concealed Western government efforts to use sport as a political tool in the Cold War; it devalued communist sporting achievements by suggesting they were the result of cheating; and it presented communist bloc athletes as automatons, slaves even, who are forced to win at any cost.

During the 1980s, American filmmakers made good money playing with this man-versus-machine cliché and with echoing Ronald Reagan’s Evil Empire rhetoric in the process. *Miracle on Ice* (1981) was a three-hour-long, fact-based drama, shown on television initially but then at cinemas, that narrated the U.S. ice-hockey team’s improbable victory over the Soviet Union at the Lake Placid Olympics of 1980. Later

⁹ Mark Cushman, *I Spy: A History and Episode Guide to the Groundbreaking Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007); Russ Crawford, *The Use of Sports to Promote the American Way of Life during the Cold War: Cultural Propaganda, 1945–1963* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2008), pp. 286–292.

voted the “Top Sports Moment of the 20th Century” by U.S. magazine *Sports Illustrated*, the American team’s defeat of the perennial gold medalists at Lake Placid was at the time depicted in classic David-versus-Goliath terms by the U.S. media. Miracle on Ice in particular took great pleasure in accentuating the differences in age, experience, status, training facilities and state support between the rival teams, with one referred to as “a bunch of college kids” and the other as “the Red Machine.”¹⁰

Nadia, a less well known production from 1984, was a biopic of Romanian Nadia Comaneci, who was famous for being the first female gymnast to score a perfect 10 at the Olympics, in Montreal in 1976 when just 14 years of age. *Nadia* was filmed in Yugoslavia and showed the enormous physical and mental pressures that communist bloc gymnast coaches heaped on their young “comrades.”¹¹ *No Retreat, No Surrender*, released in 1986, saw the Belgian action actor Jean-Claude Van Damme playing a former Russian martial arts champion who is working as an enforcer for a crime syndicate on the U.S. West coast. The bullying Russian is finally put spectacularly in his place by a

¹⁰ [Miracle On Ice, 3 July 2015](#). This 1980 sporting event has attracted considerable academic interest. See, for instance, Mary G. McDonald, “‘Miraculous’ Masculinity Meets Militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-USA Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey match and Cold War Politics,” in Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds., *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 222–234; Chad Seifried, “An Exploration Into Melodrama and Sport: The ‘Miracle on Ice’ and the Cold War Lens,” *Olympika*, Vol. 19, 2010, pp. 111–138. On a post-Cold War Hollywood version of this ice-hockey game, *Miracle* (2004), see Michael Silk, Bryan Bracey and Mark Falcos, “Performing America’s Past: Cold War Fantasies in a Perpetual State of War,” in Wagg and Andrews, eds., *East Plays West*, pp. 289–313 and M. Silk, J. Schultz, and B. Bracey, “From Mice to Men: Miracle, Mythology & the Magic Kingdom,” *Sport in Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2–3, pp. 279–297.

¹¹ “Kell,” “Nadia,” *Variety*, 16 May 1984, pp. 31, 32.

talented young karate student and Bruce Lee fanatic from Seattle.¹² *Streets of Gold*, a more thoughtful drama that also appeared in 1986, told the tale of a retired Russian boxer who when he was younger was barred from the Soviet national team for being Jewish. After moving to the US, the boxer trains two young amateur fighters, and the film culminates in one of them defeating the European champion, a burly Russian.¹³

Of all of Hollywood's 1980s Cold War films, *Rocky IV* was the most direct in its iconographic representation of the man-against-machine cliché of U.S.-Soviet confrontation. In it, the Soviet boxer, Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren), personifies the faceless, mechanicalness of Soviet society—an emotionless lab rat pumped up with steroids who has been computer programmed to handle every ring situation (apart from the American spirit). In contrast, the warm-hearted Rocky (Stallone) eschews technology and trains by felling trees and running to the top of the Ural Mountains. Pre-bout press conferences are excuses for Cold War shouting matches over whether communism or capitalism produces physically stronger, morally superior athletes. Motifs of jingoistic American magazine covers, images of Soviet surveillance, innovative boxing sound effects and songs such as “Living in America” all underline what is at stake. Little wonder critics called *Rocky IV* the most strident piece of anti-Soviet propaganda of the Reagan era (in whatever medium), nor that the movie was publicly denounced by Soviet cultural

¹² Patrick Goldstein, “Movie Review: No Rhyme, No Reason In ‘No Retreat,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 May 1986.

¹³ “Brit,” “Streets of Gold,” *Variety*, 12 November 1986, p. 14.

officials.¹⁴ Helped by a huge budget of \$28 million, *Rocky IV* turned out to be one of the highest grossing of all U.S. films that focused explicitly on the Cold War and one of the biggest-selling sports films of all time.¹⁵

Transnational and Counter-Propaganda

Generally speaking, American filmmakers kept a keener commercial and propagandistic eye on overseas audiences than their Soviet counterparts during the Cold War. This reflected Hollywood's global reach, the profitability of external markets, and advice from the State Department on how films could best serve U.S. interests. Sports films, with their emphasis on action rather than dialogue, were naturally seen as products that could easily crisscross national boundaries and might even penetrate the Iron Curtain. *Rocky IV* is a good example of this, with VHS copies of the movie fetching high prices on the Soviet black market. Decades earlier, the most famous American Olympian of the 1920s, the swimmer Johnny Weissmuller, had achieved cult status on Soviet screens as

¹⁴ Philip Taubman, "Societ [sic] Pans 'Rocky' and 'Rambo' Films," *The New York Times*, 4 January 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/04/world/societ-pans-rocky-and-rambo-films.html> .

¹⁵ William J. Palmer, *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), pp. 218–222. *Rocky IV* made \$300 million worldwide and was the most profitable film in the *Rocky* series. In July 2015, Box Office Mojo listed *Rocky IV* as the highest-grossing boxing film ever and, after *The Blind Side* (2009), the second highest grossing sports drama ever. Due to inflation, it is very difficult to say which particular Cold War movie made the most money but one of them has to be *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, which also made in excess of \$300 million, was released in 1985 and starred Sylvester Stallone.

Hollywood's Tarzan. Even Josef Stalin was a secret admirer, though, unlike many Soviet adolescents, he stopped short of mimicking Weissmuller's flowing locks.¹⁶

As popular as Rocky and Tarzan were, neither could help much with what American diplomats consistently identified as the U.S.'s biggest image problem during the Cold War, race.¹⁷ Soviet cinema found numerous ways of proving to audiences, especially in the developing world, that African-Americans were treated little better than slaves and consequently that Washington's claim to be a beacon of equality and progress was phony.¹⁸ It is in this light that we ought to view a spate of American films from the 1950s and 1960s that showed African American athletes making it to the very top of their sport and which thereby indicated that the U.S. was a level playing field politically and socially. None of these films were blockbusters but, collectively, they might have helped offset communist allegations that the U.S. was inherently racist.

Pride of place among these films must be taken by *The Jackie Robinson Story*, produced by Jewel Pictures and released in 1950. Another biopic, this time about the man who famously broke the baseball color line when he started for the Brooklyn

¹⁶ Frederick H. White, "Tarzan in the Soviet Union: British Lord, American Movie Idol and Soviet Counterculture Figure," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2015, pp. 64–85.

¹⁷ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ See, for instance, *The Meeting on the Elbe* [*Vstrecha na Elbe*] (1949), *Silvery Dust* [*Serebristaia pyl*] (1953) and *Harlem, USA* (1952). Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, pp. 171–174; Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), pp. 46–47, 73.

Dodgers in April 1947 and who went on to become one of the biggest baseball stars of all time, *The Jackie Robinson Story* is an uplifting story of racial integration and African-American advancement. Robinson, unusually, plays himself in the film, and is shown effectively being guided to success and prosperity first by the U.S. Army and then by an innovative white baseball executive, Branch Rickey. The movie ends, significantly, with Robinson re-enacting his controversial testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in July 1949, in which he had said that “democracy works for those willing to fight for it” and which was widely interpreted as a response to the entertainer and former All-American football player Paul Robeson’s recent statement that black Americans would not support the United States in a war with the Soviet Union due to their continued second-class citizen status under U.S. law. *The Jackie Robinson Story* performed well at the box office and reviewers placed the film squarely within the ideology of the post-World War II liberal consensus, one that saw racial prejudice being tamed by sustained economic growth and American pluralism. One prominent African American newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, hailed *The Jackie Robinson Story* as a “vehicle to depict democracy at work.”¹⁹

Two feature films appeared in the early 1950s centered on and starring the famed African American basketball outfit, the Harlem Globetrotters. Both movies

¹⁹ Briley, *Baseball Film*, pp. 12–15, 57–74; Damion Thomas, “Playing the ‘Race Card:’ US Foreign Policy and the Integration of Sports,” in Wagg and Andrews, eds., *East Plays West*, pp. 207–221; Alessandro Raengo, “A Necessary Signifier: The Adaptation of Robinson’s Body-image in ‘The Jackie Robinson Story,’” *Adaptation*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 79–105.

presented the Globetrotters, a team formed years earlier because U.S. professional basketball was (until 1950) restricted to whites, as less a symbol of racial segregation and more as one of the wonderful opportunities that existed for minorities in American society. *Go, Man, Go!*, a drama released by United Artists in 1954, is an inspirational story of the Globetrotters' rise to stardom, from playing in farmers' barns for a pittance to headlining in the biggest stadia in the U.S. Akin to *The Jackie Robinson Story*, the film highlights the role that a white man, Abe Saperstein (Dane Clark), plays in helping the black athletes get the recognition they deserve, and dazzles viewers with exciting, real-life sports footage. *Go, Man, Go!* shows the deep friendship that develops between the Jewish Saperstein and one of the basketballers, played by future civil rights activist and "noble Negro" Sidney Poitier, as the two men climb the sporting and social ladder. The movie climaxes with the Globetrotters winning a national tournament by beating an all-white team of champions.²⁰

The second film, *The Harlem Globetrotters*, was a comedy-drama released by Columbia Studios in 1951. Its narrative focused on a bright, athletically talented college student, Billy Townshend (Billy Brown), who is torn between joining the Globetrotters and continuing his education. "One of the finest sport pictures ever produced," one trade paper called *The Harlem Globetrotters*; "It should be noted that no attempt is made to bring in any mention of race prejudice," wrote another, "it's simply a story of a

²⁰ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen in Review; Harlem Globetrotters Perform in a Sports Romance, 'Go, Man, Go!' at the Globe," *The New York Times*, 10 March 1954.

great team with fine traditions.”²¹ The State Department enthusiastically supported Columbia’s worldwide distribution of *The Harlem Globetrotters*. Officials working in the French West Indies for the U.S. Information Services, the forerunner to the U.S. Information Agency, felt the movie’s portrayal of the African American athletes as “well-dressed, well-paid, and well-fed Americans whose skill is admired by Negro and white fans alike” would enlighten members of the local population who had been led astray by communist depictions of African Americans as downtrodden and persecuted citizens. Other USIS officials argued that a scene in which a white professor tries to persuade Billy Townshend to stick to his studies “demonstrates the fact that Negroes are welcome in American universities and that excellent career opportunities await them upon graduation.” Other scenes that featured Townshend meeting his wife in an integrated hotel lobby and his being paid a \$1,000-monthly salary were visual images that, officials claimed, could be used to ‘refute communist-inspired distortions of the status of the “American negro.”²²

By the late 1950s, the USIA had grown extremely adept at turning out artistic, bite-sized films celebrating African-American athletic prowess. Neatly packaged, ten- or fifteen-minutes-long documentaries could be made much more cheaply than feature films and, if cleverly put together, could transmit the required ideological messages quicker and more effectively. Notable examples of this form of celluloid propaganda

²¹ *Harrison’s Reports*, 20 October 1951, p. 168; *Motion Picture Herald Picture Digest*, 27 October 1951, 1074.

²² Damion Thomas, *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (Champaign, IL; University of Illinois Press, 2012), pp. 70–71.

include *Althea Gibson - Tennis Champion* (1957), about the first person of color to win a Grand Slam tennis title, and *Wilma Rudolph—Olympic Champion* (1961), about the sprinter who overcame infantile paralysis to become the fastest woman on earth. Another Olympic gold medalist, the hurdler Hayes Jones, was the subject of *One Man—Hayes Jones* (1968), a film that focuses on his recent appointment as commissioner of recreation in New York City, where he supervised the administration of eight hundred parks. In *Press Conference USA—Arthur Ashe* (1975), the first black man to win a tennis title at Wimbledon and a civil rights activist, talks about professional sport and the black athlete.²³ Not every USIA sports film designed for Cold War purposes focused on African-Americans. *Old Young Man* (1968) presented 24-year-old white basketball star, Rhodes Scholar and future U.S. senator, Bill Bradley, as a symbol of American pluralism, idealism and compassion as the cameras focused on his outreach work in the slums of New York. *Old Young Man* was translated into dozens of languages, with copies dispatched to U.S. diplomatic posts in places like Ankara and Katmandu, Rangoon and Jakarta, Kabul and Warsaw.²⁴

²³ Donald Roe, "The USIA Motion Picture Collection and African American History: A Reference Review," *Federal Records and African American History*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1997; Melinda M. Schwenk-Borrell, "Selling Democracy: The US Information Agency's Portrayal of American Race Relations 1953–1976," Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004, pp. 100–134, 168–170.

²⁴ Associated Press, "Cold War Film Gave Bradley a Bit Part in US Propaganda," *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, 2 September 1999, http://lubbockonline.com/stories/090299/ent_0902990012.shtml#.VrCQYE3MXIU .

Dissent

To a greater extent than is often realized, Hollywood supported the U.S. government's line during the Cold War. This had less to do with political pressures or official subsidies, and more with the fact that most people in what was, after all, a film *industry*, shared officialdom's ideological worldview; their relationship was one based, in essence, on the need to protect capitalism. Notwithstanding this, films were made that deviated from Cold War orthodoxy, including some about or involving sport. Some of these films used sport to mildly criticize prevailing views on the Cold War, others to confront those views head-on.

The start of the Cold War in the late 1940s coincided with a flurry of scandals in American sport, most centered on bribery and corruption. Despite the pressures on Hollywood to project positive images of the American Way of Life during this period, filmmakers could not simply ignore or bury these scandals on grounds of national interest. Some filmmakers had in fact shifted markedly to the left during the Great Depression and World War II and were inclined to link sleaze in sport to wider problems of corruption and inequality within U.S. society.²⁵ The result was an unprecedented cinematic probe (investigation would be going too far) into how money, greed and sport interrelated in a land of unfettered capitalism. Movies like *Body and Soul* (1947),

²⁵ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund. *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979).

Champion (1949) and *The Set-Up* (1949) poured scorn on the sordid side of the boxing business; *The Big Fix* (1947) drew attention to gambling rings connected to basketball; *Under My Skin* (1950), which was based on an Ernest Hemingway story, implied that horse racing was riven with corruption; *White Lightning* (1953) cast a withering eye over bribery and gambling in many Americans' favorite winter sport, ice hockey.²⁶

It was a coming-of-age drama that looked at the cold business of subsidizing (and exploiting) college footballers that was probably the most radical—and certainly the most controversial—of these films. Written by former Communist Party member Sidney Buchman, *Saturday's Hero* (1951) told of a Polish-American immigrant (played by John Derek) who wins a scholarship at an exclusive Southern university and whose grades are enhanced so he can concentrate on playing football—and helping a wealthy benefactor win a series of lucrative wagers on games. The movie's political edge would have been harder had Hollywood's censorship board, the Production Code Administration, not labeled it "anti-American" and demanded changes to its "vicious," "shame-faced" depiction of class differences in the U.S.²⁷ In the event, many in football and the press were infuriated by the film's denigration of sport and capitalism, feelings that were

²⁶ Briley, *Baseball Film*, p. 11; [review of *The Big Fix*, *Film Daily*, 9 May 1947, p. 8](#); [review of *Under My Skin*, *Motion Picture Herald Digest*, 11 March 1953, p. 221](#); [review of *White Lightning*, *Motion Picture Herald Digest*, 7 March 1953, p. 1751](#).

²⁷ E. G. Dougherty to Harry Cohn, 3 March 1950, *Saturday's Hero*, Production Code Administration Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, USA. On how the Production Code Administration and the censorship of Hollywood movies operated during this era see Matthew Bernstein (ed.), *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) and Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

heightened by *Saturday's Hero's* release coinciding with the uncovering of a “cribbing scandal” at West Point in which tutors had been found to be giving footballing cadets undue help in exams. As a result, a U.S. senator, William Fulbright, the author of a Congressional resolution to overhaul the educational system at West Point, fully endorsed *Saturday's Hero's* message, while right-wingers picketed theatres showing the film on the grounds that it was subversive propaganda. HUAC later found Buchman guilty of contempt of Congress when he refused to name communists in the film industry. As a result, Buchman spent most of the fifties on the industry blacklist.²⁸

In the 1960s, perhaps because it was safer politically, films often used satire rather than drama to critique the connections between sport and the Cold War. The best-known example of this has to be Stanley Kubrick's dark comedy about nuclear annihilation, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Kubrick's acclaimed masterpiece turned the visual and verbal metaphors used to link sport and national defense in earlier movies like *Strategic Air Command* on their head. In *Dr. Strangelove*, we see gung-ho politicians and military chiefs using language suffused with sports metaphors, as if World War III were merely a game. The status board in the giant White House War Room, for instance, is called the “Big Board” in the manner of sports scoreboards. Dropping bombs is referred to as ‘scoring’ and a rescue ship as “TD” [touchdown]. When Major “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) delivers a motivational speech to his B52 crew just before destroying the world,

²⁸ Crawford, *Use of Sports*, pp. 166–173; “*Saturday's Hero*,” *American Film Institute Catalog*, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=53423>; Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, pp. 382-383.

the pilot sounds just like a football coach prepping his team for the big game; when he rides the bomb down to his target at the very end of the film, he whoops like a rodeo cowboy. Phallic images of bombers copulating with tankers in the sky to the strains of “Try A Little Tenderness” and General Ripper’s fear of communist subversion via “vital bodily fluids” suggest a clear link between sex, war, threatened masculinity and sport.²⁹

Though it was more of a light-hearted spoof than a black comedy, *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home!* (1965) also had something important to say about the US national security state’s incestuous relationship with sport. *John Goldfarb* was inspired by the diplomatic crisis caused by the Soviet Union’s downing of an American U2 spy plane in May 1960, flown by CIA operative Gary Powers. In the film, U2 pilot John “Wrong-Way” Goldfarb (Richard Crenna), a former college football star who once ran 95 yards for a touchdown in the wrong direction, crash lands in the mythical oil-rich Arab kingdom of Fawzia *en route* to spying over the USSR. Goldfarb ends up in the middle of a tug-of-war between Fawzia’s baffoonish leader (Peter Ustinov), who threatens to hand him over to Moscow unless he agrees to coach the Fawz University football team, and the State Department, which wants to use the footballer as a bargaining chip in order to secure Fawzia as a valuable strategic base in the Middle East. Eventually, the State Department dispatches a football team from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana to Fawzia for an exhibition game, with instructions to lose to Fawz University, and with farcical results. *John Goldfarb’s* slapstick humor fell far short of its potential, but the film was

²⁹ Peter Kramer, *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (London: British Film Institute, 2014); Crawford, *Use of Sports*, p. 30–35.

saved from obscurity due to publicity generated by an unsuccessful lawsuit brought against the producers by the University of Notre Dame, which objected to a scene involving Notre Dame players fraternizing with harem girls.³⁰

The 1970s saw a number of films that could be interpreted as critiques of America's warlike sporting culture. These included two dystopian science fiction productions: *Death Race 2000* (1975), about a murderous trans-American road rally, and *Rollerball* (1975), set around an ultra-violent sport akin to roller derby that is run by a string of global corporations and which has been designed to replace team sports and warfare.³¹ A very different sort of film, *Drive, He Said* (1971), was an off-beat, small-budget, counter-culture production directed by actor Jack Nicolson about a disaffected college basketballer caught up in campus radicalism. Nicolson's irreverent film, which was aimed at young audiences, was fuelled by the anxieties surrounding the Vietnam War and embodied the spirit of New Hollywood.³²

³⁰ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: 'John Goldfarb' Arrives: Miss MacLaine Stars in Disputed Film," *The New York Times*, 25 March 1965, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D03E5DA153CE733A25756C2A9659C946491D6CF>.

³¹ Vincent Canby, "Futuristic World of 'Rollerball,'" *The New York Times*, 26 June 1975, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A01EFDD103CE034BC4E51DFB066838E669EDE>; Richard Combs, 'Death Race 2000', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1976, pp. 26–27.

³² Vincent Canby, "Screen: Nicholson's 'Drive, He Said': Movie Marks Actor's Debut as Director Tale of College Athlete Opens at Tower East," *The New York Times*, 14 June 1971, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=950DE6DF1E3FE63ABC4C52DFB066838A669EDE>.

The film that arguably surpassed all others in its condemnation of America's Cold War military-sports complex, however, and the final movie therefore to be dealt with here, is the powerful, Oscar-winning 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*. Directed by Peter Davis, a provocative tele-journalist who in 1971 had exposed the US Defense Department's propaganda activities in *Selling the Pentagon*, *Hearts and Minds* was not a sports film at all but a two-hour disquisition—using a mixture of interviews, combat footage, telecasts and old movie clips, with no narration—on how the United States had got embroiled in the Vietnam War. One of the chief, underlying reasons for this, *Hearts and Minds* posits, is that the Cold War had bred a sinister cult of victory in the United States. At the core of this victory culture was the interrelationship between militarism and sport.

Hearts and Minds points an accusing finger at the military-sports nexus in several ways that, like the movie as a whole, rely on the viewer to connect the thematic dots. In one scene, we see a U.S. colonel praising his young men for being “a bloody good bunch of killers,” followed immediately by a principal speaking to his college football team on the eve of a big game about god, manliness and love of one's country. In another scene, a frenzied college football coach exhorts his young charges not to lose and to “kill the competition.” In a different part of the movie, a newly-released POW, Lieutenant George Coker, justifies the United States' actions in Southeast Asia by citing his old high-school sports coach—“when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Shots of hysterical cheerleaders and grunting, helmeted footballers show us how American sport has conditioned its youth to resort to arms instinctively and to win at all costs.

Hollywood had played its part in this fashioning this gung-ho, macho culture too, the documentary argued—cue a sequence from the aforementioned McCarthyite melodrama *My Son John*. On its release, *Hearts and Minds* was called everything from “brave and brilliant” to “a cinematic lie.” It is now widely regarded as the definitive documentary about the Vietnam War.³³

Part Two: Soviet Sports Cinema

American and Soviet films have much more in common than is usually supposed, but it can be difficult to analyze them in a comparative framework for a number of reasons. The most important are that Hollywood, as the global juggernaut in filmmaking after World War II, produced many more movies than did its Soviet counterpart, and that Hollywood dominated the cinema market in the non-communist world. This pronounced imbalance is even greater in the case of sports cinema, because the sports film was actually a minor genre in Soviet cinema.

The Soviet Union’s quest for sporting dominance during the Cold War may have implied to Westerners that Soviet citizens were as obsessed with sports as they were. In fact, as the leading historian of Soviet sports, Robert Edelman, has noted “There was always far less attention to spectator sports in the USSR than in the West—fewer

³³ Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold War*, pp. 238–249; Kurt Kemper, *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 2, 6, 22–26, 200–201.

games, fewer teams, fewer stadiums, fewer sports, fewer newspapers, less television coverage, and much less advertising.”³⁴ This was true of the feature film as well. Unlike in the US, the Soviet sport film was not born until the mid-1930s, but even then only a few such films were made. The most notable among these was the successful soccer comedy *The Goalkeeper* (*Vratar*, 1936). This is a precursor to the Cold War sports film, featuring a match between the noble sportsmen of the Soviet team and the “Black Oxen,” a fascist-like team from an unnamed European country.³⁵ Another particularly interesting example from the thirties is a beautifully filmed drama about a female track star, who has to temporarily suspend sporting competition for motherhood, *A Chance Encounter* (*Sluchanaia vstrecha*, 1936).³⁶ Although Soviet studios made several dozen sports films after World War II, as we shall see, they failed to produce any blockbusters. Soviet sports cinema therefore had no equivalent of *Rocky IV*.

³⁴ Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 240.

³⁵ For analyses of this film, which was directed by Semyon Timoshenko, see John Haynes, “Film as Political Football: ‘The Goalkeeper’ (1936),” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2007), pp. 283–97; Andrei Apostolov, “The Enemy at the Gate: The Soviet Goalkeeper in Cinema, Culture, and Policy,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* Vol. 8, No. 3 (November 2014), pp. 200–7. Mike O’Mahony, *Sport in the USSR: Physical Culture—Visual Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 141–42, compares the film to paintings of the period.

³⁶ *A Chance Encounter*, directed by Igor Savchenko, ran into censorship trouble, in part because of the negative portrayal of the runner’s erstwhile coach and, soon, husband. See Julian Graffy, “‘An Unpretentious Picture?’—Igor Savchenko’s ‘A Chance Encounter,’” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2012), pp. 301–18. Susan Grant also discusses this film in her book *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 86–90. Our thanks to Dr. Grant for loaning us a copy of the film, which is not available online.

In the USSR, in contrast to the United States, sports films were mainly low-budget pictures made by and featuring second-tier directors and actors. With few exceptions, they can be considered the Soviet equivalent of the Hollywood B picture. Sports films rarely enjoyed any reviews at all in the major organs of the cinema press—*Art of the Cinema* (*Iskusstvo kino*) and *Soviet Screen* (*Sovetskii ekran*)—or positive critical attention. Sports films almost never recorded significant audience attendance (the Soviet equivalent of “box office”). *The Goalkeeper* aside, they are not included in historical surveys of Soviet film, whether written by Russian or Western scholars, and subsequently have been largely forgotten.³⁷ In short, sports films appear to have made little impact on Soviet cinema.

This presents us with a problem. Given that sports films were for the most part marginal in Soviet cinema, can they nevertheless reveal anything important and new about the way the Soviet state employed its film industry during the Cultural Cold War? To what extent do these sports films reinforce—or challenge—state rhetoric about the role of sport in Soviet society during the Cold War? In order to answer these two questions, let us start with a brief historical overview.

As we have already underscored, a fundamental, if obvious, contrast between the American and Soviet cinemas reflects the profound ideological differences between

³⁷ A good example is the relatively recent and highly authoritative history by L.M. Budiak, *Istoriia otechestvennogo kino* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2005). *The Goalkeeper* receives three paragraphs, pp. 290–91. The only other sports films mentioned are *Sporting Honor* (p. 357) and *Sport, Sport, Sport* (p. 449).

the two systems they were part of. Hollywood may have been influenced by the state, but Soviet cinema was owned by the state, a process that started in 1919 and was completed in the mid-1930s.³⁸ Over the life of the Soviet Union, cinema played a highly significant propaganda function (although that was not the only function it performed) and was subjected to central planning and varying degrees of political and artistic censorship.³⁹

The state invested heavily in the film industry during World War II and achieved remarkable successes given the dire circumstances.⁴⁰ Afterwards, however, the situation for Soviet filmmakers soon became even worse than it had been in the late 1930s during the Great Terror.⁴¹ Scarce economic resources were parceled out according to a hierarchy of need. Even though film was considered, as Lenin had famously put it, “the most important of the arts,” movies were a low priority compared with the need to rebuild the USSR’s devastated industrial infrastructure at a time of Cold War. Stalin therefore urged directors to make fewer but better films, but it is doubtful that even he

³⁸ The institutional history of the early Soviet film industry is the subject of Denise J. Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

³⁹ A good overview of the development of Soviet film censorship can be found in Jamie Miller, *Soviet Cinema: Politics and Persuasion under Stalin* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), ch. 2.

⁴⁰ See Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914–2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), ch. 4.

⁴¹ There were, however, two stylistically interesting sports films made in 1946 that showed how Soviet cinema might have developed had it been left to the filmmakers: *The First Glove* (Pervaia perchatka), a musical comedy about a boxer from Siberia who struggles to become a champion, and *Center of Attack* (Tsentri napadeniia), about a famous soccer player who abandons his successful sports career to do “something useful” as an engineer.

expected production to drop as precipitously as it did, to only nine films in 1951.⁴² Hard-core Cold War films like *Meeting on the Elbe* (*Vstrecha na Elbe*, 1949) enjoyed heavy investment and achieved significant box office success with Soviet audiences, who like all filmgoers appreciated entertaining stories, high production values, and big name stars.⁴³ The return of draconian censorship after the end of the war, coupled with the depredations of the *zhdanovshchina*, Culture Minister Andrei Zhdanov's campaign against "cosmopolitan" artists, made it difficult for any film director to challenge the role that the international political melodrama played in Cold War cinematic politics.⁴⁴ This was, however, also a period in which the regime sought to convince the populace that life had returned to a happy "normal," and the sports film could help reinforce this fantasy by showing smiling and fit young people having fun, not to mention winning a few international competitions.

As was the case in the United States, Soviet sport film directors' approach to the Cold War tended to be "soft." To a greater extent than in the United States, Soviet cinema generally shied away from direct rhetorical engagement with the ideological enemy, even when state rhetoric was at its harshest—as in the late Stalin and late Brezhnev eras. It is true that international sports competition was a motivating factor in most Soviet films about sport, but that competition was constructed generically as "Western," very rarely specifically American. Foreign competitors in Soviet sports films

⁴² Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, p. 40–41.

⁴³ For an analysis of early Cold War Soviet cinematic production see Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, p. 40–47, 66–79.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

were occasionally shown engaging in a dirty trick or two, but for the most part the emphasis was not on the negative attributes of the competition. Rather, it was on the superb training, sterling moral character, and selfless motivation of Soviet athletes, inculcated in them by their coaches. A distinguishing characteristic of Soviet sports films compared to American films is that the coach is invariably the second lead, and sometimes even takes the leading role, a reflection, perhaps, of the socialist mentor who is a stock figure in socialist realist fiction.⁴⁵

The common, ideologically-driven stereotype of Cold War cultural politics is that the Soviets sought to develop team sports at the expense of individual sports and therefore focused on team heroes as opposed to individual stars. Certainly, there were many Soviet films about team sports, mostly soccer, the most popular Soviet spectator sport, and especially in the early films, the importance of teamwork was emphasized. Nevertheless, as we shall see, an unexpected variety of individual sports are also represented: gymnastics, figure skating, boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, swimming, skiing, running, auto racing, horse racing, dressage, and mountaineering. Yet like their Hollywood counterparts, even the films on team sports emphasize the individual, the star athlete.

“Soft” Propaganda: Soviet Sports as a Way of Life

⁴⁵ Thanks to Olga Klimova for this observation, email to authors, 14 August 2015.

In the early years of Soviet Cold War sport cinema, competitive sports and the intensive training required to succeed at the international level were presented as wholesome and fun. The few films about sports from the end of World War II to de-Stalinization in 1956 were generally comedies or comedy-dramas, lighthearted pictures emphasizing a return to “normal” life after the war. They stress the joys of sports and the contributions of sports participation to building moral character and physical fitness. They are “socialist realist” in style and content, even after Stalin’s death, meaning that they are straightforward and uplifting, with all conflicts successfully resolved by film’s end.

The master plot of these films is that an inspirational coach takes a talented but immature athlete (usually a young man) and teaches him the Soviet values of hard work and discipline. This young man often has been “discovered” by talent scouts on a collective farm or elsewhere in the provinces and is brought to the “center” (Moscow or Leningrad) to train. (In this way, like in many Hollywood movies, sport is constructed as a route to upward social mobility.) The plot focuses on character-building as much as on winning, but victory is almost always the result, the implicit message being that the superiority of Soviet values leads to sporting triumph. This is, of course, virtually identical to Hollywood’s presentation of the American athlete.

One of the most entertaining early comedies, *The Reserve Player* (Zapasnoi igrok, 1954), is a musical tale of the triumph of a lesser talent over an acknowledged star in

soccer, “the noblest people’s sport,” as the film tells us.⁴⁶ Eventually the arrogant champion sees the error of his egocentrism and shirking ways, and the hardworking “reserve player,” who is substituted for the goalkeeper, saves the game. Another example of a talented sportsman who goes astray due to his ego can be found in *Champion of the World* (Chempion mira, 1954), about a Greco-Roman wrestler, a rural blacksmith on a collective farm, who is overly reliant on his natural physical talent and reluctant to train until he is saved by his kindly coach and an understanding girlfriend. Good-natured and light-hearted films like these were popular, providing a relief from the bombastic biopics and combat epics that had dominated Soviet screens since the Second World War. *Champion of the World*, for example, took twelfth place at the box office in 1955, with 28.21 million viewers.⁴⁷ It is important to note that although both of

⁴⁶ This film was directed by Semyon Timoshenko, who also made *The Goalkeeper*. Although unknown in the West except to specialists in Soviet cinema, Timoshenko, a leading director of comedies, is an exception to the rule that only lesser directors took on sports film assignments in the USSR.

⁴⁷ Sergei Zemlianukhin and Miroslava Segida, *Domashniaia sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino, 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1996), p. 490. Although emphasis on the lighthearted elements of sport is, ironically, most clearly connected to the harshest stages the Cold War, the sport comedy made occasional appearances in the years that followed. *The Queen’s Regatta* [Korolevskaia regatta] (1966) is an entertaining fairy tale that focuses on a team of cheerful slackers who, despite an incompetent coach, manage to pull together to win an international competition. *The Center from the Heavens* [Tsentrovoi iz podnebesia] (1975) is a loopy basketball comedy about an amazingly tall shepherd from the Caucasus recruited to play. His interest in playing competitive basketball is to allow him to travel around the country in pursuit of a Soviet pop singer with whom he has fallen in love, but he ends up as the team hero who sink the winning basket in a tight match against an American team. It is important to note, however, that neither of these two films emphasizes sport’s transforming character in the way the earlier comedies did.

these films were made after Stalin's death, they still very much reflect the Stalinist comedic style.

The cultural thaw of the Khrushchev era that began in cinema in 1957 with *The Cranes Are Flying* (Letiat zhuravli) was not friendly to the sport film, as directors had many more intellectually stimulating artistic issues to deal with and more freedom to follow their own inclinations.⁴⁸ There were, however, a few exceptions. *The Hockey Players* (Khokkeisty, 1965), the first Soviet feature film about ice hockey, is a serious film that shows the impact of intense training on the private life of players, especially as they get older, as well as rivalries within the sporting establishment.⁴⁹ Another sports film that reflects Thaw era values is *The New Girl* (Novenkaia, 1968), about a talented gymnast who is more interested in being nice to her teammates than in competing internationally—an attitude unlikely to increase Soviet competitiveness in gymnastics were it to be widely adopted. The girl's lack of ego and humanity sets her apart from the typical Soviet film athlete.

More characteristic of the Soviet Cold War sports film—and more entertaining—is *Goal! Another Goal!* (Udar! Eshche udar! 1968). This is a soccer film that reflects Thaw stylistics while incorporating socialist realist themes. The star of the "Dawn" team is the adopted son of the coach, a World War II hero and former champion soccer player. The

⁴⁸ On the Thaw in cinema, see Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000). Woll does not include any sports films in her analysis of the period.

⁴⁹ This film is discussed in Andrei Apostolov, "Passivnaia passionarnost: Zritel i media v otechestvennykh filmakh o khokkee," *Logos*, No. 6 (2014), p. 163–93.

film projects the construction of Soviet sporting values very explicitly, starting at the beginning. The film opens at a press conference after an international match that the Soviets have won. The Western reporters challenge the coach to comment on charges that his players are to all intents and purposes professionals, to which he replies that the only professional on the team is himself. (How can “players” be “professionals”?) Indeed his son Sergei, an orphan from the wartime Leningrad blockade, is studying physics at university. Interestingly, we see later that Sergei’s professors are not sympathetic to his attempts to combine “serious work” like physics with competitive soccer, and are especially unhappy with the amount of time he devotes to his sport. In the end—and this is presented as the right choice—Sergei decides to focus on soccer, leading the Soviet team to a tie with the West Germans, who play dirty, picking fights on the field and faking injuries. The generational conflict between father and son, in which the boy resents his father/coach’s guidance, is very characteristic of the humanism of Thaw pictures, but in this case the values of the father, who upholds Soviet traditions, triumph.⁵⁰

Although Leonid Brezhnev came to power in late 1964, the Thaw in cinema lasted until 1968, when the Soviet government began to ban films once again.⁵¹ Brezhnev, like Stalin, did not care for artistically innovative or intellectually challenging films, but his reign marked a shift to social criticism in a number of genres, including the

⁵⁰ The film’s flashback to a soccer game played in blockaded Leningrad on 2 May 1942, the traditional starting date for the summer sports season, is particularly interesting because it reflects a real event. See Edelman, *Serious Fun*, p. 82.

⁵¹ Woll, *Real Images*, part 5.

sports film. A wider variety of sports were featured in these films, many of which share a common theme, if not a common sport.

A new master plot dominated the 1970s: talented Soviet athletes have lost their lust for victory and their willingness to train hard.⁵² A dedicated coach needs to drag the athletes to success by berating them for their selfishness, especially their desire to stay out late at night dancing to Western pop music or to focus on their private lives. Wives and girlfriends are seen as particularly invidious distractions. Sports, in short, are no longer fun; success at the international level requires a complete break with the pleasures of private life. Winning one for the team is apparently no longer a sufficient motivator for the seventies generation of Soviet athletes.

Blue Ice (Goluboi led, 1969) is notable because it was the first film to critique openly the arduous training regimen for world-class Soviet athletes, in this case ice dancers. A husband and wife team split over the pressures of training, with the wife seeking a more normal, less stressful life. (Her driven husband, rather than the coach, is the source of most of the pressure.) Eventually the couple reconciles, although the wife's motivations for returning are unclear, and go on to win the world championship. This essentially joyless victory is nevertheless presented as right and just.

The Speed of the White Queen (Khod beloi korolevoi, 1971) returns to a trope of the earlier, classic master plot by focusing on the role of the coach in inspiring an athlete

⁵² According to Edelman, during this period there was a lot of criticism in the Soviet press about Soviet soccer players, in particular, being undertrained. Edelman, *Serious Fun* p. 172.

to achieve international victory. The coach in this film is far different from the kindly, humorous, avuncular trainer of the films of the early 1950s, however. Here a self-sacrificing, unsmiling Nordic skiing coach decides to quit to return to his “true” profession of architecture because his skiers lack dedication, preferring to party instead of train. When the coach spots a raw talent, though, he is lured back to the sport. Fortunately, the skier is a passive and malleable young woman who subjects herself to a grueling training regimen. Although she demonstrates no obvious agency or will to victory, she nevertheless becomes a world champion by anchoring a relay team. This depressing theme is reprised in *It’s Just a Game* (Takaia ona, igra, 1976), a return to the soccer film. Here the team is so lazy and unmotivated that their coach quits. The players’ wives and girlfriends are thrilled; these self-centered, not-very-Soviet women want their men to leave soccer in favour of something “respectable.” Eventually, the players come back together and win, but this sour and unconvincing drama could not hope to inspire anyone to engage in high-level competitive sports.

Two other films from the late 1970s shift the focus somewhat, from the breakdown of discipline among competitive athletes to the ideological problem of the individual sports star in a collective society. In *The Son of a Champion* (Syn chempiona, 1979), the star of the Soviet downhill team stubbornly refuses to ski as an act of rebellion against his father, the team’s hard-driving coach and a former world champion skier. Eventually the egotistical young man recognizes that the team needs him, and he wins the last leg of an international competition for his comrades. This might seem reminiscent of films from the early fifties like *The Reserve Player* and *Champion of the*

World, but *The Son of a Champion* completely lacks the humor and optimism of its predecessors.

A Moment Decides Everything (Vse reshaet mgnovenie, 1978) is a more complex film about a childish but enormously gifted young swimmer who is spotted by a scout at a regional competition in Sochi. The swimmer is invited to Moscow to train, where she immediately breaks Soviet and world records. But unlike the young-athletes-from rural backwaters in earlier films who thrive in the big city and under a demanding training regimen, this swimmer is not mentally or emotionally prepared for international competitions and suffers from panic attacks at critical moments. In the end, the youngster cedes her place on the team to an aging champion. The message is a new one for Soviet sport cinema: maturity proves more important than raw talent, and the young swimmer is sent home to her grandfather.

Although this body of work is interesting for what it confirms about the malaise among Soviet youth in the 1970s and the state's interest in reviving traditional Soviet values of collectivism, hard work, and respect for authority, its impact was likely marginal. Unfortunately, all these films suffer from poor production, banal scripts, and mediocre acting. If the intention was to instill the core Soviet values in a Soviet youth that was rejecting them in favor of other, less taxing (and more Western-oriented) leisure activities, they have to be counted failures. There is no evidence that these films ever reached their target audience, or indeed, any audience.

“Hard” Propaganda: Soviet Sport as Cold War Proxy

Most Soviet sports films aimed at defining the Soviet athlete in a positive way rather than on defaming the competition, to the extent that it is hard to find a pure example of negative Cold War filmmaking in the genre. Although Soviet cinema made a number of highly successful hard propaganda films during the early Cold War, as we have already noted, the sole attempt at replicating this feat in the sports genre during Stalin’s time is not among them. Actually, most of the film *Sporting Honor* (*Sportivnaia chest*, 1951) is a jolly comedy featuring the same motifs as *The Reserve Player and Champion of the World*, discussed above as “soft” propaganda. Svetlugin, a factory worker from the Urals, is an unschooled talent who joins a leading soccer team. Grinko, the team’s star player, resents the newcomer and attempts to undermine him. Except for the arrogant Grinko, everybody is having fun and living the Soviet good life. Only at the end, in a sequence that seems tacked on, does the mood turn dark due to Cold War tensions. Now united, with Grinko accepting his new teammate, the team goes abroad to compete with a Western team that is backed by nefarious bourgeois types, including a monstrously ugly priest. The match, played in driving rain and fog that suggests Britain,⁵³ is plagued by Western thuggery, including a deliberate effort to break Svetlugin’s leg, but the “new Soviet system of [collective] play” prevails. The team is also buoyed by receiving dozens of telegrams urging them on from all over the USSR. With this

⁵³ The film might have been alluding to Moscow Dynamo’s famously successful tour of Britain in 1945. On this tour see David Downing, *Passovotchka: Moscow Dynamo in Britain, 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

collective support, how could the Soviet team lose? Although it faced some criticism for its fun bits, this lively and entertaining film took fifth place at the box office, with a more than respectable 20.3 million viewers.⁵⁴

During the cultural thaw of the late fifties, many directors sought the opportunity to work with more “serious” material in a less straightforward way. As we have seen, this was not an opportune moment for the sports film to develop beyond its established conventions. Given that many of this era’s film artists were preoccupied with rewriting the history of the Great Patriotic War, it should come as no surprise that the major sports film of the Khrushchev era, *Third Period* (Tretii taim, 1962), dramatizes a “true story” from the war, a soccer “death match” pitting Soviet POWs against German soldiers that took place in Kiev on June 22, 1942, the first anniversary of the German invasion. This was an international match with the highest possible stakes: the price of victory for the Red Army soldiers would be death.⁵⁵ *Third Period* is a hybrid, reflecting some Thaw themes and stylistics but also socialist realist tendencies that

⁵⁴ Zemlianukhin and Segida, *Domashniaia sinemateka*, p. 422.

⁵⁵ The truth behind this event is much debated - only some of the team was executed—and it was certainly exaggerated by the Soviet authorities for propaganda purposes when Kiev was retaken in December 1944. See James Riordan’s account of the match, “Match of Death, Kiev, 9 August 1942,” *Soccer and Society* 4, No. 1 (Spring 2003), p. 87–93. For a lively, if popularized rendition that is partly based on interviews with witnesses, see Andy Dougan, *Dynamo: Defending the Honour of Kiev* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001). Edelman mentions it in *Serious Fun*, p. 82. Also see Volodymyr Ginda, “Beyond the Death Match: Sport under German Occupation between Repression and Integration, 1941–1944,” in Nikolaus Katzer, Sandra Budy, Alexandra Köhring, Manfred Zeller, eds., *Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2010), p. 179–200. Curiously, none of these writers seems to be familiar with the movie *Third Period*.

would have been quite acceptable to Stalin. As in a socialist realist film, the villains, the German officers, are with one exception thoroughly bad. Yet the heroes are more finely drawn than in socialist realist cinema, as is the supporting cast. For example, a local collaborator is assigned to the team and wants to throw the game, but the viewer easily empathizes with his fear of the consequences of victory. There is also a “good” German, a former professional soccer player who tries to argue with his commandant that sports and politics should never be mixed. Yet, as was the case in many Stalinist films, the heroes’ true triumph is not the victory on the soccer field, but rather their courageous willingness to die for their motherland. This emotionally fraught film evidently struck a chord with Soviet audiences, coming in sixth at the box office in 1963, with 32 million viewers, making it the most-watched sports film in the history of Soviet cinema.⁵⁶

However, the “hardest” of the hardline Cold War sports films, and the only truly negative one, was *A Cool Guy* (Mirvoï paren, 1971), about a truck road rally in an unnamed Middle Eastern country that was filmed by the Belorussian film studio in Afghanistan. A truck factory in Minsk has produced a spectacular heavy-duty truck that the Soviets want to sell abroad. The rally is a perfect stage on which to showcase the Soviet vehicle, which is competing against rival trucks from European and American companies. Many of the Westerners are serious bad guys, even stooping to sabotage and murder to win the rally. (This is less true of the drivers than their backers; it is worth noting that the American, Parker, is actually more upstanding than the rest of the

⁵⁶ Zemlianukhin and Segida, *Domashniaia sinemateka*, 454.

“bourgeois” drivers.) *A Cool Guy* is definitely a sports film about moral character: the hero, the Soviet driver Viktor Login, is a clean-cut young man who has no desire to travel abroad and has his worst fears about foreign culture confirmed by the assorted capitalist types he encounters on his plane coming over. His repulsion increases when he arrives at his destination and sees the crowded, dirty streets and the amoral scene at the Western-style bar where the drivers congregate. But, as the film proclaims, “Russians are not afraid of anything.” Eventually, even though he is attacked by thugs and temporarily thrown in jail, Viktor manages to win the rally. He cannot wait to return to the clean, orderly USSR, and the film closes with an aerial panorama of a Soviet cityscape.

A Cool Guy is as close to a stereotypical Cold War film as we can find in Soviet sports cinema, but, although some viewers might well have enjoyed their campiness, its cartoonish images of Westerners were already being challenged by 1971. There are no box office figures available for this movie; *A Cool Guy* is so obscure that it is not even included in the most comprehensive listing of Soviet feature films.⁵⁷ Certainly, the endless scenes of trucks rumbling along twisting mountain roads do not make for exciting viewing, and it is hard to imagine Soviet audiences devoting the time or money to see it.

Transnational and counter-propaganda

⁵⁷ I.e., Zemlianukhin and Segida, *Domashniaia sinemateka*.

As we have noted already, Soviet cinema could never hope to match Hollywood's global reach. True, the Soviet Union had a supposedly "captive" market in its East European bloc, but Soviet films were rarely particularly popular there, although they were certainly screened. Film exchange agreements—with the United States and India, for instance—invariably failed because of the lack of box office appeal of Soviet productions.⁵⁸ A few Soviet films did break through the audience barrier during the Cold War, especially during the Thaw, but were usually pictures released to the international film festival circuit.⁵⁹ No sports films were among them, these being produced for the domestic market alone.

Although there is, therefore, no direct Soviet counterpart to the Hollywood sports films that sought to counteract negative views of America's race problem, we might consider the ways that many Soviet sports films indirectly sought to challenge the West's cinematic views of Soviet athletes.⁶⁰ The American construction of the Soviet athlete is best exemplified by *Rocky IV*'s spectacularly caricatured villain Ivan Drago, a gigantic, ridiculously muscled automaton. (Although "Ivan" is used to typify the Russian

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the fate of Soviet films in the United States and India, see James H. Krukones, "The Unspooling of Artkino: Soviet Film Distribution in America, 1940-1975," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 29, no. 1 (March 2009) and Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinema: The Culture of Movie-Going after Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁵⁹ Woll, *Real Images*, *passim*.

⁶⁰ One outlier must be noted, *Flight 222* (Reis 222, 1985), which depicts the defection of a Soviet athlete while on a trip to the US. This is interesting because it was based on the real life defection of the ballet dancer Alexander Godunov in 1979; actually, it was performing artists, not athletes, who tended to defect. For more on this film see Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 57-58.

common man even by Russians, “Drago” is not a Russian surname, nor does it sound like one.) In fact, no Soviet sports film emphasized the purely physical attributes of its athletes, except as a joke; in *Champion of the World*, for example, the wrestler-hero’s amazing breathing capacity is played for comic relief. Instead, all Soviet sports films took pains to present Soviet sportsmen and sportswomen as fully, painfully human; if the athletes do not question their own abilities, circumstances usually force them to do so. And unlike in Hollywood films, pretty girls do not seem to be naturally attracted to competitive sportsmen. As the films from the seventies show, the opposite appears to be true. At least on film, Soviet sports stars have to work hard to win—or win back—the girl.

American sports propaganda during the Cold War also claimed that Soviet athletes were steroid-fueled professionals, not wholesome, clean-living amateurs. In Soviet sports films, the “real” profession of the athlete is almost always underscored, and especially in the earlier films, the factory manager or factory committee puts in an obligatory appearance. Additionally, most of the films emphasize that Soviet athletes absolutely will not drink alcohol, even while others around them are doing so; in general the cinematic coaches stress the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

The truth is therefore that Soviet cinema imagined the Soviet sports hero in almost exactly the same way that Hollywood constructed the American sports hero. Both are depicted as honest and hardworking, and motivated by love of family and country. What is different—the tenacious emphasis on the *transformation* of the Soviet

athlete hero with the help of a coach (who represents the state)—comes straight from the socialist realist playbook.

Dissent

Obviously American directors were able to make many more “dissenting” pictures than their Soviet counterparts, but even in the darkest days of censorship some Soviet filmmakers sought an independent path, as an inventory of banned films indicates.⁶¹

One can also occasionally find evidence of dissent in films that were released. The earliest film to deviate from the norms established for the Soviet sports film genre in the post-World War II era is Elem Klimov’s highly experimental and largely unsuccessful *Sport, Sport, Sport* (1970), which was based on a script by his brother, long-jumper German Klimov.⁶² A pastiche of acted and documentary material, the film is anchored—to the extent that it can be—by the anecdotes and philosophical musings of an old sports masseur, Uncle Volodya. Although on the surface the film seems to support the Party line on sports as promoting good character as well as a means of advertising the superiority of the Soviet system, the eccentricities of its style may be seen as a mockery

⁶¹For a catalogue of Soviet films banned from 1917 to 1953, see Evgenii Margolit and Viacheslav Shmyrov, *Iziatoe kino* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1995).

⁶² German Klimov wrote several more scripts for sports films; see, e.g., *Men’s Games in the Fresh Air* (*Muzhskie igry na svezhem vozdukhe*, 1978), a glum depiction of two rival decathletes who never manage to overcome their differences, produced by the very minor Riga studio.

of its putative message. Certainly it subverts the conventions of the genre. Unusual among sports films for the amount of critical attention it received, which was mainly negative, *Sport, Sport, Sport* did not attract an audience outside of film festivals.⁶³

By the late 1970s, the Brezhnev regime's grip over the film industry was inconsistent, and it was sometimes possible to make films that openly questioned the Party line on the importance of victory at international sports competitions. One of these films, *The Girl and Grand* (*Devushka i Grand*, 1980), also typifies the Soviet film industry's turn to old-fashioned Hollywood-style entertainment during this period. This was a backhanded tribute to the American films that enjoyed increasing popularity in the USSR even though Cold War rhetoric was heating up.⁶⁴ *The Girl and Grand* concerns a young woman who trains Grand, a handsome but difficult stallion born at a large breeding farm in the Caucasus. Eventually, the troublesome horse is sold at auction for a high price to a British sportsman. Awhile later, the girl travels to England to help a champion Soviet horse compete in an international steeplechase. During the race, Grand's rider is thrown, whereupon the girl immediately mounts him and finishes the

⁶³ For an excellent analysis of this bizarre film see Christine Gözl, "Sport, Sport, Sport, or a Cinema Experiment with the 'Formula of Harmony,'" in Katzer et al., eds., *Euphoria and Exhaustion*, 339-59. Klimov's best known film is his 1985 masterpiece *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*), set in Belorussia in World War II.

⁶⁴ The enormous popularity of Vladimir Menshov's *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, 1979), an old-fashioned "girl friends" film in the Hollywood style, is a case in point. Seen by nearly 80 million viewers, and winner of an Oscar for best foreign picture, it puts the relative popularity of *Third Period* (almost 50 million fewer viewers) in perspective. On the influence of American films on Soviet film production see Denise J. Youngblood, "Americanitis: The 'Amerikanshchina' in Soviet Cinema," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19, No. 4 (Winter 1992).

race, winning for the British owner! Grand's grateful master improbably returns the valuable horse to her and the film ends with the girl riding Grand in a dressage event. *The Girl and Grand* makes it seem that Soviet-Western sports competition had already ended, when in some ways it was actually reaching new heights. This entertaining film—who does not love a girl and her horse?—was a modest success at the box office with 11 million viewers, at a time when movie attendance was dropping dramatically in favor of television.⁶⁵

Two other films upended the tropes of the Soviet sports film in much more serious ways. *A Race without a Finish* (Gonka bez kontsa, 1977) is only marginally a sports film, but a highly revelatory one nonetheless. The Soviets are trying to build a racecar that can successfully compete internationally with Western cars. Unlike the Soviet-made champion trucks in *A Cool Guy*, here Soviet autos are portrayed as distinctly inferior. There are serious quality control problems at the factory due to lazy workers, but the factory director refuses to listen to the inspector, a young woman. Unlike in a socialist realist film, these issues are not resolved, and the Soviet cars break down before the finish, to the dismay of their drivers.

Another dissident film from this period badly misjudged how much criticism of Soviet life and sport could be tolerated, and was banned. *Viktor Krokhin's Second Try* (Vtoriaia popytka Viktora Krokhina, 1977) features a young boxer who is thoroughly ruined as a person, first because of early hardship and second because of his single-

⁶⁵ Zemlianukhin and Segida, *Domashniaia sinemateka*, p. 111.

minded focus on his sport. The film is a harshly realistic look at the life of a boxer, from his brutal and impoverished childhood in the slums of post-war Leningrad to his boxing career 20 years later, when he is a vulgar, cold, arrogant champion. Some of the documents related to the banning of *Viktor Krokhin* have been published and reveal that its shocking deviation from the feel-good norms of Soviet filmmaking truly unsettled critics.⁶⁶ There is no more unlikeable protagonist in all of Soviet cinema.

Although the late seventies saw a number of important films of social criticism, the heyday of Soviet dissent was without doubt the glasnost era. The most prominent films of this heady and demoralizing period in Soviet cinematic history focused on the revisioning of Soviet history and on searing critiques of contemporary Soviet life.⁶⁷ Sports were not a dominant theme, given the scope of the crises the country faced. Although there were a few documentary movies that attacked the Soviet sports “machine,” the most controversial feature film to focus on this subject was *The Dolly* (Kukolka, 1987), a devastating, highly-sensationalized critique of the Soviet “women’s” gymnastic system. (All internationally competitive gymnasts are, of course, underdeveloped teenaged girls.) In this film, a champion gymnast continues competing even though her trainers know she has suffered a serious back injury. After her health is ruined, she is forced to return to a home and mother she really does not know and, worse yet, to enter an alien society: a high school, where she is mocked and shunned

⁶⁶ See *Zapreshchennye filmy: Dokumenty, svidetelstvo, komentarii*. “Polka,” part 2 (Moscow: NII Kinoiskusstva, 1993), p. 154–61.

⁶⁷ The best book on this period is Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

because she is a world champion, a Soviet “Master of Sport.” Intensely angry at her fate, the girl becomes a cruel bully who revels in exposing her teacher’s romance with a student. Unable to cope outside the institutionalized Soviet sporting system, and now ostracized by everyone, the “dolly” commits suicide.⁶⁸ According to Russian critic Sergei Tsyrukun, *The Dolly* enjoyed considerable popularity among young athletes for daring to critique the conditions under which they trained and competed.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Comparing U.S. and Soviet sports films made during the Cold War is not altogether an easy task, especially for those historians interested in exploring what went on behind the screen as much as what appeared on it. In general, American film archives are much richer and, even in the 2010s, more accessible than their Soviet counterparts. The difficulty in finding viewing copies of some Soviet sports movies makes meaningful comparative analysis all the more problematic. In these imbalanced circumstances, scholars run the risk of focusing greater attention on the American material and thereby possibly over-emphasizing its depth and propagandistic versatility. This, in turn, can on the one hand add false weight to the argument that the Americans fought the Cold War’s battle for hearts and minds more skillfully and on the other exacerbate the

⁶⁸ To situate this film in the context of glasnost cinema, see *ibid.*, 184.

⁶⁹ Sergei Tsyrukun, “Ultra-si: Sportivnoe kino kak chast sovetskoi mifologii,” *Iskusstvo kino*, No. 11 (November 2007), p. 7.

Western-centric nature of much of the work that has been conducted into the Cultural Cold War to date.

Archival issues aside, it is nevertheless possible to reach a number of firm conclusions about American and Soviet sports cinema during the Cold War. The first is that Cold War sports cinema incorporated a dizzying array of activities—on almost every conceivable surface, from grass and tartan to water and ice—and that it involved far more than direct, head-to-head clashes between the two countries' athletes. Indeed, very few films did in fact focus on American and Soviet athletes competing against one another. This tells us something about cinema's limitations compared, say, with live television coverage of sporting clashes. It also tells us to widen our definition of the Cold War and of Cold War culture specifically.

Secondly, surprisingly perhaps given the degree to which Soviet sports were overtly politicized, overall sports played a more prominent propagandistic role in the American film industry than in the Soviet one. This was particularly the case when it came to targeting international audiences. This, again, tells us we need to broaden our definitions, in this case of propaganda, to take in visual material that reaches across a wide spectrum from negative to positive and that serves a wide range of political and social functions, some overt, some covert. The Cold War was a propaganda conflict par excellence and therefore involves far more sporting movies than the likes of *Rocky IV*.

Thirdly, given that international sporting rivalry served as an alternative to direct military conflict between the United States and the USSR during the Cold War, and that

both countries put so much energy into mobilizing cinema in the conflict's crucial battle for hearts and minds, it is not surprising that American and Soviet sports films crystallized many of the issues that were felt to be at stake. What is remarkable—at least in the context of the “two camps” rhetoric employed by the United States and the USSR during the Cold War—is how similar the cinematic output of the two ideological foes was. What stands out most is how much each side focused on positive, indirect propaganda, that is, on images that many people at the time would not have interpreted as propaganda. Key to this was affirming their side's moral superiority by using sports as a metaphor for righteous competition. The team with the best athletes wins, and in American and Soviet films “best” is defined in terms of old-fashioned values—of hard work, discipline, sacrifice for the greater good, honesty and humanity. In both countries' movies, sporting victories are more likely to be presented less as a vindication for any sort of international ideological “system” and more loosely as an indication of that country's superior way of life. Patriotism, rather than capitalism or communism, breed's winners, the films seem to say.

Fourthly, each country's Cold War sports cinema included resistance to or criticism of this way of life. This form of dissent was particularly pronounced by the 1970s when, in documentaries such as *Hearts and Minds*, American filmmakers used sport to interrogate the whole basis of U.S. foreign policy. Significantly, however, Soviet filmmakers went several steps further than niche, anti-Vietnam War movies like *Hearts and Minds* to use sport to question the very nature of communism. Even in early Cold War comedies, talented Soviet athletes would be shown resisting training and self-

abnegation and having to be coaxed and cajoled by their coaches along the right path. By the 1970s, this resistance had become much stronger, as Soviet athletes, like all Soviet youth, were seduced, not by the joys and rewards of work—and sports were work—but by Western-style conceptions of leisure and self-fulfillment. Many Soviet sports films of the 1970s and 1980s are not an *affirmation* of Soviet values as much as they are a *plea* to return to them. A film like *The Dolly* is so devastating because it reveals the falsity of the promises made to Soviet youth by the sports establishment.

Finally, this comparative analysis of sports films underscores a vital difference between American and Soviet Cold War cinema and arguably indeed between American and Soviet culture generally. Contrary to prevailing views during the conflict, and still now to an extent, American filmmakers were more adept than their Soviet counterparts at making effective and entertaining negative propaganda. As we have demonstrated here, in the sporting sphere Soviet efforts at this were at best half-hearted, failing, for example, to attack the manifest hypocrisy of American “amateur” athletics, in favor of a more defensive posture. Why this is the case is unclear but certainly Soviet cinema produced nothing like *Rocky IV*. In doing so, it missed a trick. From a propaganda perspective, American cinema was more versatile, better equipped and, as the evidence indicates, more persuasive.

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