

## **Sport as a Tool for Strengthening a Political Alliance: The Case of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to investigate the issue of the use of sports exchanges between states to strengthen their alliance, as with the example of communist states during the Cold War. As a matter of fact, Soviet sports officials very often implied that one of the roles of sport was to “consolidate friendship between nations.”<sup>1</sup> The truth of this statement might be doubtful in relation to the USSR’s sports relations with the capitalist states, but in respect to sports contacts between the Eastern European communist countries these words appear to be very accurate. Within the Eastern Bloc, sport functioned as a tool for strengthening the socialist system, in theory by broadening Soviet influence over its satellite states in cultural and social areas. At the same time sport served to demonstrate the superiority of communism to the outside world, by showing the unity of communist societies.<sup>2</sup>

Some key terms relating to this issue need clarification. The utilisation of sport for diplomatic reasons is generally associated with the term sports diplomacy, which is regarded as a part of public diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> There are three main objectives of sports diplomacy: to bring states or societies closer, to use

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<sup>1</sup> J. Parks, “Verbal gymnastics: sports, bureaucracy, and the Soviet Union’s entrance into the Olympic Games, 1946–1952,” in: S. Wagg, D.L. Andrews (eds.), *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, Routledge, London, 2007, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> E. Mertin, “Steadfast Friendship and Brotherly Help: The Distinctive Soviet-East German Sport Relationship within the Socialist Bloc,” in: H.L. Dicher, A.L. Johns (eds.), *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2014, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> E.H. Potter, *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada’s Soft Power through Public Diplomacy*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2009, pp. 90–92.

sport as a tool of conflict (for example to express dissatisfaction with another player's policy), and to shape a state's international image. In regard to this, authors sometimes distinguish positive and negative sports diplomacy, focused either on international cooperation or conflict. This research refers to positive sports diplomacy aimed at evoking friendship between the societies of a political alliance, thus strengthening it.

Sports relations between Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War can be regarded as a paradigm of sport being used to deepen friendship between states. Although the activities that were undertaken at the time were very often propaganda rather than public diplomacy, the boundary between the two terms remains blurred. In fact, the aim of the sports exchanges that were undertaken within the group of European communist states was to evoke mutual friendship, particularly between the societies of the Soviet satellite states and the people of the Soviet Union. As Eastern Bloc membership was enforced, artificial and intentional means of strengthening such an alliance should be seen as necessary.

This research attempts to verify the hypothesis that strengthening the Eastern Bloc via sports exchanges should not be associated exclusively with the interests of the Soviet Union, but with those of the communist governments of Eastern Bloc countries in general. Membership of the coalition of states was not voluntary, but was enforced with coercion, as a result of settlements after the Second World War. This led to a need to use methods typical for either propaganda or public diplomacy to legitimise the political reality among the societies of those countries. As a result, both the Soviet Union and the communist leaders of its satellite states wanted the societies to "like" the fact of being in the communist alliance.

Positive sports diplomacy within the Eastern Bloc failed in fulfilling its goals. The people of the European communist states, the athletes participating in sports exchanges, and sometimes even the organisers of the events, showed negative attitudes towards other nations of the alliance. Therefore, another aim of this research is to determine why the long-running activities of positive sports diplomacy within the communist alliance failed to create friendship between societies.

The research is basically empirical, based on two methods: decision-making and hermeneutics. It encompasses the need to determine the motivations of establishing sports exchanges, and interpretation of selected sports events from the perspective of their political and diplomatic

significance. The results of the research allowed verification of the research hypothesis and the discovery of general rules concerning positive sports diplomacy.

### The Role of Sport in the Eastern Bloc

Soviet policy-makers shared a belief that sport should be tied in with the general construction of socialism. It was meant to support mental and technical education, prepare people for work in production, and to realise military and socialisation objectives. The brave behaviour of athletes during the war convinced Soviet leaders of the validity of such a belief.<sup>4</sup> The view was further voiced in a resolution of the central committee of the communist party in 1948, where physical culture was described as “one of the most important tools of a communist upbringing, strengthening the health and strength of the labouring masses and preparing them to work more efficiently and to defend the socialist fatherland.”<sup>5</sup>

Once the Second World War was over and the communists took over the governments of states that found themselves in the Soviet sphere of influence, Soviet solutions concerning sport and physical culture were implemented. In the USSR they had already been shaped in the 1930s, and were simply copied to the Soviet satellite states.<sup>6</sup> In most Eastern European countries the transition of sport to the Soviet model was carried out between 1947 and 1948. According to Piotr Godlewski, the main objective was to indoctrinate the world outlook of the youth and to prepare young people to work and to defend the country, as well as for the sake of propaganda.<sup>7</sup> The latter issue encompassed sports victories being promoted as a matter of prestige, and the organisation of sports shows during processions.<sup>8</sup> Sport

<sup>4</sup> P. Godlewski, “Sowietyzacja sportu w Polsce (lata 1948–1956),” in: T. Jurek (ed.), *Studia z dziejów kultury fizycznej*, PTNKF, Gorzów Wielkopolski, 2002, p. 44; P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce na tle politycznej rzeczywistości lat 1944–1956*, AWF Poznań, Poznań, 2006, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Sport w ZSRR. Organizacja – rozwój – osiągnięcia. Praca zbiorowa*, Prasa Wojskowa, Warszawa, 1950, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> See: P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, p. 19; J. Riordan, “The U.S.S.R.,” in: J. Riordan (ed.) *Sport under Communism: The U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, The G.D.R., China, Cuba*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1978, p. 26; I. Brażnin, *W barwach czerwieni*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa, 1950, p. 6; M. Segal, *Święta kultury fizycznej*, Biblioteka Kultury Fizycznej, Warszawa, 1951, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–26.

<sup>8</sup> M. Ordyłowski, “Stalinizm w sporcie,” in: *XVI Powszechny Zjazd Historyków Polskich. Wrocław 15–18 września 1999 roku. Pamiętnik*, vol. III, no. 3, Wydawnictwo Adam

was very important in the Soviet Union in the internal context, but when the Soviet sphere of influence was established in Eastern Europe it began to be perceived as meaningful in the external dimension too, including in the context of strengthening friendship between states within the Eastern Bloc.

It should be noted that the Soviet Union gained experience in employing sport for such diplomatic matters in the pre-war times. At the time the USSR used sport in order to promote good relations with its neighbours. Such sports contacts were established at the national level, between the Soviet team and other national representatives, and at the local level between clubs from the borderlands, for example between teams from Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) and Finnish cities.<sup>9</sup> These experiences were used after the war within the communist alliance, when Soviet policy-makers unified the organisation of sport in Eastern European satellite states.

In considering Soviet sports experiences in connection with sports diplomacy within the Eastern Bloc, Spartakiads should also be mentioned. These were multi-sport events dedicated to the people of the Soviet Union. They were held from 1928, once every four years, and included summer and winter editions<sup>10</sup> similarly to the Olympic Games. The main motivation of organising Spartakiads was to popularise sport for all<sup>11</sup> and to prepare athletes to compete internationally. Another objective was to strengthen friendship between the nations of the Soviet Union. Sergey Pavlov, chairman of the Soviet Committee of Physical Culture and Sport, stated at the opening ceremony of the 1971 finals, "The Spartakiad is a true festival of fraternal

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Marszałek, Toruń, 2004, p. 481; L. Szymański, "Polityczne aspekty rozwoju kultury fizycznej w Polsce 1918–1989," in: *XVI Powszechny Zjazd Historyków Polskich. Wrocław 15–18 września 1999 roku. Pamiętnik*, vol. III, no. 3, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń, 2004, p. 498.

<sup>9</sup> J. Riordan, "The Sports Policy of the Soviet Union, 1917–1941," in: P. Arnaud, J. Riordan (eds.), *Sport and International Politics: The Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport*, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> J. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, p. 249; M. O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR: Physical Culture—Visual Culture*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006, p. 30; R. Edelman, A. Hilbrenner, S. Brownell, "Sport under Communism," in: S.A. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 604; R. Edelman, "Moscow 1980: Stalinism or Good, Clean Fun?," in: A. Tomlinson, C. Young (eds.), *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2006, pp. 154–155.

<sup>11</sup> J. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, *op. cit.*, pp. 249–250; J. Riordan, "Soviet Muscular Socialism: A Durkheimian Analysis," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1987, p. 386.

friendship of the peoples of our multi-national country.”<sup>12</sup> The event generally had a domestic dimension, but on various occasions foreign participants were invited, for example in 1979 when the finals of the Spartakiad served as an Olympic trial and athletes from 88 countries competed.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the internal character of the Spartakiads, they served as an aspect of positive sports diplomacy. As Pavlov said, the Soviet Union was a multi-national country, and in that respect there was a need to integrate its members. As sport is usually regarded as an effective tool of integration, it should be no surprise that the USSR tried to use its experience in this field in a more international dimension in respect to its satellite countries, although there were no major sports events like the Spartakiads that were dedicated to these states.

### **Sports Exchanges within the Eastern Bloc**

After the Second World War, afraid of losing prestige, communist countries strongly limited sports contacts with capitalist states. In contrast, contacts within the Eastern Bloc were being developed, particularly in such sports as boxing, athletics, ice-skating, basketball, weightlifting, wrestling, water polo and football. Yet such exchanges were not established instantly. In Poland, for example, the authorities did not establish intensive sports contacts with the Soviet Union until 1947, being unwilling to demonstrate increasing dependence on the USSR.<sup>14</sup>

Establishing sports contacts between the countries of the Soviet sphere of influence was based on three pillars: treaties on cooperation in sport (which were very common between the communist states), sophisticated forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and decisions by party institutions and state offices on whether sports contacts accomplished the Soviet policy-makers' expectations.<sup>15</sup> The two latter elements served to minimise the risk of unintended effects of sports contacts, such as the possibility of evoking

<sup>12</sup> J. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 250; B. Houlihan, R. Giulianotti, “Polityka i (nie)bezpieczeństwo igrzysk olimpijskich: casus Londynu 2012,” *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*, vol. XI, no. 2, 2015, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> A.C. Wilson, *New Zealand and the Soviet Union 1950–1991: A Brittle Relationship*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004, p. 101; “Warming Up for the 1980 Olympics at Spartakiad, one can see the future, and it works—mostly,” *Time*, 6 August 1979; “Losing and Learning in Moscow at Spartakiad, a lesson was as good as a win,” *Time*, 13 August 1979.

<sup>14</sup> *Sport w ZSRR...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 268–275; A. Pasko, *Sport wyczynowy w polityce państwa*, Avalon, Kraków, 2012, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> E. Mertin, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60.

negative emotions towards the USSR among its satellite societies. The first element, on the other hand, was used to formally institutionalise cooperation in sport.

Sports exchanges within the Eastern Bloc were sanctioned by a number of international treaties between particular states and on the basis of annual or multiannual arrangements.<sup>16</sup> For example, sports contacts between East Germany and the Soviet Union were regulated by numerous agreements, such as parts of the Cultural Agreement (25 April 1956), the Friendship Treaty on Strengthening and Deepening the Brotherly and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Organs and Organisations of the German Democratic Republic and the Federation of Sports Societies and Organisations of the USSR (8 May 1966), and the Treaty of Further Strengthening and Deepening of Brotherly Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation between Organs and Organisations of the German Democratic Republic and the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport at the Council of Ministers of the USSR (7 October 1975).<sup>17</sup> These treaties between the Soviet Union and East Germany may serve as a paradigm of sporting relations in the whole bloc.<sup>18</sup> Other bilateral agreements between the Soviet Union and its satellite states encompassed, for example, those with Bulgaria (1969), Poland (1971), Hungary (1971), Czechoslovakia (1972), Cuba (1972), Yugoslavia (1973) and Romania (1973),<sup>19</sup> although Yugoslavia was not directly a part of the alliance. There were also formal arrangements between the satellite states, for example the Joint Committee for the Execution of the Cultural Agreement between Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup> Such treaties and agreements were not necessary to establish exchanges and cooperation in sport, but they were quite common.

Sports contacts within the Eastern Bloc were being established long before they were sanctioned by inter-state agreements. Taking the example of Poland, the first post-war international sports contacts were held in 1946. In August of that year, two football matches against Soviet team Torpedo Moscow were organised, in Warsaw against the Polish Football Federation

<sup>16</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *Sport w cieniu polityki. Instrumentalizacja sportu w NRD*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław, 2011, p. 123; B.A. Hazan, *Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games: Moscow 1980*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1982, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> E. Mertin, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> J. Riordan, "Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy," *Soviet Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1974, p. 337.

<sup>20</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

team (which ended 1-1), and in Łódź against a city team (which ended 3-1 to Torpedo).<sup>21</sup> These matches were exceptions concerning Polish sports contacts at the time, because in general sports exchanges with the Soviet Union were limited. In September 1946 Poland participated in a women's athletics event in Brno, against Czechoslovakia, while in August 1947 the Polish national football team played Czechoslovakia—an event that marked the first post-war sports radio broadcast in Poland.<sup>22</sup> In the same year, sports contacts between Poland and the Soviet Union were intensified. For example, a Polish delegation was invited to Moscow to watch a sports parade, and there were exchanges in boxing and in volleyball (against Dynamo Moscow). In 1948 Poland was visited by gymnasts, athletes, and basketball and volleyball teams.<sup>23</sup>

Polish sports contacts with states from beyond the communist bloc were becoming more intense in the immediate post-war years, but between 1948 and the mid-1950s, due to the worsening international situation and the thesis on exacerbating the class struggle, international sports contacts were limited in general. Even when the Polish authorities decided for political reasons to increase the number of sports contacts with states from beyond the communist alliance in the second half of the 1950s, permission to send athletes to championships abroad depended on the participation of the Soviet Union and other communist countries, the location of the event, and the level of sport. Another aspect of Polish sports contacts encompassed participation in typical socialist sports events, such as the Month of Deepening Polish-Soviet Friendship, Labour Day, the Anniversary of the Revolution in Prague, and the Holiday of the Victory of Democracy over Fascism and Hitlerism.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, Poland's international sports contacts were dominated by exchanges with the communist countries. Over time, contacts with other states including those from the West were also established, but as long as the Eastern Bloc existed such meetings remained in the minority. This was despite the fact that, from the 1950s, there was a belief in the communist world that sports achievements boosted international prestige and could be used as elements of the ideological rivalry against the West.

<sup>21</sup> *Sport w ZSRR...*, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>22</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 310–311.

<sup>23</sup> *Sport w ZSRR...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 278–280, 283, 286.

<sup>24</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 311, 313–314, 320, 324.



The situation was similar concerning other satellite states of the Soviet Union. The case of East Germany was unique because, due to lack of recognition from West, the country for a long time maintained sports contacts only with the communist states. Even when the GDR was eventually recognised by capitalist states in the 1970s, most of its sports exchanges were conducted within the Eastern Bloc, particularly with Poland and Czechoslovakia. They did depend on the prevailing state of political relations, but, for example in 1978 sports contacts with those two states constituted 90% of all the athletic exchanges between East Germany and other countries of the socialist alliance. Such contacts were formally based on bilateral agreements modelled on those with the Soviet Union,<sup>25</sup> which proved to be a general characteristic of sports exchanges within the Eastern Bloc. The USSR also applied the same policy to its sports exchanges with the West. For example, when exhibition sports events were established with such countries as the U.S. or Canada, they were preceded by the signing of formal agreements, contrary to the American style of positive sports diplomacy which was usually based on more informal and grass-roots initiatives.

For East Germany, the most important sports contacts were those with the Soviet Union, even though they were not the most frequent within the communist bloc. These can be divided into three stages: 1949–1966, 1966–1977 and post-1977. In the first stage the USSR was supporting the development of sport in East Germany, and the second stage can be described as one of equal partnership. By the third stage, the German Democratic Republic was being called “the most important sports partner of the Soviet Union,” on the basis of the Treaty of Further Consolidation and Deepening of Brotherly Friendship and Mutual Cooperation between the Sport Organisations of the German Democratic Republic and the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport at the Council of Ministers of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (1977).<sup>26</sup>

In general, the European communist states’ sports contacts were much more frequent within the Eastern Bloc than with countries outside the alliance—at times reaching ten times as high. Such exchanges were described as “deliberate,”<sup>27</sup> and this was typical of both Soviet satellite countries and the

<sup>25</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–122.

<sup>26</sup> E. Mertin, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–59.

<sup>27</sup> P. Godlewski, “Sport w służbie PRL,” in: T. Gąsowski, S. Bielański (eds.), *Sport i polityka w dwudziestowiecznych państwach totalitarnych i autorytarnych*, Historia Jagellonica, Kraków, 2009, pp. 59, 61.



Soviet Union itself. For example, in 1969 58% of all Soviet sports exchanges were with its communist allies. The figure was similar in the following year, and in 1971 it had reached 67%.<sup>28</sup> By this time the USSR was already fully integrated with international sport and its athletes were very successful in major sports competitions such as the Olympic Games. International sports victories were obviously used in the Soviet Union to demonstrate prestige, but policy-makers nevertheless prioritised contacts within the alliance, at least from the quantitative perspective.

The key diplomatic objective of sports contacts between the countries of the communist bloc was shaping friendship between the socialist societies of the alliance. It would have been natural that the Soviet Union should most of all be interested in integrating the bloc. However, an inconsistency could be seen concerning the attitude of the USSR. The “big brother” appeared to foster friendship and cooperation within the bloc, but at the same time struggled to underline its dominant position in sport. As James Riordan described it, the Soviet Union was to be “the first socialist state” in sport, as in political relations.<sup>29</sup> This was particularly visible in the USSR’s relations with East Germany when the latter began to achieve very good results in sport. At the time, arguments concerning “repaying the debt” arising from earlier Soviet support of the development of sport in the GDR were raised by Soviet officials,<sup>30</sup> while the Germans became reluctant to share their knowledge. During one meeting, the GDR leadership stated that “newly elaborated training methods should not be forwarded to other socialist sports organisations.”<sup>31</sup> This situation illustrates the high degree of political context in sport in the Soviet Union. On one hand, the USSR was apparently conducting positive sports diplomacy directed at strengthening its sphere of influence by uniting its nations with sports exchanges. On the other hand, there was a Soviet desire for dominance, which, to a certain extent, contradicted the positive diplomatic objectives of sports exchanges aimed at integration.

<sup>28</sup> J. Riordan, “Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy...,” *op. cit.*, p. 336; G. Caldwell, “International Sport and National Identity,” *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1982, p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> J. Riordan, *Sport, politics and communism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991, p. 135.

<sup>30</sup> E. Mertin, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–66.

<sup>31</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

The situation described above, in conjunction with the psychological attitude of Soviet athletes and officials, who emphasised their superiority over the “brotherly” nations at every opportunity, may be one reason for the failure to bring the nations of the communist alliance closer with the use of sport. Such failure can be seen, for example, in the case of Poland. Shortly after the Second World War, a directive on sports friendship with the athletes of the Soviet Union came into force. Accordingly, sports contacts between Poland and the USSR were given political meaning by the Polish authorities, who at the same time saw a chance to improve the level of sport in Poland despite the unwillingness of Soviet coaches to share their knowledge, especially at the beginning of the Cold War. Although the Polish authorities often faced difficulties from the Soviet side when seeking to establish sports contacts with the USSR, Soviet sports delegations did visit Poland and received extraordinary and privileged treatment.<sup>32</sup> This was similar to the situation in other satellite states,<sup>33</sup> and may suggest that these countries were more interested than the USSR in using sport to deepen friendship with the Soviet Union, despite the fact that they had been forced to join this geopolitical bloc. Logically, this should have been the other way round, but sports authorities of the Soviet Union often appeared to be unwilling to cooperate. The paradox of this situation is hard to explain directly, but it is likely that the difficulties caused by the Soviets did not arise from general Soviet policy, but were an effect of the sense of superiority that was expressed by the citizens of the USSR. The quoted figures concerning the frequency of sports exchanges within the Eastern Bloc appear to support such a thesis.

This situation suggests that the concept of the diplomatic exploitation of sports contacts within the Eastern Bloc was raised not only by the Soviet Union, as was natural, but also by its satellites states. East German sports officials were said to be using sports contacts with the USSR to “actively fulfil their duties as the smaller brother in the communist bloc,”<sup>34</sup> which could be seen during their speeches at conferences and meetings, when they stressed the superiority of the communist system and the great role played by Soviet achievements. The rhetoric of friendship was present even in response to criticism over insufficient cooperation.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Włodzimierz Reczek, chairman of the Polish Olympic Committee, said that sports exchanges

<sup>32</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 340–342, 347.

<sup>33</sup> See: E. Mertin, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 64–65, 71.

should serve “to deepen the friendship with the nations of the USSR and the countries of people’s democracy, and serve as a form of putting pressure on the capitalist states.”<sup>36</sup> Apparently, communist leaders of the Soviet satellite states were equally interested in strengthening the alliance, even though this probably did not correspond with the actual interests of their societies.

Sports exchanges between the communist states took various forms. Obviously, meetings in elite sport were the most spectacular and most authors refer to them. They included joint sports camps, regular meetings in order to share findings and consult on common policy towards the West. Responsibilities were shared between states. For example, East Germany specialised in scouting for talented athletes, Czechoslovakia in professional training, Bulgaria in sports psychology, Hungary in sports medicine, and so on.<sup>37</sup> Besides the mainstream of sports organisations, contacts were also sustained by institutions that were not primarily oriented towards sport. One such example was the Sports Committee of Befriended Armies, which organised Summer and Winter Spartakiads every four years, one year after the Olympics.<sup>38</sup>

The reluctance, even animosity, of societies within Eastern Bloc vis-à-vis athletes representing the allied states, represented a serious challenge to the role of sport in positive diplomacy. In Poland, escalating reluctance towards Russians led the Polish authorities to fear that the public would demonstrate anti-Soviet feeling during sports events taking place in this country. In order to avoid this, stadiums and sports halls were filled with officers of the security services and members of the Communist Party, but even this did not guarantee a friendly attitude towards Soviet visitors. The reluctance of the Poles was fuelled by the arrogant behaviour of the Soviets,<sup>39</sup> a situation that was similar in other Soviet satellite states. In Czechoslovakia, the fear of anti-Soviet demonstrations also led to the selective distribution of tickets, particularly concerning ice hockey.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Soviet society sometimes displayed a negative attitude to athletes from other communist states when

<sup>36</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

<sup>37</sup> J. Riordan, “Elite Sport Policy in East and West,” in: L. Allison (ed.), *The Politics of Sport*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, pp. 77–78.

<sup>38</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–126.

<sup>39</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 340–341, 344–345.

<sup>40</sup> J. Soares, ““Our Way of Life against Theirs’: Ice Hockey and the Cold War,” in: H.L. Dichter, A.L. Johns (eds.), *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2014, p. 277.

they visited the USSR. For example, Polish athletes at the Moscow Olympics in 1980 were welcomed very reluctantly by spectators and organisers.<sup>41</sup> This proves that there was a need for public diplomacy, but the fact that the situation remained unchanged suggests that the idea of using sport to foster friendship between the communist countries was unsuccessful.

Leaders of the Soviet Bloc used sport not only to strengthen the alliance, but also to broaden the sphere of influence and establish friendship with other communist states. In accordance with the doctrine of internationalism, sports contacts were established with the People's Republic of China, among others. Contacts with Beijing were particularly intensive in the 1950s,<sup>42</sup> with Chinese officials visiting the Soviet Union to observe the functioning of sport there, the Soviets sending experts and advisors to China,<sup>43</sup> and the organisation of Friendship Games.<sup>44</sup> In times of crisis in Sino-Soviet relations, such contacts were limited, but they were restored in the mid 1980s on the basis of two sports exchange agreements.<sup>45</sup> The Soviet Union and its European satellite states also supported the development of sport in Cuba, for example by sending coaches.<sup>46</sup> Such internationalism sometimes resulted in absurd exchanges, such as Polish support for the development of gliding in China, and a series of football matches played in China by Polish club Garbarnia Kraków.<sup>47</sup> All such activities involving non-European communist countries were rather subsidiary. They should not be regarded purely as sports diplomacy aimed at strengthening the communist alliance, but as an attempt to establish closer relations with the countries beyond it.

### The Peace Race

The issue of strengthening the communist alliance through sport is most commonly analysed in respect to bilateral sports contacts between the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Such contacts encompassed most of all sports exhibition matches, the exchange of experience and knowledge, and

<sup>41</sup> P. Godlewski, "Sport w służbie PRL...", *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> F. Hong, L. Zhouxiang, *The Politicisation of Sport in Modern China: Communists and Champions*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> D. Jinxia, *Women, Sport and Society in Modern China: Holding Up More than Half the Sky*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> F. Hong, L. Zhouxiang, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> L. Chein-Yu, L. Ping-Chao, N. Hui-Fang, "Theorizing the Role of Sport in State-Politics," *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Science*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> J. Riordan, *Sport, politics and communism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

joint training. Although this form of sports cooperation dominated, it was not the only one and there were also various multilateral, often periodical sports undertakings that should be considered within the category of positive sports diplomacy. Among them were the Znamensky Memorial athletics meeting held in Moscow, and the 26 Baku Commissars Memorial athletics meeting held in Baku.<sup>48</sup> A cycling Peace Race, the biggest amateur cycling race until the end of the 1980s<sup>49</sup> and an example of intensive sports contacts between East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia,<sup>50</sup> was one of the prime examples; it illustrates perfectly the mechanisms and the final failure of the idea of building friendship between European communist societies with the use of sport.

At least in the original form, and according to original intentions, the Peace Race did not involve the Soviet Union, but other Eastern European communist countries including Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. These neighbouring states had a history of conflict and antagonism, thus here was a situation for which sports diplomacy appeared perfect. The event was treated by the authorities of the countries involved as extremely prestigious.<sup>51</sup> It was held for the first time in 1948 as the initiative of Poland and Czechoslovakia,<sup>52</sup> and two years later East Germany joined as the third organiser, although formally it was run by the official newspapers (*Trybuna Ludu*, *Rude Pravo* and *Neues Deutschland*) and the cycling associations of the three countries.<sup>53</sup> From 1952 the course included Warsaw, Berlin and Prague. At times the race also took cyclists through Bratislava, and twice through the territory of the USSR.<sup>54</sup>

“Uniting the nations of the socialist bloc” was the official reason for organising the Peace Race. At the beginning it was also stated that the event was meant to enhance the friendship between Poland and Czechoslovakia, especially in respect to the Zaolzie dispute, which was lively on both sides of the border. The political significance of the event was, then, clear.<sup>55</sup> The

<sup>48</sup> J. Riordan, “Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy...” *op. cit.*, pp. 337–338.

<sup>49</sup> J.W. Porycki, *Tour de Pologne nad Lynq*, WPW, Olsztyn, 2006, p. 10; *Der Sport Brock Haus. Allesvom Sport von A bis Z*, Brockhaus, Mannheim, 1989, p. 174.

<sup>50</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

<sup>52</sup> S. Sieniarski, *Sport w Polsce*, Interpress, Warsaw, 1972, p. 122.

<sup>53</sup> D. Wojtaszyn, *op. cit.*, p. 123; A. Pasko, *Wýścig Pokoju w dokumentach władz partyjnych i państwowych 1948–1980*, Avalon, Kraków, 2009, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> J. Ferenc, *Sport w służbie polityki. Wýścig Pokoju 1948–1989*, Trio, Warszawa, 2008, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 86–87, 95.

race was also aimed at improving the attitudes of Czech and Polish societies. It was to be utilised for propaganda purposes both internally and externally, and was intended to create a substitute of normality in the situation of political isolation.<sup>56</sup> That it should be a cycling race was also significant, as this sport was selected intentionally to reflect its “diplomatic” status as an activity perceived as a people’s sport that allowed more than one country to host a single event together. That kind of cycling race requires team work as well, which was also regarded as an advantage.<sup>57</sup> All those official aims of the Peace Race are typical of public diplomacy, or of positive sports diplomacy aimed at strengthening international friendship. It is worth noting that, although in general the political aims of sport are normally hidden, in this case and generally within positive sports diplomacy they are usually articulated openly.

The Peace Race was basically intended to have a diplomatic effect on the societies of the Eastern Bloc most of all. Nevertheless, it was an international sports event, and cyclists from non-socialist countries participated as well. Among them were teams from developing world countries, a move that can be associated with Cold War rivalry over spheres of influence. The race was gradually expanding. For some years a dozen or so nations participated, while in the record-breaking 1987 there were as many as 26.<sup>58</sup> Regardless all this, the Peace Race was most of all an example of sport being used to strengthen the alliance of communist countries, and the fact that cyclists of other states also participated was of only modest significance.

In spite of the declared intentions, the event proved to be anything but a “festival of peace” between the nations of the Eastern Bloc. Friendly moments were very rare, with the atmosphere being dominated by fierce rivalry between the national teams of the Soviet Union, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. According to some authors, incidents such as fights between cyclists, oil being deliberately spilled on the track, and the stadium gates being opened and closed were frequent. In fear of being poisoned, cyclists often only ate the food they brought with themselves. There were constant accusations of “cutting in,” quarrels about the order of technical cars, and so on. As Tadeusz Olszański recalled, there was nothing

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<sup>56</sup> A. Pasko, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 293; W. Lipoński, *Historia sportu na tle rozwoju kultury fizycznej*, PWN, Warszawa, 2012, p. 592.

<sup>57</sup> J. Ferenc, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

of the race's name in its atmosphere.<sup>59</sup> The organisers of particular stages were said to be in favour of certain cyclists.<sup>60</sup> Even if some of these reports have been exaggerated, it is certain that attitudes of both the athletes and the organisers towards representatives of other communist nations were rather negative, or even hostile, so it is hard to speak of brotherly friendship at the Peace Race. This obviously undermined the meaning of this event as regards its diplomatic objectives.

Sports diplomacy, as an element of public diplomacy, is generally channelled to a number of recipients, with ordinary people within societies being the key subject. Bearing this in mind, it is worth taking a closer look at the behaviour of spectators at the Peace Race, as the event aroused much public interest. Their attitude could be described as chauvinistic and hardly accepting of cyclists representing other countries. For example, Polish fans perceived victories for Poland as a form of a payback to the USSR. They also whistled when the Soviet cyclists were passing.<sup>61</sup> Fans from other countries behaved in a similar manner. According to Wojciech Lipiński, anti-Soviet attitudes, particularly strong in Poland, a little weaker in Czechoslovakia and weakest in East Germany, were most common.<sup>62</sup> In response, organisers attempted manipulation by selecting the spectators to be present at the finish line where foreign journalists gathered. They did this by distributing the tickets to Communist Party members,<sup>63</sup> as they did during sport contacts between Poland and the USSR at the beginning of the Cold War.

The Peace Race was meant to generate friendship between the European communist states, particularly Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, but in a way also with others including the Soviet Union. It was therefore a pure example of positive sports diplomacy aimed at strengthening the political alliance. Concerning relations between athletes and most of all the attitude of supporters, it failed.

### Friendship-84

The desire to increase the level of friendship and cooperation between the countries of the Eastern Bloc could also be found in another sports

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 116, 211.

<sup>60</sup> P. Godlewski, *Sport w Polsce...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 322–323.

<sup>61</sup> J. Ferenc, *op. cit.*, pp. 212–213.

<sup>62</sup> W. Lipiński, *op. cit.*, p. 592.

<sup>63</sup> A. Pasko, *op. cit.*, p. 32.



event, the Friendship Games of 1984. However, despite including the word “friendship,” the aim of the event was most of all anti-American as the it was meant to be competition for the Olympics in Los Angeles, boycotted by the Soviet Union and its European allies except Romania, officially for safety reasons, but most probably as revenge for the Western boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

The Friendship Games, also described as Friendship-84 (*Druzhba '84* in Russian<sup>64</sup>) were held between June and August 1984 in nine communist states which boycotted the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, but most of the competitions took place in Moscow in August.<sup>65</sup> Even the symbols of the event were modelled on the Olympic Games, for example the Olympic cauldron built for the Olympics in Moscow was fired again, lit by the eternal flame burning at the Kremlin in memory of the people killed during the Second World War.<sup>66</sup>

The declared aim of Friendship-84 was to create an opportunity for the athletes from countries that boycotted the Olympics to present their sports skills. Interestingly, though, athletes from other countries, sympathising with the event, were also welcome to participate.<sup>67</sup> In fact, the main aim of the event, as has been mentioned, was to create competition for the Los Angeles Olympics. For example, organisers tried to motivate the participants in order to achieve highest level possible.<sup>68</sup> The number of world records to beaten<sup>69</sup> was very important, as it could be perceived as proof of the event’s superiority over the Olympics. And there were quite a few of them, including 30 in weightlifting, five in swimming, and one in athletics.<sup>70</sup> In general, the authorities of the socialist states asserted that the Friendship Games were of extreme importance. Wojciech Drzyzga, then a member of the Polish national volleyball team and now a sports commentator, recalled,

<sup>64</sup> A. Bairner, G. Molnar (eds.), *The Politics of the Olympics: A Survey*, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 198.

<sup>65</sup> J. Grasso, B. Mallon, J. Heijmans, *Historical Dictionary of the Olympic Movement*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2015, p. 208.

<sup>66</sup> D. Sansone, *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> J. Grasso, B. Mallon, J. Heijmans, *op. cit.*, p. 208; R. Menkis, H. Troper, *More than just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2015, p. xii.

<sup>68</sup> M.B. Michalik (ed.), *Kronika sportu*, Wydawnictwo Kronika, Warsaw, 1993, p. 768.

<sup>69</sup> T. Taylor, “Sport and International Relations. A Case of Mutual Neglect,” in: L. Allison (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 37

<sup>70</sup> J. Grasso, B. Mallon, J. Heijmans, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

“the Polish authorities were pretending that the event was more important than the Olympics, they dressed us up in suits, hats, and even organised a special oath.”<sup>71</sup>

The Friendship Games were most of all an attempt to strike at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles by reducing the latter's significance. Therefore, their main objective was rather external. The question, though, is whether bolstering friendship between communist nations was also an aim of the event? The answer, in theory, is yes, but this intention appears to have been a smoke screen, with little bearing on reality. It should be stated here that, in the mid-1980s, it was rather obvious that sports diplomacy as a tool for strengthening the communist political bloc of states by deepening friendship between the nations had failed. The case of Friendship-84 is presented in this article to show this deteriorating importance of the objective of friendship in sports relations between European communist countries.

### Conclusions

The use of sports exchanges to strengthen the alliance between the European communist states encompassed a number of activities. Sports contacts that were established were both bilateral (aimed at evoking friendship between two given societies), and multilateral (to create unity between the communist nations in general). The exchanges included simple exhibition matches between athletes from particular countries, joint training, exchange of knowledge, and more. Contacts within the Eastern Bloc were much more common than with the rest of the world. Despite all this, the attempt to use sport to create friendship between the people of the Eastern Bloc countries failed.

There are probably a number of reasons for this failure. Most of all, membership of the alliance was enforced, which in itself gave rise to the need for public diplomacy. Ordinary people simply did not like representatives of most of the countries belonging to the Eastern Bloc, for historical reasons. The artificial selection of spectators in an attempt to demonstrate that there was sympathy towards, for example, Soviet athletes, did not have any effect on the societies. Another reason for the final failure of sports diplomacy was the behaviour of the Soviet athletes and officials visiting other countries of

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<sup>71</sup> J. Krzyk, “Drużba-84: socjalistyczne igrzyska,” *Ale Historia*, no. 33 (135), 18 August 2014, <http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria>.

the bloc. They behaved as if they were better, and wanted to show that the superiority of the Soviet Union was not only political. What is more, the Soviet Union presented on certain occasions the desire to be seen as the “first communist state.” All this proved to have an effect opposite to the desired generation of friendship. It was, then, hardly possible that the plan could succeed.

The hypothesis that the Soviet Union and leaders of its satellite states intended to use sport as a means of strengthening the communist alliance has been confirmed. The Soviet motivation for such a goal is obvious, and sports officials of the USSR stressed such a need repeatedly. This could also be seen in the circumstances under which various sports exchanges were organised within the bloc. The motivation of the communist leaders of Soviet satellite states appears to be more puzzling. However, it must be remembered that they were not usually true representatives of their people, but the enforced rulers. They were, then, interested in strengthening the communist alliance and gave evidence of such motivation on various occasions, for example by applying vigorously for sports exchanges with the USSR, often in the face of difficulties from the Soviet side.

This research has revealed a characteristic of positive sports diplomacy in the communist countries. As has been shown, a number of formal agreements were signed at intergovernmental level. This was a specificity, as many other cases of positive sports diplomacy had a rather grassroots dimension and were usually initiated by non-governmental players, without the formal engagement of the government.

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