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Collective Hockey Against the Grit and Grind: Ice Hockey as a Reflection of Cold War Differences

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Collective Hockey Against the Grit and Grind: Ice Hockey as a Reflection of Cold War
Differences

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Table of Contents

SUMMARY.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	4
HOCKEY'S UNIQUE POSITIONING	5
COLD WAR DIFFERENCES	7
AMATEURISM AND ANTICAPITALISM	13
CANADA AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA: HOCKEY STARS, POLITICAL SHADOWS	20
CONCLUSION.....	31
REFERENCES.....	33

Summary

Although the 1980 Miracle on Ice has been thoroughly examined from both the American and Soviet viewpoints, these studies set the game upon a pedestal of its own, a one-off incident that persists in American sports memory today because of its improbability and the subsequent public reaction. However, hockey played a role in Cold War tensions long before the Miracle and exemplified international dynamics and tensions on multiple levels. Through a review of existing literature, this thesis holistically examines the sport of ice hockey as a microcosm of the Cold War. Differences between communism and capitalism produced differences in the organization and play of hockey between the Soviet Union and North America. Moreover, Soviet propagandists took advantage of differing attitudes towards amateurism and capitalist exploitation of sport in order to denigrate the North American game and praise their own. Furthermore, smaller states such as Canada and Czechoslovakia were also able to leverage their substantial hockey programs in order to assert some modicum of independence from their respective superpowers. While many of these differences faded after the end of the Cold War allowed freer and easier exchange of ideas and practices, notably equalizing the playing field, the resumption of US-Russia tensions as well as increasing pressure for American athletes to use their platforms to voice political views mean that lessons learned during the Cold War regarding the politicization of sport are still relevant today.

Introduction

On a chilly February day in 1980 at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, an upstart team of American college hockey players – all amateurs unsigned by any NHL team – checked themselves into the annals of history. Matched up against an incredibly dominant Soviet team which had just ran ragged over all of its group play opponents (as well as the American team itself only two weeks prior, crushing them 10-3 in exhibition play), Team USA more than held its own, chasing goaltending legend Vladislav Tretiak from the net and winning their first elimination game 4-3. Or – at least – such went the consensus of the American media narrative.

These teams could not have been more different. On the home side stood a ragtag group of college students, all unaffiliated with any professional teams, brought together for a few months explicitly for the Olympics. Across the ice were the Soviet juggernauts, whose fluid skating and tight passes had resulted from years of living and playing together under autocratic coaches. Both teams' playstyle, history, and development were exemplary products of their respective systems. And when the United States came from behind to win the game, this "Miracle on Ice" found an audience all over the nation in people who "didn't know the difference between a blue line and a clothesline," as legendary broadcaster Al Michaels put it, but nevertheless recognized that this game meant something more than just a hockey upset.¹ Touted as a clash of civilizations despite only being a game (and not even an actual medal game, at that), there was still more truth to this interpretation than simply the pathos of nationalism and propaganda. Throughout the Cold War, hockey enjoyed a unique international niche that both resulted from and elucidated the effects of the differences between the communist Soviet Union and capitalist North America.

¹ Donald E. Abelson, "Politics on Ice: The United States, the Soviet Union, and a Hockey Game in Lake Placid," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 67.

Hockey's Unique Positioning

While many sports enjoyed places of prominence within the international sphere during the Cold War, ice hockey is specifically interesting firstly because of how little proselytizing the sport – long the whitest and most privileged sport of the Big Four in the United States – has done.

During the Cold War, hockey was especially unique in that, unlike basketball, soccer, and baseball, it was never used to reach out to developing and satellite nations. Instead, its icy nature and sheer expense of equipment (the cost of pads, jerseys, sticks, skates, and ice time certainly add up) proved difficult hurdles for the Global South (and continue to do so today), leaving only affluent nations already under the sway of one pole or another to play the sport. The obstacles to even starting the sport at a rudimentary level made it impractical in the face of warm-weather, lower contact sports such as soccer or basketball which required nothing more than a ball and an approximation of a net. Because of this, Soviet sports diplomacy focused less here on increasing influence with Third World nations, as other initiatives did, and more on direct opposition with the other global power.

Although American sports diplomacy leaned heavily towards informal actions instead of formal policy or doctrine, it still made more use of other sports such as basketball and baseball instead of hockey, due not only to its impracticality but also its regional character within the United States itself.² Therefore, hockey set the two great powers of the Cold War in direct opposition more so than any other sport, providing the direct conflict with far more clarity than the muddled waters of basketball, with its cultural goodwill tours in Africa, or baseball, with its ever-increasing popularity in Japan. The only confounding factors in international hockey were

² John Soares, “‘Our Way of Life against Theirs’: Ice Hockey and the Cold War,” in *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945*, edited by Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 255-256.

Canada (of course) and Czechoslovakia, both of which provided interesting (and sometimes similar) client-state dynamics with the powers they were aligned with. Of course, other Northern European nations such as Sweden and Finland also developed strong hockey programs largely independent of American or Soviet meddling, but due to their lack of either physical size or political influence, any dominance they achieved in the sport (which, itself, would not occur for decades) was limited to the rink. As a microcosm of the larger Cold War, then, the practice and play of hockey reflected the balance of global power in perhaps a purer form than any other sport.

Moreover, hockey's level of prominence varies sharply even across the countries with substantial programs. Hockey *is* Canada, while in the United States it seems relegated to an also-ran in the Big Four sports (but at least it *has* an unofficial Big Four designation, unlike soccer). Despite not truly adopting the game until after World War II, preferring bandy – a sport that could be considered a mixture of field hockey and soccer but for the fact that it is played on skates on the ice – the Soviet Union quickly discovered hockey's appeal to their masses. By 1985, as a matter of fact, the captain of the Soviet team – defenseman Slava Fetisov – lived in a state-provided apartment, the equal of which only the USSR's top army general possessed.³ Regardless of these differences in popularity, however, hockey remained a connecting factor because its basics were easy to understand for the uninitiated (nothing quite like “whoever scores the most goals wins”, compared to the more complex scoring rules of basketball, for example) and enjoyed at least some sort of following in many countries of the Northern Hemisphere (as opposed to American football, very rare anywhere outside North America).

³ Tal Pinchevsky, *Breakaway: From Behind the Iron Curtain to the NHL - The Untold Story of Hockey's Great Escapes* (Somerset: Wiley, 2012), 160.

Cold War Differences

As a reflection of the larger forces at play during the Cold War, the organization of the two superpowers' respective hockey apparatus reflected the divide in the two economic and social systems. Like in other sports, state-sponsored Soviet professional hockey was organized by trade. The best team, far and away, was army-affiliated CSKA Moscow, which provided much of the bench staff and a good proportion of the players for the national team – through 1982, CSKA held the rights to 59 out of 140 total national team players, eclipsing the closest (Dinamo Moscow) by almost 40 total.⁴ Even then, the numbers themselves hide the outsized impact CSKA had on the national team, due to its complete dominance of hockey within the Soviet Union, winning 1,123 games from inception through the 1986-1987 Elite League season with only 150 losses and 88 ties through that time.⁵ Its players, therefore, played the largest roles on the international team.

Outside the Elite League, CSKA's operating practices also formed the organizational and ideological basis of the national team, which also contributed to the militaristic atmosphere and cohesive playstyle that became the hallmark of the team on an international scale. Operating effectively as a part of the army, CSKA notably expected an extraordinarily high level of commitment from its players, who were housed in barracks and stayed with the team eleven months of the entire year.⁶ And while the tales and stereotypes of the tyrannical nature of Soviet sports coaches are certainly exaggerated, they are still rooted in truth – at least with the “father of Soviet hockey,” Anatoli Tarasov, and his protégé, Viktor Tikhonov, both of whose tough love

⁴ Robert F. Baumann, “The Central Army Sports Club (TsSKA): Forging a Military Tradition in Hockey,” *Journal of Sport History* 15, no 2 (1998): 163.

⁵ Baumann, “The Central Army Sports Club,” 162.

⁶ Pinchvesky, *Breakaway*, 149.

style of coaching made them were extraordinarily difficult to play for, by all accounts.⁷ For example, Tikhonov, both loved and hated by his players, once refused a player a leave of absence to visit his wife and newborn in the hospital after a difficult birth. And he had every right to do so – playing for CSKA quite literally meant that a player was a Red Army soldier, exempt from his mandatory military service but still legally bound to the team as if it were his service unit. Most of the few national team players who did not hold military commissions instead played for with Dynamo Moscow, which itself was sponsored by the Interior Ministry (and thus the KGB).⁸ Nevertheless, on the international stage, they were all playing for Tikhonov, whose “totalitarian system” was “centered around the patriotic mindset” and was “connected to the general social psychology of that time in this country,” according to Lev Zarokhovich, a member of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics organizing committee and former international secretary for Soviet Sport.⁹ The players first played for their nation, then for their team, and only lastly for themselves.

Beyond just the international stage, however, CSKA’s dominance in the Soviet Union’s own Elite League itself spoke to the emphasis that the Soviet Union placed on not only sports diplomacy as a whole but also hockey specifically. Utilizing both the advantages of playing in the Soviet Union’s most modern city as well as the benefits of a Soviet Army career, CSKA consistently lured a disproportionate share of the best players to their club. This concentration of national team-caliber built the “fluidity and cohesiveness” that the Soviet national teams were known for, creating bonds between linemates and defensive pairings that ran far deeper than

⁷ Gare Joyce, *When the Lights Went Out: How One Brawl Ended Hockey’s Cold War and Changed the Game* (Scarborough: Doubleday Canada, 2006), 240.

⁸ Jason Vuic, “Do You Believe in Debacles?” in *The Sarajevo Olympics: A History of the 1984 Winter Games* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 83-84.

⁹ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 149.

anything a few months on a Western national team could produce.¹⁰ And while the CSKA organization also included other sports, its hockey team was by far the most successful due to this consolidation of high-caliber players. In contrast, the CSKA soccer team only won a single national championship between 1951 and 1988, and the national team never finished higher than 4th at the FIFA World Cup.¹¹ The hockey squad had shown the value of keeping an entire nation's best players together all the time, consequently pulling a much higher rate of success within the same general organizational system than the soccer club.

These Soviet attitudes and restrictions also served to reinforce the overt characterization of international hockey as an allegory for war itself. When players were treated as soldiers, not only on the ice but also in their everyday lives, they began to see themselves as warriors for their nation, just as influential and integral to the cause as boots on the ground. However, this was not limited only to the Soviet Union – while the military imagery and training were not nearly as overt in the North American programs, the rituals and ceremonies surrounding international organized sport, especially the Olympics, “help support a highly uncritical form of militarism.”¹²

The programs in North America, however, differed through lack of the kind of control and prioritization that the Soviet system gave their own program, consequently falling vulnerable to domestic squabbles and power struggles. For one, geography played a huge role in both the American and Canadian programs, and the American divide between the east (mostly Massachusetts) and the west (mostly Minnesota and Michigan) in particular fostered rivalries that were not only present in NCAA tournaments but also stirred up conflict and resentment in

¹⁰ Baumann, “The Central Army Sports Club,” 160.

¹¹ Baumann, “The Central Army Sports Club,” 165.

¹² Mary G. McDonald, “‘Miraculous’ Masculinity Meets Militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR–US Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey Match and Cold War Politics,” Chap. 12 in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, edited by Stephen Wagg and David Andrews (London: Routledge, 2007), 227.

the selection process for national teams, especially the US Olympic team.¹³ To the north, the governing bodies of amateur Canadian hockey were confusingly structured and often stepped on each other's toes. As a state-funded organization, Hockey Canada, founded in 1969, was nominally responsible for Canadian teams playing in International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) tournaments, but the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA) officially represented their nation at IIHF meetings.¹⁴ Resentful at what it considered an intrusion into its sphere of influence, the CAHA hindered Hockey Canada's efforts to "foster and develop hockey in Canada," one of its founding prerogatives, and even attempted to block Hockey Canada's international responsibilities as well.¹⁵ Hockey Canada itself also ran into problems with simply recruiting players to their team at the senior level, because many NHL teams refused to release their players from training camp in order to prepare for the international "friendlies" such as the Summit Series, even when they would not interrupt the actual season.¹⁶

Beyond just organization, differences in play style between the Soviet game and the way it was played in North America also reflected the different economic and social systems that so divided the two societies. While the world eventually discovered Soviet hockey players as incredible talents in their own rights, even Tarasov believed during his tenure as head coach that his players needed some other way to counter the sheer talent of the Canadians.¹⁷ To do so, he emphasized teamwork, passing and playmaking skills, and play *without* the puck, where the

¹³ Soares, "'Our Way of Life Against Theirs,'" 271.

¹⁴ John Soares, "Hockey Diplomacy and U.S.-Canadian Relations in the Early Trudeau Years," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 5 (2016): 817.

¹⁵ Donald Macintosh and Donna Greenhorn, "Hockey Diplomacy and Canadian Foreign Policy," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1993): 102.

¹⁶ Michał Marcin Kobierecki, "Canada – USSR Hockey Exchanges: Between Positive and Negative Sports Diplomacy," *Historia i Polityka* 25, no. 18 (2016): 24. Tournaments *during* the season, of course, were a non-starter.

¹⁷ John Soares, "East Beats West: Ice Hockey and the Cold War," in *Sport and the Transformation of Modern Europe: States, Media and Markets 1950-2010*, edited by Alan Tomlinson, Christopher Young, and Richard Holt (London: Routledge, 2011), 38.

North American style of play focused on individual talent, goal-scoring, and play *with* the puck.¹⁸ This was especially evident in games that pitted the Soviet national team against North American All-Stars, such as the 1972 Summit Series. While most in the West expected that a team comprised of such household names as Phil Esposito and Bobby Clarke would run ragged over any national team, the Soviet emphasis on team play over individual talent often proved the victor and indeed found parts of itself slowly adopted by Western coaches. As a matter of fact, part of head coach Herb Brooks' efforts to form his Olympic team in 1979 relied on such skating and passing skills that he had picked up from watching Soviet tape.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it did not all quite stick, even if the Soviet emphasis on playmaking and conditioning has shaped the game into the one we know today. The Western game had always been far more physical and violent compared to the game in Europe (incidentally, on both sides of the Iron Curtain), which lent itself well to Soviet propaganda. Because the ice surface was smaller in North America compared to IIHF regulations (adopted by most of Europe, including the Soviet Union), physical struggles and body checking gained importance over fluid skating. The Soviet Union turned this to their advantage off the ice even as they protested on it, denigrating American teams as overly violent while professing that their own system allowed for a more beautiful game. The final game of the 1975-1976 Super Series, in which both CSKA and the Soviet Wings played the best teams in the NHL, featured CSKA's only loss, a 4-1 defeat at the hands of the Philadelphia Flyers, also known as the Broad Street Bullies. They had earned this nickname through playing a rough, physical form of the game that terrorized NHL teams, won them the Stanley Cup the previous two seasons, and caused so much consternation to CSKA

¹⁸ Soares, "Our Way of Life Against Theirs," 269.

¹⁹ Abelson, "Politics on Ice," 72.

that the players withdrew from the ice and threatened to quit the game.²⁰ While this story certainly proves that there was some modicum of truth to the Soviet claims – the popularity of fights and enforcers in North American hockey peaked in this era – the Soviet players did not exactly pull their own punches either, when it did come to punching. That, however, was still rare, as the Soviet mentality saw rough play and the subsequent penalties as cowardly, “leaving his teammates to face the consequences of his irresponsible actions.” This further reflected the general Soviet prioritization of the team over the individual, in sharp contrast with the North American view of penalties as “praiseworthy aggressiveness.”²¹ To the North Americans, fighting and rough play were an opportunity to showcase individual players’ grit, while to the Soviet players, such behavior was selfish because it put the rest of the community at a disadvantage. These attitudes, again, reflect the wider contrast between the individualistic, capitalist West and the communitarian, communist Soviet Union.

²⁰ Soares, “Our Way of Life Against Theirs,” 264.

²¹ Soares, “East Beats West,” 38.

Amateurism and Anticapitalism

The controversies spurred on by North American on-ice aggression also contributed to the debate surrounding Soviet “shamateurism”. The Soviets argued that capitalism in sports, driven by ticket and merchandise sales, encouraged North American players to play dirty and win at all costs, resulting in the popular perception that North Americans were nothing more than goons.²² However, this also clashed sharply with the virtually *spiritual* emphasis Westerners also placed on amateurism and the purity of sport, ideals championed by International Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage. Serving from 1952 to 1972, Brundage defended amateurism as a holy grail, regarding it as a moral law and refusing to concede any ground to athletes who sought virtually any form of compensation, yet still wished to compete for the world’s highest athletic honors in the Olympics.²³ When the Soviet Union first attempted to enter the Olympics after the end of World War II, Brundage – then still only a vice president – was understandably alarmed not only by reports that Soviet athletes were compensated generously, far beyond the average Soviet citizen, but also by the Soviet perception of sport as an overtly political tool.²⁴ However, as the idealism of international cooperation began to overtake that of pure amateurism, the IOC turned a blind eye to Soviet “shamateurism”. Nevertheless, some still looked on the Soviet systems with suspicion – in 1956, four years after the Soviet Union’s first appearance at the Olympics, Dr John Nelson Washburn, an international lawyer in Washington, DC and a Russian interpreter for the State Department, wrote that “it would be difficult to find a spirit more alien to [Baron Pierre] de Coubertin’s ideals of moral purity and nobility than the Soviet concept of sport as an element of state power and control a means of ideological indoctrination, a tool at the

²² Soares, “Our Way of Life Against Theirs,” 262-263.

²³ Matthew P. Llewellyn and John Gleaves, “The Amateur Apostle and the Cold War Games,” in *The Rise and Fall of Olympic Amateurism* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 99.

²⁴ Llewellyn and Gleaves, “The Amateur Apostle and the Cold War Games,” 108.

disposal of the army and the secret police, a source of propaganda, and a weapon of class warfare for international Communism.”²⁵

Even with many such Westerners (especially Canadians) voicing their discontent with the amateur system that gave Soviet teams the advantage, the IIHF followed Olympic regulations, forbidding professional athletes from competing in any sponsored international competitions until 1976. (Professional hockey players would not attend the Olympics until 1988.) However, because of the huge potential of monetization in team sports such as hockey (as opposed to individual sports such as skiing or track and field) and the opportunities available in the NHL and minor leagues, the best athletes in the West simply could not afford to only compete as amateurs in order to qualify for international competition. The IIHF’s policy therefore forced both the United States and Canada to ice teams that were far less than their best, consequently falling to Soviet “shamateur” teams. (Other European teams found similar workarounds to the Soviets, leaving only North Americans hampered by their professional leagues.) While the Soviet club teams – and by extension the national team – provided a lifestyle for their players to a greater extent than any level of NHL professional hockey could do in North America, they not only were allowed to play their nation’s very best on Olympic and IIHF stages, but also denigrated professionals when playing them in national team all-star games such as the 1972 Summit Series or the Super Series against NHL clubs. The Soviets claimed that their players were “educated, cultured, amateur sportsmen” who played fairly and for love of the game in sharp contrast with the Western professionals who played only to win and make a profit.

As a matter of fact, the debate over amateurism confounded both Western and Soviet propagandists and ideals. Westerners valued amateurism over professionalism, even as their

²⁵ John N. Washburn, “Sport as a Soviet Tool,” *Foreign Affairs* 34, no. 3 (April 1956): 499.

capitalist system benefited professionals so much more than skilled amateurs in lesser-known sports whose only chance at mainstream fame came from the strictly amateur Olympics. On the other hand, the Soviet Union denigrated Western sport as corrupted because of its capitalistic goals, but did not shy away from treating their top athletes as professionals who made their entire living through their sports.

In America, this outlook stems from over a century's worth of a "hands-off" mentality regarding sports that viewed them as the endeavors of private citizens and completely apolitical, one it shares with much of the English-speaking world. Anglophone sport was largely directed by trends coming from Great Britain, which had long associated sport with gambling and thus viewed sport not only as a gentleman's activity for leisure rather than health, but also as strictly amateur. Aristocratic lords who placed bets on horse racing did so just for fun, not to make their livings. While sport did make its way into working-class life by the early 20th century, the old ideals of fair play, sportsmanship, and "building character" still retained their importance. The game itself was not important, but the lessons learned from it were.²⁶

This attitude gave rise to the classist emphasis on amateurism placed on many international sporting competitions of the 20th century. While professional sport – football, baseball, basketball in the United States, soccer in the UK – was lucrative and boasted millions of fans, it was not viewed by the upper class with the almost mystical reverence afforded amateur sport. Because only the wealthy could be proper "amateurs", gaining nothing but moral character from their athleticism, the moral value of sport was barred from the working class.²⁷

²⁶ Andrew Strenk, "What Price Victory? The World of International Sports and Politics," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 445 (1979): 137-138.

²⁷ Toby C. Rider, "The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Olympic Games," in *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, University of Illinois Press, 2016: 33-34. The current of amateurism still has yet to fully dissipate, remaining evident in collegiate athletics and the stringent regulations on student-athletes receiving any sort of compensation beyond tuition scholarships for their performance.

Even if they became stars on the pitch or the field, the lure of money was corrupting, and the Soviet Union could certainly turn that opinion to their advantage.

And they did not have to look far to find prime targets for their anticapitalist propaganda. Beyond squabbles with Hockey Canada, the NHL also had problems with other professional leagues, thereby further reducing the quality of any hypothetical national teams. For example, from 1972 to 1979, the World Hockey Association (WHA) competed for fans, market share, and players with the NHL, most notably luring Bobby Hull (the first NHL player to score over 50 goals in a season) away from the Chicago Black Hawks with a then-ludicrously high one-million-dollar contract to play for the Winnipeg Jets.²⁸ Although the WHA's talent pool was largely drawn from minor-league teams despite its positioning as a competing major professional league to the NHL, the league signed contracts with far higher values than the NHL in order to recruit talent (thereby justifying Hull's cool million). As other players followed Hull's example, the talent pool in North America was spread thin, thereby reducing the quality of not only the on-ice product but also the national amateur teams, as more and more players went professional. By doing so, both the Canadian and American teams were less and less able to compete on an international scale with the Soviet Union, which provided more fuel for Soviet claims of communist success. This, incidentally, helped to stack the odds against the miraculous American team at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics. Were it not for the proliferation of available professional contracts, as well as the lure of the professional athlete lifestyle, perhaps the team would not have been so full of college players with chips on their shoulders. Instead, there may have been more players just on the "bubble" of making it in a pro league. If this hypothetical "bubble-

²⁸ Gerald Eskenazi, "Bobby Hull Shifts Hockey Leagues for \$2.5-Million," *The New York Times*, 28 June 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/06/28/archives/bobby-hull-shifts-hockey-leagues-for-25million-hull-quits-hawks-for.html>.

player”” team had won, the narrative itself would have differed, less an underdog tale and more simply just another piece of evidence that capitalism trumps communism on every field. It certainly would not have had the same emotional power as a base of propaganda. Perhaps the domestic disputes resulting from capitalist priorities worked out in the United States’ favor at the end of the day.

This sort of meddling also strained US-Canadian relationships. While the NHL was largely populated by Canadian players and based in Montreal, after the 1967 expansion that doubled the size of the league, its teams were mostly hosted in American cities, lauded by American fans, and owned by American businessmen. This financially-motivated expansion drew the ire of many Canadian fans, who, uninterested in growing the game, believed instead that increased American influence was diluting the product and “distorting the sport to sell it to people who knew nothing about it.”²⁹ Furthermore, because of the risks of lending out high-profile prospects to the national team (they could incur injuries that were then not rehabilitated to the team’s standards or be unavailable for call-up after a key player on the NHL team gets injured), NHL teams preferred to keep their prospects in their own development systems or on their junior or college teams. Because of this, NHL teams were painted by Canadian fans (whose national team was losing out to the NHL far more than the American team was) as unpatriotic at the *least* for NHL teams in Canada.³⁰ To them, NHL executives cared more about making money than about the integrity of the sport.

²⁹ Soares, “‘Our Way of Life Against Theirs’,” 276. Incidentally, this attitude persists today in a somewhat different iteration – hockey “purists” denigrate showy play, such as the lacrosse-style goal first scored by Carolina Hurricanes’ forward Andrei Svechnikov in 2019, as well as showy players, such as the stylish (some would say flamboyant) P.K. Subban, whose bombastic personality got him traded off the Montreal Canadiens, as detrimental to the “purity of the sport.” Growth of the game into unconventional markets such as the American South or Asia also receives the same animosity from Canadian fans.

³⁰ Soares, “East Beats West,” 40.

No incident encapsulated this divide between Canadian fans and American businessmen more than the 1972 Summit Series. Played between Soviet national team and Canadian All-Stars in eight games split equally between the two countries, tensions between the NHL and the upstart WHA meant that Hockey Canada was forced to exclude all WHA players, including such names as Bobby Hull and Gordie Howe, considered one of the most complete players ever to play the game. The American NHL owners were motivated to protect their own hockey interests by excluding the WHA in their negotiation with Hockey Canada. The Canadian public saw this as a blatant power play and cash grab from the NHL, which, they believed, viewed the WHA as the enemy. While this mindset framed the NHL as the enemy instead of the Soviet Union, the NHL's own business goals placed the WHA in that same slot, thereby splitting the West in their opposition to Communism where the Soviet Union stood together. This series showed them that NHL executives' money-grabbing not only superseded the integrity of the sport but also prioritized profit over striking down communism and the Soviet Union.³¹

While the Canadians did end up winning the 1972 Summit Series 4-3, it was a come-from-behind "reverse sweep" win that was a far cry from the Canadian expectations of complete dominance, actually further strengthening the Soviet contention that capitalism detracted from the quality of sport. Of course, said expectations did stem largely from Canadian arrogance and ignorance of the Soviet team's skill level, not just the exclusion of WHA players. Nevertheless, the narrative remained – the Soviets skated faster, were better conditioned, and passed more accurately than the individualistic Westerners because the communist system gave them the tools to achieve at the highest level. Even with the narrow loss, the closeness of the series was still seen as "a validation of the 'Soviet school' of hockey."³² Olympic and IIHF competition were

³¹ Soares, "Our Way of Life Against Theirs," 274.

³² Baumann, "The Central Army Sports Club," 159.

even worse for Canada – amateur rules stipulated that no player making any money from hockey, no matter how minor the league, could play on the national team. Considering the professional opportunities among various senior leagues, this meant that Canada often iced teams that were no more than their “31st best”, causing further national embarrassment when these teams were understandably trounced by Soviet “shamateur” teams.³³ Even when Hockey Canada made another attempt to ice the best of their best two years later at the 1974 Summit Series, capitalism played the same confounding factor as it had in 1972. The NHL, still unwilling to lend any sort of legitimacy to the WHA, refused to participate when Hockey Canada invited WHA and CAHA players to the team.³⁴ Eventually, what was essentially a WHA Canadian All-Star team only won a single match against the Soviet Union through the eight-game series, leading Tretiak (already the Soviet starting goaltender) to conclude that their team “displayed the best qualities of Soviet sportsmen: team play, devotion, unity, and will to win.”³⁵ Again, because of internal squabbles brought on by capitalist greed, a Western team suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Soviet Union.

³³ Soares, “Hockey Diplomacy and U.S.-Canadian Relations in the Early Trudeau Years,” 815.

³⁴ Jay Scherer and Hart Cantelon, “1974 WHA All-Stars VS. The Soviet National Team: Franchise Recognition and Foreign Diplomacy in the ‘Forgotten Series’,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 36-37.

³⁵ Baumann, “The Central Army Sports Club,” 159.

Canada and Czechoslovakia: Hockey Stars, Political Shadows

Nevertheless, the two Summit Series and other international “friendlies” that followed still achieved some modicum of success for Canada, if not the United States. At the 1972 Series, Paul Henderson’s game winning goal in the last minute of the last game of the series has gone down in Canadian memory as one of the biggest sports moments in national history. Outside the rink, the series also furthered Canadian goals. If hockey served as an outlet for Czechoslovaks to express discontent towards the Soviet Union through supporting Western hockey teams, it also served as a tool for Canada to assert its independence through seeking closer diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. As a key part of the Canadian national identity as well as a point of pride for the Soviet Union, hockey served as an extraordinarily important tool to improve relations between the two nations. The 1972 Summit Series was a diplomatic effort first and foremost, first conceptualized in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* and taken as a genuine suggestion by Canadian diplomats, who then set to convincing Moscow to agree.³⁶ The series themselves also served as opportunities for Canadian and Soviet diplomats and politicians to meet privately. These meetings helped raise Canadian standing in the eyes of Soviet leadership just as the Summit Series had raised their standing in the eyes of Soviet citizens.³⁷ Moreover, as diplomatic tools, both 1972 and 1974 also enjoyed an unusual level of public interest (especially in Canada), in sharp contrast with most foreign policy initiatives. In this way, the Summit Series helped foster contact, not only between government officials and diplomats, but also between common people.³⁸

³⁶ Kobierecki, “Canada – USSR Hockey Exchanges,” 24.

³⁷ Kobierecki, “Canada – USSR Hockey Exchanges,” 25.

³⁸ Scherer and Cantelon, “1974 WHA All-Stars vs. the Soviet National Team,” 41.

In 1972, Canadian fans barely knew a single name on the Soviet roster. They soon learned. The 1972 Series not only gave the Soviet team legitimacy but also brought its players into the international hockey consciousness. By 1974, fans in Canadian arenas wildly applauded players such as Tretiak, Aleksandr Yakushev, and Valeri Kharlamov.³⁹ However, they were lauded solely as paragons of the game, stars in a very real way that spoke to the Canadian heart but did not reflect the larger conflict at play between the capitalist East and the communist West. The tale on the other side of the Iron Curtain was far different. At a time when Soviet citizens were beginning to be disillusioned by the harsh reality of Soviet life, even after Khrushchev's thaw, Canadian players in Moscow were often seen as ambassadors from a better world. In his short story "The Half-Belt Overcoat," Russian writer Mikhail Shishkin encapsulates the goodwill the Canadian players found in the Soviet public of Moscow. "In response to our adoring screams [Phil Esposito, 'Bullyboy' Cashman, and brothers Frank and Pete Mahovlich] peered out of the windows, smiled, waved, gave us thumbs up...I can see, vividly as ever, the toothless grin of Bobby Clarke, who'd leaned out of the window and thrown us a badge." In the story, other players proceeded to throw such capitalist, Western goodies as crackers and chewing gum, the wrapper of which becomes the narrator's most prized possession.⁴⁰ Even today, the effects of Team Canada's behavior at the Summit Series remain in the consciousness of the Soviet legacy.

Moreover, the 1972 Series also helped restore Canadian hockey prestige. Until then, because of the prohibition against professional players in international tournaments, Canada's hockey star had been falling in the eyes of the rest of the world. In the 1960s, most teams that wore the maple leaf were not only nowhere near the best players Canada had to offer, but also

³⁹ Scherer and Cantelon, "1974 WHA All-Stars vs. the Soviet National Team," 47.

⁴⁰ Mikhail Shishkin, "The Half-Belt Overcoat," trans. Leo Shtutin, in *Calligraphy Lesson* (Dallas: Deep Vellum, 2015), 8-9.

conducted themselves in a “brutish” and “reprehensible” manner during games.⁴¹ Finally icing an all-star team (albeit one missing some key names due to the NHL-WHA split) that did beat the Soviet Union helped the Canadians “recover their national prestige and honor.”⁴² The Summit Series began a slow climb for Canadian hockey back to the top where it now stands, perennially contending for the gold (at least in tournaments that featured NHL players). Because of hockey’s integral position in the Canadian national identity, regaining some sort of dominance in the sport also bettered Canadians’ own self-perception and conception as an independent nation. Canada did not need the United States to beat the Soviet Union – they did it themselves, with their own players, and could only have been *better* if the American founders of the World Hockey Association had not tried to compete with the then-Montreal-based NHL.

While Canada certainly benefited from international friendlies, the Soviet Union actively turned them to their advantage to not only portray its own system as superior, but also find new ways to denigrate the West. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the way the Soviet media discussed on-ice violence. Although Soviet players did not land hits or instigate fights nearly to the extent that Western players did, they still took “sneaky, hidden cheap shots” at both players and referees. Nevertheless (and perhaps unsurprisingly), the Soviet public saw neither hide nor hair of aggression from their own side – as a matter of fact, in 1974, a CSKA player threatened an official with a stick during an Elite League match in a manner that seemed like a “real threat of violence.” A virtually identical incident occurred between Canadian J.P. Parise and an official in the early minutes of the last game of the 1972 Summit Series. However, while Parise’s

⁴¹ Macintosh and Greenhorn, “Hockey Diplomacy and Canadian Foreign Policy,” 100.

⁴² Kobierecki, “Canada – USSR Hockey Exchanges,” 26.

outburst cost him an ejection and was plastered across all Soviet coverage of the series, the Elite League incident received absolutely no publicity.⁴³

This incongruity exemplified a far greater trend – Soviet attitudes and portrayal of sport in the public sphere often strayed far from the reality, reflecting the general use of propaganda to paint a picture of Soviet life as far better than it actually was, both within and without its borders. For example, the Soviet hockey organization professed to be built from the ground up, giving every child an equal chance of making it onto a major club team, just like the big Communist claims of providing equality for every citizen. However, even this system of professed equality fostered corruption and privilege. While ordinary Soviet citizens could certainly make use of varied recreational organizations, only the clubs' own programs actually offered a shot at getting onto a major club team, and they only accepted members of those specific trades.⁴⁴ The favoritism shown here reflects favoritism and corruption within the larger Soviet apparatus, where the communist ideal that provided equal rights, opportunity, and benefits to every citizen fell far short of the reality. Furthermore, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the Soviets claimed that their system of sport prioritized athleticism and well-being in every citizen over developing superstars – quantity over quality, another byproduct of the communist ideology. However, their assertions that over a third of the population participated at some level in spartakiads – national sports competitions originally intended to mirror the Olympics – and that most students earn *GTO* (*Gotov k trudu i oborone*, “Prepared for Labor and Defence”) badges to prove their athleticism were revealed as exaggerations to inflate public perception of Soviet sport.⁴⁵ These

⁴³ Soares, “Our Way of Life Against Theirs,” 263-264.

⁴⁴ Soares, “‘Our Way of Life Against Theirs’,” 270.

⁴⁵ Jim Riordan, “Playing to New Rules: Soviet Sport and Perestroika,” *Soviet Studies* 42, no. 1 (1990): 133-134.

inconsistencies (and many others) speak to the importance of sport to the Soviet propaganda machine.

Sport did not always support the machine, however – in some cases, especially in nominally-independent satellite states such as Czechoslovakia, it actually served to hinder it. Throughout the Cold War, Czechoslovakia boasted one of the most dominant hockey programs despite its small size, at some times proving to be the Soviet Union's stiffest competition.⁴⁶ After the 1968 Prague Spring and subsequent invasion by other Soviet forces, the people of Czechoslovakia were understandably indisposed towards the Soviet Union, despite ostensibly being on the same side of the global conflict. While the Czechoslovak team was one of the best in the world, it lacked the resources and human capital that the Soviet Union had access to and thus often lost head-to-head matches, thereby spawning extremely popular rumors that Czechoslovak-Soviet hockey matches were rigged for political purposes. The tendency of the state-controlled Czechoslovak press to effusively praise the Soviet team and program to their own national detriment did not help matters either. As the Communist propaganda increasingly focused on extolling the virtues of the Soviet Union and their athletes, Czechoslovak public sentiment went the other way, viewing "all things Russian and Soviet with ironical contempt and a feeling of cultural superiority."⁴⁷

Amidst the repressive atmosphere and the looming threat (and subsequent realization) of invasion from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakian hockey fans used Czechoslovak-Soviet hockey matches to express their displeasure with the USSR. When travel restrictions were finally lifted

⁴⁶ Soares, "'Our Way of Life Against Theirs,'" 256.

⁴⁷ Oldřich Tůma, "'They Had No Tanks This Time and They Got Four Goals': The Hockey Events in Czechoslovakia in 1969 and the Fall of Alexander Dubček," trans. Jiří Mareš, in *The Inter-Communist War On Ice: Soviet-Czechoslovak Ice Hockey Politics, 1967-1969*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper 69, Wilson Center, 2016, 15-16.

for Czechoslovakian citizens in 1967, fans at the World Championships in Vienna booed and catcalled the Soviet anthem to the point of inaudibility after the Czechoslovak team had lost a bloody game against the USSR 2 – 4.⁴⁸ At home, the atmosphere was no different. At the 1959 IIHF World Championships, Czechoslovak fans cheered for the United States hockey team against the Soviet Union, an early example of what would later become behavior expected by fans and officials alike. Ten years later, the 1969 World Championships were moved to Stockholm from Prague after the IIHF decided that the recent Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia could complicate matters.⁴⁹ Indeed, with the memory of Soviet tanks still raw and fresh in the nation’s mind, the two Czechoslovak wins over the Soviet team at the 1969 IIHF World Championships in Stockholm were met with jubilation and slogans such as “Today Tarasov [the long-time Soviet coach], tomorrow Brezhnev!” and “Czechoslovakia 4–Occupation forces 3!”⁵⁰ In the minds of Czechoslovak fans (and, indeed, citizens who did not care all that much about hockey specifically), the Soviet hockey team and staff were inextricably linked with the Soviet troops that were present in their towns and communities. Alexander Dubček, then the reformist first secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, would later comment that “it was a replay of a lost war.”⁵¹ The second win, coming on March 28, devolved into a full-scale riot in Prague that damaged or destroyed many symbols of the Soviet presence, including an office building belonging to Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline. This riot, postulated by Soviet officials as originating within the reformist regime under Dubček and simultaneously as proof

⁴⁸ Tůma, “‘They Had No Tanks This Time’,” 16.

⁴⁹ Tůma, “‘They Had No Tanks This Time’,” 19.

⁵⁰ Soares, “‘Our Way of Life Against Theirs’,” 278-279.

⁵¹ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 5.

that Dubček could not retain control of the nation, heralded the beginning of the end for Czechoslovakia's attempts at reform.⁵²

The Czechoslovakian Hockey Riots, as they are sometimes known, manifested the same spirit of hockey victory as moral victory as the Miracle on Ice did over a decade later. As a matter of fact, considering its very real consequences (as opposed to Team USA's victory tour), the March 28th Czechoslovak-Soviet game had more of a real impact on the state of international relations. However, the game itself lies in the shadow of the riots, while the Miracle on Ice shines brightly on its own. Nevertheless, Soviet authorities and their puppets in Czechoslovakia alike quickly realized how instrumental the game – and international hockey in general – was to stirring up public sentiment. No other sport was met with nearly the same public reaction or level of violence as hockey, and consequently any conflict on or off the ice related to hockey was quickly addressed at the highest level, seen as an accurate measurement of popular sentiment towards the Soviet Union and dealt with accordingly. When planning the yearly Czechoslovak-Soviet “friendly” match (a tradition begun in 1972 in an effort to “strengthen friendship”), officials resorted to such preventative tactics as claiming that tickets were completely sold out while whole stands stood empty. Even these strategies failed, as the spectators who did manage to get in still “booed the Soviet anthem, chanted threatening slogans against the Soviet coaches and players”, and threw debris onto the ice.⁵³

The players often joined in. At one of these “friendlies”, rough play resulted in a broken arm, cut to the face, and an elbow injury for the Soviets, not to mention the numerous fights and

⁵² Mary Heimann, “Back to Normal,” in *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 273-274; Soares, ““Our Way of Life Against Theirs’,” 281.

⁵³ Mikhail Prozumenshikov, “Soviet-Czechoslovak Hockey Politics,” trans. Alex Fisher, in *The Inter-Communist War On Ice: Soviet-Czechoslovak Ice Hockey Politics, 1967-1969*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper 69, Wilson Center, 2016, 102-106.

player expulsions.⁵⁴ This was not new to the Czechoslovak players, who had long used the confines of the game to display their own anger and resentment towards the Soviet Union, reflecting the zeitgeist of their country. Trailing 1-5 against the Soviet Union (in their first Olympic appearance) at the 1956 Winter Olympics, the Czechoslovakian team began to play violently, resulting in several injuries for the Soviet team.⁵⁵ This pattern of violence continued into almost every subsequent matchup between the two teams, with more than one game devolving into line brawls. The second match at 1969 Worlds, later memorialized for its role in the riots, also featured vitriol far harsher than the usual “chirps” popular between hockey players – after Czechoslovakia opened the scoring, forward Jaroslav Holík pointed his stick at the Soviet goaltender and repeatedly shouted “You f---ing Commie!” at him.⁵⁶ At that tournament, multiple players also covered the red stars on their jerseys with stick tape, symbolizing their opposition to the Communist Party.⁵⁷ Even twenty years after the Hockey Riots, hostilities still remained high (at least on the part of the Czechoslovak team) – Miroslav Frycer, who later defected to the NHL and played for the Toronto Maple Leafs, recalled that “you wanted to kill them on the ice, pay them back for what happened to us, the whole country, in 1968 [referring to the Prague Spring].”⁵⁸

Furthermore, Czechoslovakia saw the most defections from their own hockey program to the West, proving their own discontent with the Communist regime as well as the Soviet yoke. The first player to defect from behind the Iron Curtain, Vaclav Nedomansky, was Czech and a veteran of many hostile games against the Soviet Union. Along with his teammates,

⁵⁴ Mikhail Prozumenschikov, “Soviet-Czechoslovak Hockey Politics,” 104.

⁵⁵ Mikhail Prozumenschikov, “Soviet-Czechoslovak Hockey Politics,” 94.

⁵⁶ Tůma, “‘They Had No Tanks This Time’,” 20.

⁵⁷ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 5.

⁵⁸ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 73.

Nedomansky had experienced not only the intense anti-Soviet atmosphere around Czechoslovak hockey but also the contrast between the life of professional athletes at tournaments in Western Europe and their own lifestyles. Unlike his teammates, however, Nedomansky was scouted by teams in both the NHL and WHA as a solid, big two-way forward with good hockey sense and a good shot.⁵⁹ In 1974, he fled Czechoslovakia by way of the Swiss leagues and eventually found his way to Toronto. Moreover, perhaps the most well-known defectors outside of the Soviet Union, the Stastny brothers, were Slovak, defecting in August 1980 during the European club championships to sign with the Quebec Nordiques.⁶⁰ More followed, some legitimately after they turned 30 and were released by the Czechoslovakian Ice Hockey Federation, others defecting and leaving their families behind.⁶¹ For example, Petr Svoboda, the first Czech to play over 1,000 games in the NHL, began his long and storied career by sneaking away from his under-18 team in Munich with nothing but the clothes on his back, gaining refugee status while costing his parents their jobs and eventually losing even the opportunity to contact them without risking their interrogation.⁶² Even knowing that, if discovered and recaptured, they would spend considerable time in prison and their families would lose their careers – not to mention losing contact with everyone they had known even if they succeeded in defecting – the Czechoslovakian players kept coming. Back at home, they were denigrated as having been “lured by the money of the NHL” and “[betraying] the collective of their teammates.”⁶³ Perhaps this was true – the lifestyle of a professional athlete in the West was certainly a pull factor, but

⁵⁹ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 12-13.

⁶⁰ Vuic, “Do You Believe in Debacles?”, 83.

⁶¹ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 69.

⁶² Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 76-77.

⁶³ Pinchevsky, *Breakaway*, 86.

the animosity against the Soviet Union exhibited by so many of Czechoslovakia's hockey players also provided a substantial push factor.

Even as Soviet hockey became more open and Western through *perestroika* and the Czechoslovaks followed suit, the hard feelings against the Soviet Union and its hockey team definitely still remained – the 1985 IIHF World Championships, back in Prague, also featured a crowd that cheered for the United States underdogs against the clearly superior Soviets, who instead received markedly hostile chants.⁶⁴ Two years later, the 1987 World Junior Championships in Piestany in Slovakia featured a matchup between Canada and the USSR that was later scrubbed from IIHF records due to a bench-clearing brawl that proceeded until arena officials literally turned the lights out. Before the “Punch-Up in Piestany” less than halfway through the second period, however, the main narrative of this game focused on the Czechoslovak fans who wore maple leaf pins and waved Canadian flags, cheering on the Canadians against the USSR just as they had the United States.⁶⁵ However, despite their animosity towards the Soviet Union, Czechoslovak hockey benefited immensely from *perestroika* policies, experiencing a surge in popularity through the 1980s that coincided with increased commercialization of the game – ice hockey was the first sport in Czechoslovakia to sign sponsorship deals with Western corporations in the late 1980s.⁶⁶ Perhaps more than anything else in popular culture, ice hockey manifested Czechoslovakian acrimony against the Soviet Union and drove it closer to capitalism.

While attitudes towards hockey in both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia were driven by overt propaganda, the story was a little different on the other side of the globe. Certainly,

⁶⁴ William H. Luers, “Czechoslovakia: Road to Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 2 (1990): 82-83.

⁶⁵ Joyce, *When The Lights Went Out*, 28.

⁶⁶ Vic Duke, “Perestroika in Progress? The Case of Spectator Sports in Czechoslovakia,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 41, no. 2 (1990): 154.

victories such as the Miracle on Ice were turned to the United States' benefit, portrayed by the media and politicians alike as emblematic of the superiority of the capitalist system. Although the US-Soviet game was only one of a number of round-robin games played in the medal round (and should have been overshadowed by the gold medal game against Finland at that), the team garnered far more praise and adulation from the American public than they had after any single game before (or after.) Even after they beat Finland to win the gold medal, *Time* magazine's writeup still chose to focus on the battle with the Soviets, claiming that "No moment was sweeter for the Americans than the last instant in the 4-3 hockey victory over the Soviets."⁶⁷ Barely a day later, the staff of the New York Times published *Miracle on Ice*, a book that focused solely on the Soviet team and the US-Soviet matchup, riding the high of national pride. Thus began the wave of privately created propaganda, helmed by both sports and mainstream media from *Playboy* to *Reader's Digest*, all of which ignored all the other achievements the 1980 team had made in order to focus on the important one – proof that "the Protestant work ethic had proven itself stronger than Communism."⁶⁸ Although none of this was state-driven, the effect that it had on the American public may have been even greater than the constant Soviet state-sponsored writing – this single game united the American public around a sport that, until then, had been quite unknown to most of them.

⁶⁷ "A Stunning Show, After All," *Time*, 3 March 1980, 30.

⁶⁸ Craig Nickerson, "Red Dawn in Lake Placid: The Semi-Final Hockey Game at the 1980 Winter Olympics as Cold War Battleground," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 26, no. 1 (1995): 78-79.

Conclusion

While the 1980 Miracle on Ice may have lifted American spirits even as it ran ragged over most of the Soviet propaganda machine, it was also a short-lived victory. As most of the staff of the 1980 team had moved onto greener professional pastures, the head coaching job at the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics was up for grabs. Being head coach of the American Olympic hockey team was not an enviable task, as the Amateur Hockey Association of the United States found out to their chagrin when searching for a replacement for Herb Brooks, who had gone on to coach the New York Rangers of the NHL. Their first choice, Bob Johnson, had turned down their offer to serve his country to instead serve his wallet and coach the Calgary Flames, who had just moved to Canada from Atlanta. Lou Vairo, the coaching education executive within the AHAUS who eventually accepted the job, was certainly a devout student of the game and a future NHL assistant coach. In 1984, however, he had never coached either professional or college teams. The closest he had come was the junior level, both in the US Hockey League and on the national team.⁶⁹ Again, the lure and corrupting forces of capitalism conspired to draw away a factor that could have greatly contributed to the US hockey team and thus to America's national prestige – or, at least, the Soviet perspective viewed it thus. Their interpretation was certainly justified – in 1984, Team USA finished seventh, their worst showing at the Olympics at the time. Meanwhile, the Soviets had rebounded from the disastrous loss of 1980 to go undefeated, giving up a total of six goals the entire Games.⁷⁰ The Miracle, then, was contextualized as the fluke it almost certainly was, adding more fuel to the Soviet fire even as *perestroika* smoothed the way for Soviet players to genuinely consider playing in North America without defecting.

⁶⁹ Vuic, “Do You Believe in Debacles?”, 81.

⁷⁰ Vuic, “Do You Believe in Debacles?”, 94.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, those players started trickling in, bringing with them their play style and work ethic, even as teams in the former Soviet bloc began to adapt Western (capitalist) *modi operandi*. NHL teams became ever more international, blurring rivalries and animosities in the hunt for a common goal. While the differences that so marked demarcations between hockey teams in the communist East and the capitalist West are disintegrating, the same old rhetoric may still remain, the same hostilities never quite forgotten. The Miracle on Ice, still considered a defining moment of American hockey, is regaining wider relevance in today's increasingly anti-Russian climate as a return to the rhetoric of the Cold War has begun to manifest in the public discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. Worries of Russian interference in American politics are evident on both sides of the aisle in Washington, and in Moscow, Vladimir Putin looks to remain in power indefinitely. The "us against them" rhetoric is returning, and if it continues to escalate, sports (including hockey) will indeed play a newly energized role in the relationship.

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