Euphoria and Exhaustion
Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society
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In October 1920, at the Third All-Union Congress of the Russian Young Communist League, the role that sport and physical culture should play in the newly established Soviet state was enshrined in an official declaration: “The physical culture of the younger generation is an essential element in the overall system of communist upbringing of young people, aimed at creating harmoniously developed human beings, creative citizens of communist society.”

More pragmatically, the declaration continued to outline two practical goals that the development of sport should work towards: (1) preparing young people for work; and (2) preparing them for military defence of Soviet power. Just over two decades later, as men and women from throughout the Soviet Union exchanged their sports outfits for military garb and marched, sometimes straight from sports parades, to the military front to defend the nation from Nazi invasion, few citizens were in any doubt regarding the officially approved associations between sport, labor and military training. As one military leader argued in an article published in the journal Fizkul’tura i sport in 1941, the conflict would provide both the culmination and ultimate testing ground for this policy. Yet, it should be noted, this idealistic vision of the value of sport for society was one that was not necessarily shared by all participants in and spectators of sport.

The widespread notion that the growth of sport in the Soviet Union might simply be read as little more than a means by which the state coerced the masses to serve its needs, has proven to be a pervasive one, especially dur-

2 “We owe it primarily to the sports organizations that Soviet people were trained and had imparted to them such qualities as courage, persistence, willpower, endurance and patriotism. The soldier needs such qualities in the war we are fighting. The same qualities will be very much needed in peacetime too.” Quoted in Riordan, James (1977). Sport in Soviet society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 154.
ing the Cold War period. Here, Soviet successes in international sport, most notably at the Olympic Games, served further to shape Western interpretations of the Soviet state’s official attitudes towards sport as a social practice. However, as many of the essays in this section reveal, the transformations that Russian and Soviet sport underwent, particularly during the period from the late Tsarist era up to the Second World War, were in fact far more diverse, complex and nuanced than the model of the great Soviet sports machine might suggest. Indeed, as many historians of Soviet sport have shown in recent years, sport during this period might best be regarded, perhaps appropriately enough, as a contested arena, rather than simply as one of totalitarian command. For whilst the authorities, as the notional producers of sport, may well have aspired to promote sporting activities for the objectives proposed above, the public at large, frequently consumed sport in a manner that did not necessarily fulfil these aspirations. Thus, whilst the authorities valued sport as a means, variously to strengthen the organism and develop specific and pragmatic physical skills and regarded sports spectatorship as a means to educate and enhance a notion of collectivity, for the public, sporting activity could equally serve as a vehicle for personal physical expression and competition for competition’s sake, whilst spectatorship frequently manifested itself in the form of a fan culture where team loyalty was based on a desire to celebrate heroes or be part of a smaller, more exclusive counterculture.3 Put more simply, whilst the state promoted sport as a social duty, it could equally be engaged with as a personal and pleasurable distraction and even a form of passive resistance.

Inevitably, many of the key debates about sport were conducted amongst high ranking officials and members of state–sanctioned sports organizations. However, these debates also filtered out into a broader public arena, not least in the pages of the national and sports press, thus generating a widespread public discourse on sport. Thus, to gain a broader understanding of what sport may have signified to the public at large, a wider set of research resources needs to be examined. Visual culture, in its broadest sense, provides one such set of resources. Each of the essays in this section recognizes and highlights the ambiguous nature of sport. More importantly, they cast light on the various ways in which visual representation, whether in the form of photographs (both public and private), architectural plans, paintings and

sculpture, contributed to this wider discourse concerning the potential of sport to be an agent of transformation within society as a whole.

Beginning in the pre-revolutionary era, Ekaterina Emelianova examines the social topography of sport in St. Petersburg during the latter period of Tsarist rule. By analyzing contemporary photographs of the physical spaces inhabited by the burgeoning sports clubs and organizations—from the elitist exclusivity of the *St. Petersburg Rowing Club* to the one ruble spectator spaces of the city’s hippodromes—Emelianova reveals how these visual representations of key sports sites contributed towards, or resisted, the kind of social interaction and intermingling that was an integral aspect of the urbanization and industrialization of the imperial capital at the turn of the century and thus played a vital role in the construction of a new social geography.

Sandra Budy’s analysis of photographs of sport in the popular and specialist press and in public exhibitions during the 1920s and 1930s usefully charts the ways in which changing political agendas can be traced in the shifting emphases of sports photography and photojournalism. Whether focusing on the athlete in action, portraits of individual sporting heroes or the anonymous collective of sportsmen and women at the infamous sports parades of the Stalin era, these images amply articulate and negotiate the shifting debates and concerns of the early Soviet period.

Adopting a different starting position, Alexandra Köhring’s essay offers a detailed account of the various manifestations of the project for the planned, but never completed, International Red Stadium. By comparing and contrasting the concepts and ideological underpinnings of the numerous proposals put forward by architects and social theoreticians throughout the 1920s, Köhring highlights the diverging notions of both sports participation and spectatorship for the new Soviet regime and how these tensions informed architectural ambitions. As she argues, the disparate proposals “implied different hierarchies in the interaction of body and space” and suggest radically different notions of how sport and the physical and metaphorical spaces it occupies might best serve a public that itself was regarded as undergoing a process of transformation into new citizens.

Burcu Dogramaci’s contribution to this section shifts attention away from the Soviet Union to the new Turkish Republic established under Kemal Atatürk during the 1920s. As Dogramaci argues, the promotion of sport within the new state signified “a political and social paradigm shift” placing a strong emphasis on youth, body culture and an affinity with Western mo-
dernity. Here, the influence of western figures, including the German sports administrator Carl Diem and the Italian stadium architect Paolo Vietti-Violi helped to establish this new culture whilst the powerful photographs of the Austrian, Othmar Pferschy, later to become an official state photographer for Kemalist Turkey, reinforced this new emphasis by providing a modern vision of the sporting body as a metaphor for Turkish independence.

For Bettina Jungen, the intersections between the Foucaultian concept of discipline and the practices of sport and dance are explored in the representation of such concepts in the medium of sculpture. Here a celebration of the physical control and “effortless execution” of the body in motion is linked to both the educational and transformational capacities of dance as a ‘sportive’ activity. Focusing on key sculptural works by Vera Mukhina and Elena Ianson–Manizer, Jungen demonstrates how, during the 1930s, the energy and strength of sport was aligned to the grace and beauty of dance to provide a broad role model for Soviet citizens, one based on metaphorical notions of control and discipline.

Finally, Christina Kiaer’s enlightening analysis of the personal photographs of swimmer Liudmilla Sergeevna Vtorova, alongside the paintings produced by the officially approved Soviet artist Aleksandr Deineka, for whom she posed, provides a fascinating dialogue between two distinct forms of cultural production. As Kiaer argues, Vtorova’s snapshots emphasize an intimacy and personal motivation that might be read as far more revealing of lived experience than the visual documents produced within more state-sanctioned practices. Yet, as Kiaer also establishes, Vtorova’s private photographs simultaneously draw upon the ideological imperatives and visual conventions for the representation of sport during the Stalinist 1930s, thus making these images a rich and highly valuable source for historians.