

Soviet Sports as a Cultural Phenomenon: Body and/or Intellect

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Mens sana in corpore sano

My paper discusses the transformations Soviet sports underwent during the Thaw period—that is, from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s—and the changes that consequently occurred in the athletic body's representation within the visual and verbal arts of the time. For the purpose of comparison, I also refer to pertinent developments during the preceding era. Soviet culture always targeted the body for construction in the areas of (stakhanovite) labor, military activity, and sport. National ideology defined the priorities of its use. At times the body is one of the cogs in the mass machine, while at others it stands out as a unique exemplar. The latter becomes the model of the Thaw, which reworked and moved away from the earlier Stalinist model, replacing the ideal of harmony with internal integration. Both eras aspired to overcome the body's limitations:¹ the Stalinist epoch longed for mechanistic perfection and a merger with the machine, whereas the Thaw dreamed of spiritual flight, of release from the flesh. While the former quenched its thirst through strengthening the body, the latter may have weakened it by privileging the intellect.²

The Thaw period strikes me as curious because it witnessed a conflict between two different trends in Soviet sporting life: the development of sports as a way of overcoming human imperfection, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a way of proving Socialism/Communism's superiority to other socio-political systems. The romantic and idealistic prism through which *shestidesiatniki* (men of the 60s) looked at sports and the body became an obstacle to producing record holders in the international arena (the ultimate goal of any sports machine). During the Thaw, impressive results in sports were achieved not because of positive changes in society, but in defiance of them.

Two key sporting events mark the boundaries of the Thaw, which began with the victory of the Soviet team in the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, also the year of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR.³ It ended with the Czechoslova-

kian hockey team's victory over the Soviets in the 1969 world championship in Stockholm. The defeat was unexpected for the Soviets, and welcomed by the rest of the world as a justified response to the invasion of 1968.⁴ The unsuccessful performance of the Soviet athletes at the 1964 Olympic games, in which they almost lost to the United States, however, may be seen as a first sign of the sports organization's malfunctioning.

The political changes in the country after Stalin's death in 1953 affected all spheres of cultural life, including the development of physical culture and sports.⁵ As in other spheres of human activity, the country's universal enthusiasm during the Thaw swept over sports, and revived the ancient ideal of *kalokagathos*⁶ (the well-rounded personality).⁷ Athletic qualities became necessary but insufficient requirements for athletes, as well as for the whole generation. It was the time of an imagined harmonious nation. On the one hand, *sportivnost'* (sportive ethos) created personality, and, on the other, dissolved in it.⁸ The content of the athletic body now became an issue, the body itself reduced to a beautiful container for intellect, power, and will. This shift to the interior self may be seen in depictions of athletes during the 1960s. Portraying a gymnast at rest, Igor' Popov focuses on the tension of inner life (Fig. 1). Moisei Liangleben does not even show the body of his model, presumably in order to avoid any distract-



Figure 1. Igor' Popov. *Gimnast E. Mel'nikov*. 1963. *Sport*. Slide 182.



Figure 2. Moisei Liangleben. *Larisa Latynina*. 1967. *Sport*. Slide 156.

tion from her spiritual image (Fig. 2).

In contrast, portraits of the previous era equated athletes exclusively with their bodies, whose uniformity was slightly varied only according to easily interchangeable signs of affiliation with a certain sport or club. Aleksandr Samokhvalov's painting of a shot-putter (1933) belongs to this category of representation (Fig. 3).

During the short period of the Thaw (1954-1967), the country appeared to exemplify the pure embodiment of the Greek idea of the Golden Mean: equal perfection of two halves, body and intellect. The movement of the pendulum reached one extreme (*sport intellektual'nyi* [intellectual sport]), in reaction to the previous era's opposite extreme (*sport voenizirovannyi* [militarized sport]), and, by the end of the 1960s, the pendulum stopped in the middle of its parabola in a position denoting equilibrium (*sport professional'nyi* [professional sport]).⁹ If the shifts in Soviet people's perception of sports resulted mainly from changes in the political climate, the successes of Soviet sports in the international arena stemmed from the orderly Soviet ideological mechanism that had been operating since the 1920s.

In general, the 1920s-1930s were years of physical culture or fitness (the closest equivalent to *fizkul'tura*) rather than sport, for excessive fascination with the latter was condemned. In the poem "Товарищчи, поспор'те о красном спорте!" (Comrades, argue about red sport!) (1928) Vladimir Maiakovskii wrote: "Подымая/ гири/ и гантели,/ обливаясь/ сто десятым потом,/ **нагоняя/ мускулы** на теле,/ все/ двуногие/ увлекались спортом./ Упражняются,/ **мрачны и одиноки**" (Lifting weights and dumbbells, dripping buckets of sweat, **straining muscles** in the body, all bipeds have become carried away with sport. They exercise in **gloomy solitude**) (174, emphasis added). Devotion to sport was considered dangerous because it encouraged obliviousness to everything else: the athlete "постепенно/ забывает/ все на свете [...] у такого/ в политграмоте/ неважненькая силища" (gradually forgets everything

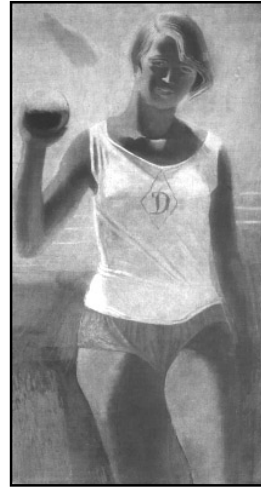


Figure 3. Aleksandr Samokhvalov. *Demushka s iadrom. Sport. Slide 3.*

in the world, such a man is barely politically literate) (175). The poet proposes that bodily development may entail mental disability. According to Maiakovskii, the country needs a commissar of sports, not a record holder, who, by the poet's definition, is the negative pole of the suggested opposition *rekordist/sportsmen*: “Нам/ необходим/ не **безголовый рекордист** –/ нужен/ массу поднимающий/ **спортсмен**” (What's essential for us is not a **headless record holder**—we need a **sportsman** who inspires the masses) (177, emphasis added).¹⁰ During these decades the values and needs of the new socialist state determined the official attitude to sports. Sport had a utilitarian and ideological function, primarily preparing young people for labor and military service. The Party resolution of 1925 defined the tasks of physical culture in the following way: “Физическую культуру необходимо рассматривать не только с точки зрения физического воспитания и оздоровления и как одну из сторон **культурно-хозяйственной и военной подготовки** молодежи [...], но и как один из методов воспитания масс” (It is essential to consider physical culture not only from the standpoint of physical education and health, and as one aspect of our youth's **cultural-industrial and military training**, but also as a method of educating the masses) (*Lenin, partiia, molodezh'* 218, emphasis added). The shift made by the Party in its policy allows us to assume that by 1925 the utilitarian side of physical culture was the state's main concern. The Party resolution of 1949 consolidated the hierarchy of the functions of physical culture: “[...] обеспечить широкое развитие [...], рассматривая физическую культуру как одно из важных средств коммунистического воспитания трудящихся, улучшения их здоровья и подготовки советского народа **к труду и защите социалистической Родины**” (to provide a broad development, looking at physical culture as an important means of labor's communist education, the improvement of its health, and as a means of training Soviet people **for the labor and defense of the socialist Motherland**) (*Lenin, partiia, molodezh'* 220, emphasis added).

In the 1920s there was a group of so-called hygienists who not only privileged physical culture as an important factor in raising national health standards, but also strongly opposed competitive sports on the basis of its harmfulness to mental and physical health. Moreover, they considered competitive sports a feature of bourgeois society, promoting individualist instead of collectivist values. Such points of view, supported by high-ranking sports officials, led the First

Trade Union Games of 1925 to exclude soccer, boxing, weightlifting and gymnastics from the program. The same year the Leningrad Physical Culture Council outlawed boxing. The proletkul'tists were even more aggressive, demanding prohibition of all sports ever practiced in bourgeois society.¹¹ The phenomenon of two contrasting approaches to sport is reflected in Iurii Olesha's *Zavist'* (Envy) (1927).

Как футболист, Володя представлял полную противоположность Гецкэ [forward of the German team]. Володя был профессионал-спортсмен, – тот был профессионал-игрок. Володе был важен общий ход игры, общая победа, исход – Гецкэ стремился лишь к тому, чтобы показать свое искусство. [...] Он презирал игроков – и тех с которыми играл, и противников. [...] Он был хаатурщик. (128)

[As a soccer player, Volodia was the complete opposite of Getske. Volodia was a professional sportsman, and the other was a professional player. The general course of the game, the overall victory, and the outcome were important to Volodia. Getske strove only to display his own artistry. [...] He despised the players, his teammates and opponents alike. [...] He was a hack.]

These contrasting ways of playing soccer lost their socio-political connotations in the Thaw and acquired a moral aspect. It was now questionable whether all means were acceptable in pursuing the ultimate goal. Abram Terts's *Sud idet* (The Trial Begins) (1956) presents a soccer game in terms that illustrate the dilemma. The prosecutor, Globov, envisions scoring without heeding the rules in the following terms: “В горячке не разбираешь. Бьешь–и все тут. Когда ворота рядом–миндальничать не приходится. Все способы допустимы ...” (270) (You can't be too fussy in the heat of the moment. You shoot, and that's that. When the goal is in front of you, you don't use kid gloves. All means are fair...)”(44). Basically, he analogizes the soccer field with the court, which pits him against internal enemies of the state.

During the 1930s, Soviet society privileged the *fizkul'turnik* over the *sportsmen*, mass sports over individual achievements. To ensure mass participation, in 1931 the state developed a physical fitness program tellingly called GTO (*Gotov k trudu i oborone*) (Ready for labor

and defense). *Fizkul'turniki* were perceived as soldiers, and, accordingly, the concept borrowed military vocabulary. The presence of the Party leaders during the celebrations of Physical Culture Days signaled their status as military parades, underscored the political meaning of



Figure 4.

sport, and reinforced its military orientation.¹² During national celebrations, parades of *fizkul'turniki* were designed as military parades, the music and words of the marches following military stylistics. In Vladimir Petrov's film *Sportivnaia chest'* (Sporting Honor 1951) the chorus sings: "Ты идешь в **шеренге боевой/ Защитников** спортивной чести/ Будь готов прославить свой народ/ По всей земле, на каждом стадионе;/ **Будь готов, советский патриот,/ И к мирному труду, и к обороне**" (You're going in **battle formation/As defenders** of sporting honor./ Be prepared to win glory for your people/Around the world in every stadium./**Be prepared, Soviet patriot,/Both for peaceful labor and for defense**) (emphasis added). In *Sport, sport, sport* the documentary sports reels of *fizkul'turniki* parades from the 1930s are, appropriately, accompanied by the *Internationale* and the military march *Esli zavtra voina* (If there's war tomorrow). In view of these lyrics, the rifles held by the marchers look "natural," since they function as props to demonstrate the men's ability to defend the country (Fig. 4). Similarly, the images of *fizkul'turniki* on a moving tank em-

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Figure 5.

phasized their affiliation with the military machine (Fig. 5).

Transforming into constituent parts of the machine, they bring it to life (see also the airplane/bicycle animated by the human body [Fig. 6]). Hence, used for purposes of defense and reconstruction, the human body and machine of the era form a unified mechanism—in which the *fizkul'turnik* often functions as a bearing (Fig. 7).¹³

The architectural structure of various sport-associated episodes (for example, Fig. 8) nicely identifies the bodily hierarchy during parades. The motorcyclist in a military uniform is located between the foundation (the bodily mass of *fizkul'turniki*), which

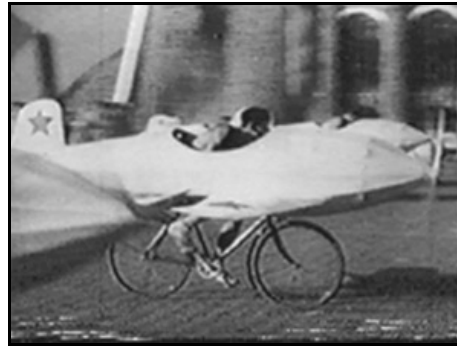


Figure 6.

practically supports his movement and his vehicle's, and the nation's Father, in his favorite service jacket (Stalin's portrait). Stalin makes everything possible from above; he is the key figure in starting all engines of the country. The



Figure 7.

“card sections” in sport festivities were as essential as the gymnastic displays. Hidden behind the huge cards, bodies glorified the Party, leaders' portraits of which observed the ritual from the upper tier of the stadium (Fig. 9).¹⁴ Only the simultaneous movement of the hundreds of participants conducted by

one will could produce the necessary visual effect of the written, dramatically highlighted word “*slava*” (glory).

Certain images employed during parades may be found in other visual samples. For instance, *fizkul'turnitsa*, a shooting figure, and a moving motorcycle (Fig. 10) strikingly remind one of Aleksandr Deineka's poster of 1933, especially in the way images are positioned

along the vertical and horizontal axes (Fig. 11).

The text on the poster contains the following lines:

“Работать, строить/и не ныть!/ Нам к новой жизни/путь указан. Атлетом можешь ты не быть, Но физкультурником — обязан” (Work,

build,/and don't whine./We've been shown/the way to a new life./ You needn't be an athlete,/But you're obliged to be a *fizkul'turnik*). Nikolai Nekrasov's well-known line, “поэтом можешь ты не быть, но гражданином быть обязан” (You needn't be a poet, but you're obliged to be a citizen) (260) is echoed in the last sentence, thus equating *fizkul'turniki* with true citizens, always ready to defend their motherland.¹⁵ In its turn, the category *atlet*, synonymous with *sportsmen*, is elevated to poetic heights. Under Khrushchev—a time of increased individualism—by contrast, the *sportsmen* edged out the *fizkul'turnik*. Athletes were equated with poets, first of all, because their sports records helped humanity to overcome the physical and spiritual limits set by nature. Secondly, the response to success in sport was as strong as that to poetic words. In his poem *Vratar' vykhodit iz vorot* (The goalkeeper leaves the goal posts) (1989), Evgenii Evtushenko implicitly analogizes

goalkeeper Lev Iashin and himself by recalling their similarly rebellious past: “Ах, Лев Иванович,/ Лев Иванович,/ но ведь и любят нас

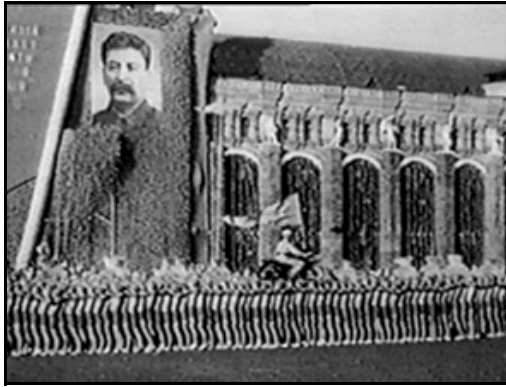


Figure 8.



Figure 9.

goalkeeper Lev Iashin and himself by recalling their similarly rebellious past: “Ах, Лев Иванович,/ Лев Иванович,/ но ведь и любят нас

за то,/ что мы куда не след совались/ и делали незнамо что./
 Ведь и в безвременное время/ всех грязных игр договорных/ не
 вывелось в России племя/ пересекателей штрафных!” (Ah, Lev
 Ivanych,/Lev Ivanych,/you know, they love us/because we stuck our
 noses in where they didn’t belong/and did the impossible./Even at a
 timeless time/of dirty,
 fixed games,/the tribe
 of rule-breakers/still
 existed in Russia)
 (Evtushenko-89 25). Like
 prominent poets, ath-
 letes were endowed
 with immortality: “И
 он останется счаст-
 ливо /разбойным
 гением прорыва,/
 бессмертный Все-
 волад Бобров!” (And



Figure 10.

he will happily remain/the thieving genius of the breakaway,/ immortal Vsevolod Bobrov) (Evtushenko, *Idut* 409).

The period after WWII introduced a new dimension to sports: international prestige, which negated the idea, popular in the 1920s, of the independent development of workers’ sports (as opposed to those of the bourgeoisie) and of strengthening proletarian solidarity.¹⁶ The debut of the USSR in the Olympic Games in 1952 in Helsinki marked the first step in the shift from sports as merely modeling a system for labor and combat toward a realization of its missionary and diplomatic role. Bodily achievements became enlisted in political causes on a more sophisticated level. Soviet participation in the Olympics was delayed by Stalin’s concern about the readiness of Soviet sports to reveal its superiority to the world and, consequently, of the social system that produced it.¹⁷ No mistakes were permissible. For instance, Nikolai Romanov,

Figure 11. Aleksandr Dineika. *Plakat*. 1933. *Sport*. Slide 7.

the post-war chairman of the All-Union Committee of Physical Culture and Sport, recalled that he personally had to submit to Stalin a special note guaranteeing victory so as to obtain his permission to participate in the international competition (Peppard 63).¹⁸ Unwilling to take risks, the Soviet Union refused to participate in the Olympics in London in 1948, on the grounds that capitalists were running the events, and thus inevitably depriving workers of their right to fair competition. However, in 1952 this fact did not prevent the Soviets from joining the XV Olympic Games. The Soviet sports machine, already set on breaking records, began producing tangible results. The Soviet team's performance in Helsinki validated the Party's expectations, and demonstrated to the world community the advantages of the Soviet system. In the unofficial team standing, Soviet athletes shared first place with the United States team and brought home seventy-one medals (*Soviet Sport. The Success Story* 27).

During the Thaw, Soviet sports continued to gain strength and power, building upon the foundation of the previous period. The rather hectic post-Stalinist structural changes did not seriously affect sports' functioning. Reorganization entailed replacing the All-Union Committee of Physical Culture and Sport with a department of the Ministry of Health of the USSR, but the former organization was soon revived. The former chairman of the Committee, Romanov, resumed his position, and Apollonov was sent back to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1959 the Union of Sport Societies and Organizations of the USSR, supposedly a voluntary public organization, replaced the All-Union Committee, which was reinstated in 1968 for the third time (Shneidman 26).

The Party resolutions adopted in the 1960s revived the old idea of developing the physical culture of the people, but emphasized uniting *bol'shoi* (large-scale) and *malyi* (small-scale) sport. The resolution of 1959 had suggested that the *Komsomol* should head the struggle for *massovost'* (mass participation) and *masterstvo* (mastery). The 1966 resolution reflected the shift in the country's political situation and the Party's concern with possibly deviant moral values among the citizens, in violation of communist ideals.

Улучшить руководство физкультурным движением как важным участком воспитательной работы среди населения [...], чтобы физическая культура стала более активным средством воздействия общества на

формирование морального и духовного облика советского человека, способствовала его всестороннему гармоническому развитию и **высокопроизводительному труду**, сохранению на долгие годы крепкого здоровья и творческой активности, **подготовке к защите Родины**. (*Lenin, partiia, molodezh'* 221, emphasis added)

[Improve the leadership of the sports movement as an important component of educational work among the populace, so that physical culture will exert a more active social influence on the formation of the Soviet man's moral and spiritual image, and contribute to his overall harmonious development and **highly productive labor**, to the maintenance of sound health and creative activity for many years, and to his **preparation for the defense of the Motherland**.]

The wording of the 1968 resolution (“массовая физическая культура и спорт должны служить укреплению здоровья, подготовке молодежи к труду и обороне” [mass physical culture and sport should serve to strengthen health and prepare our youth for labor and defense]) echoed the 1949 resolution, and signaled that ideology, as well as sports' administrative structure, had come full circle.

The foreign policy of 1960s' Soviet sports emphasized the development of friendly relations with the world, rather than aggressively promoting Soviet supremacy through competition. Even the usual readiness of Soviet sport to defend itself in military terms disappeared from sporting vocabulary as a result of the change in its perceptions and self-presentation. During the 1960s sports as a metaphor for everyday life temporarily displaced the metaphor of war.¹⁹ For example, according to at least one scholar, Soviet coverage of the track meets with the United States in 1958-62 was notable for the “unfailingly generous and laudatory way in which it described the United States' athletes.” The Soviets' attitude was extremely tolerant, despite some American reporters' adversarial discourse in newspapers that resorted to such headlines as “A Shot at the Russians,” “U.S. athletes invade Moscow for a bloodless war of track and field,” “Here They Come. The Soviet athletic army, determined, strong and secretive, invades the U.S. for a track meet—but should be beaten” (Peppard 77-78). Domestically, Soviet sport was still con-

ceived as a struggle, but a struggle with oneself. The focus of the motto *citius, altius, fortius* shifted from competition with others to competition with the individual's own past performance.

Although athletes' achievements, as always, were immediately connected to the achievements of the nation, the athletes themselves stopped being nameless and faceless. After all, any given team and Soviet sports as a whole comprised individuals. Accordingly, Dmitrii Zhilinskii's painting *Gimnasty SSSR* (Gymnasts of the USSR 1965) portrays the team less as a unified machine than as a harmonious union of different bodies and personalities (Fig. 12).

The true team is far from being a mechanism; it consists of individuals. Sergei, the formerly promising young soccer player who is the protagonist of Vasilii Aksenov's "Papa, slozhi" (Dad, Put It Together) (1962), understands the concept of a true team, though he himself never attained a status beyond that of a reserve player. The story specifically contrasts true/false fans and true/false teams.²⁰



Figure 12. Dmitrii Zhilinskii. *Gimnasty SSSR*. Fragment. *Sport*. Slide 13.

Они болели за эту команду, но болели не так, как обычно болеют несведущие фанатики, выбирающие своего фаворита по каким-то непонятным соображениям. Нет, просто их команда – это была Команда с большой буквы, это было то, что, по их мнению, больше всего соответствовало высокому понятию “футбольная команда.” На трибунах они не топали ногами, не свистели и не кричали при неудачах [...] потому что они знали [...] **команда – это не механизм, а одиннадцать разных парней.** (105, emphasis added)

[They felt profoundly for that team, but not the way ignorant fanatics usually do, who choose their favorite

team for some incomprehensible reasons. No, it was simply that their team was the Team, with a capital letter. It was that, which, in their opinion, best of all corresponded to the elevated concept of a “soccer team.” In the stands, they didn’t stomp their feet, whistle or shout at mistakes because they knew that **a team was not a mechanism, but eleven separate fellows.**]

True fans’ perspectives are based on their past experience in sport, and they study the game from inside. They are not ignorant outsiders demanding entertainment, but belong to the sporting community, and are capable of appreciating a game’s beauty and complexity. Therefore, Sergei’s resurrection (significantly, on Sunday, *voskresenie*) is accompanied by the victory of his Team. The sports event becomes a compositional device employed by Aksenov to illustrate the protagonist’s gradual inner transformation.²¹

Given the new identification between sport and the inner self, the Thaw witnessed the rise of the first sporting stars: legendary goalkeeper Lev Iashin,²² high jumper Valerii Brumel,²³ weightlifter Iurii Vlasov,²⁴ broad jumper Igor’ Ter-Ovanesian, gymnast Larisa Latynina, chess player Mikhail Tal’, and others. The new athlete was quite different from her/his predecessors. “Он, прежний чемпион, был **угловат**, немногословен, перекачивал **желваки**, **чеканил шаг**. Новый чемпион лучился **улыбкой**, поправляя **очки**, невзначай ронял томик **Вознесенского**, а установив рекорд, спешил на **зачет** по сопромату” (He, the former champion, was **angular**, **scowling**, a man of few words, a **plodder**. The new champion had a radiant **smile**, adjusted his **glasses**, occasionally dropped a small volume of **Voznesenskii**, and, having set his record, hurried to his **exam** on ‘the resistance of materials’) (Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis 207, emphasis added). Unlike the old champion, the new one lacked recognizable signs of athleticism. His signifiers of intellectual and spiritual wholeness (smile, glasses, poetry, study) replaced the old physically-based values, and emphasized intellect. Even his poor eyesight, a symptom of his physical imperfection, could not prevent him from being a hero, though it signaled his inclination to read. Sports stars recast as thinking individuals became favorites of the people and the Party: the former watched, adored, and read about them, while the latter lavished awards upon them: for example, all twenty-seven participants in the 1956 Olympic Games received the Order of Lenin, the

nation's supreme honor.

The Thaw's perspective on sports yielded rather curious results. Traditional sporting values depreciated as a consequence of the Thaw's preoccupation with the beauty and delight of the game, and several literary texts inscribe this phenomenon. The left wing in Andrei Voznesenskii's "Futbol'noe" (On soccer) (1961) loses control because of an irrepresible desire to hit the ball, and sends it into his own team's goal. "О, атака до угара! / Одурение удара. / Только мяч, / мяч, / мяч, / Только – вмажь, / вмажь, / вмажь! / 'Наши – ваши' – к богу в рай... / Ай! / Что наделал левый край!.." (O, the attack, carried to ecstasy! The stupor of the blow./Only the ball,/the ball,/the ball. Only kick,/kick,/kick!/Who cares about 'ours-yours...'/Ah!/ What has the left wing done!) (178-79). Yet the player is happy with the quality of his performance: "А ударчик – самый сок, / Прямо в верхний уголок!" (But the kick was really cool,/Straight into the upper corner!) (179). A possible reason for this mistake may be found in the ambiguous phrase: "Левый крайний, милый мой, / Ты играешь головой!" (My dear left wing,/You play with your head!). The observation could refer either to hitting the ball with his head or to playing by using his brains instead of just his feet. If the latter is the intended meaning, then he loses only because he plays the game not in accordance with its rules. Such an idea resurfaces later in Vladimir Vysotskii's lyrics.²⁵ His boxer in "Bokser" (1966) refuses to hit his opponent straight in the face: "Неправда, будто бы к концу / Я силы берегу, – / Бить человека по лицу / Я с детства не могу" (It's not true that toward the end / I save my strength./I haven't been able to hit a man / In the face since childhood) (v.1, 157). He behaves as if he were not a boxer in the ring, but an embodiment of the author's viewpoint on boxing from outside the conventions of the sport. The high jumper in "Prygun v vysotu" (High Jumper) (1970) also refuses to follow the rules and jumps with his left foot: "Но лучше выпью зелья с отравой, / Я над собою что-нибудь сделаю, / Но свою неправую правую / Я не сменю на правую левую!" (But I'd rather drink a poisoned brew, / I'll do something to myself, / But I won't exchange my wrong right [foot] / For their right left) (v.2, 162). Left carries associations of rebelliousness, likewise expressed by Vysotskii in "Pesnia pro pravogo insaida" (Song of the Right Midfielder) (1967-1968): "Справедливости в мире и на поле нет, / Потому я всегда **только слева играю**" (There is no justice, **either in the world or on the field.** / Therefore I always **play only**

from the left) (v.2, 58, emphasis added). Vysotskii's approach to sports—layering the meanings of sporting achievements—became an essential part of his poetry.

From Vysotskii's perspective, the rules of sport are obstacles to the attainment of desired results. Therefore, the broad jumper improves his results every time he crosses the line of permissibility: "Стоит только за черту переступить –/ Превращаюсь в человека-кенгуру" (When I cross the line – /I transform into a man-kangaroo) (v.2, 232). One wins only when one breaks the rules, *flazhki* (small markers) established by others. The idea that the individual is his own supreme judge ("ты сам свой высший суд") links the athlete and the poet. Both need to be free from society's conventions in order to create with inspiration. In his interpretation of sport and athletes' role in it, Vysotskii follows Pushkin's understanding of the poet's mission as formulated in "Poetu" (To the Poet) (1830): "Дорогою свободной/ Иди, куда влечет тебя **свободный ум**,/ Усовершенствуя плоды любимых дум,/ Не требуя наград за подвиг благородный" (Walk down a free road,/Where the **free mind** calls you,/Perfecting the fruits of your favorite thoughts,/Without demanding awards for the noble feat) (Pushkin 178, emphasis added). In the poet's or athlete's consciousness, supreme achievements lose their absolute value and become relative. The weightlifter in "Shtangist" (Weightlifter) (1971) conceives of his victory in the following way: "Такой триумф подобен пораженью,/ А смысл победы до смешного прост?/ Все дело в том, чтоб, завершив движенье,/ С размаху штангу бросить на помост" (Such a triumph resembles defeat,/But isn't the idea of victory laughably simple?/The whole idea is that, having completed the movement with all your might,/You drop the weight back on the dais) (v.2 263). Vysotskii's poem completely discredits the official vision of sports as little more than record mania: "Как тесто на дрожжах, растут рекорды,/ И в перспективе близкой, может быть,/ Боксеры разобьют другу другу морды,/ И скоро будет не по чему бить" (Records rise like dough with yeast,/And, in the short run, perhaps/Boxers will beat one another to death,/And soon there won't be anything to beat on) (v.2, 55). Suggesting the elimination of all rules, the hammer thrower in "Pesenka pro metatelia molota" (Song About a Hammer Tosser) (1968) completes the poet's devaluation of the official attitude toward sports. "И сказал я им: 'Товарищи, внимание!/ Взявши в руки копья, диски всех систем,/ При метанье культивируйте желание/ Позакидывать их к черту

насовсем!” (And I said to them, “Attention, comrades!/ Once you’ve got the javelins and discuses of all systems in hand,/As you throw, cultivate the desire/To chuck them to hell forever”) (v.2, 57). In short, Vysotskii takes the Thaw’s longing for harmony, rather than records, to its logical end.

For a brief period in Soviet sports history, *mal’yi* (small-scale) and *bol’shoi* (large-scale) sport co-existed, exerting a positive influence on each other. In the euphoric atmosphere that neglected the basics of sports, however, it was impossible to continually produce impressive results in the international arena. By the middle of the 1960s the incompatibility of pleasure and victory became obvious, and the inevitable division into separate spheres of influence took place.

[...] сам спорт по своей соревновательной сути отчаянно сопротивлялся превращению его в эстетское действо. Изящно прибежать последним **мог позволить себе физкультурник, а не спортсмен.** Сама конкретность спортивных результатов – голы, очки, секунды – только временно дала себя потеснить **гармонии и красоте.** Успех гораздо проще было отождествить не с расплывчатым отдаленным совершенством, а с внятной и осязаемой победой. (Vail’ 210-11, emphasis added)

[Sport inherently, by virtue of its competitive nature, strenuously resisted being recast into an aesthetic act. **Only a *fizkul’turnik*, not a sportsman, could afford** to cross the finish line in last place, though elegantly. The very concreteness of sporting results – goals, scores, and seconds – allowed **harmony and beauty** to take over only temporarily. It was much simpler to equate success not with vague, distant perfection, but with a perceptible, palpable victory.]

Perhaps inevitably, more rigorous sports values reasserted themselves: hard training instead of inspiration, a precise calculation of success instead of spontaneity, competitiveness instead of performativeness, collectivity instead of individuality, a military lexicon instead of a lyrical or philosophical discourse. Soviet sports officials took control of *bol’shoi* (large-scale) sport, and, after some “repairs,” turned its development in the direction established during the 1940s. The Thaw’s rudimentary approach to sports was transferred to mass

sport, which for a long time cultivated some of the Thaw's utopian ideas of *kalokagathos*.²⁶ The Thaw's elevated aspirations and focus on the intellect were ultimately contradictory factors that threatened the sports machine's ideal. Stagnation abandoned the athletic body, as flesh and spirit went their separate ways.

Notes

1. Both eras were oblivious to the price paid for success and avoided discussing the negative effects of using sportsmen (stakhanovites) as mere instruments for establishing records. The recognition that sport could be harmful came only later, in the Stagnation period, and culminated cinematically in Isaak Fridberg's perestroika-era film *Kukolka* (The Doll) (1988). Elem Klimov's *Sport, sport, sport* (1970) implicitly touches on this issue in the narrative about a boarding school for swimmers, where every day consists of such insistent training that it leaves the children no free time even in the evening. Although the filmmaker avoids explicit judgment, the material compiled in the film forces viewers to weigh the price of success in sport. The desire to overcome the limits of the human body and thereby free it costs a committed athlete his freedom, for s/he devotes endless hours to training. Aleksandr Galich in his "Olimpiiskaia skazka" (Olympic Fairy Tale) (1972) completely discredits the idea of children's sport when he pushes Tania Eremina's story from Klimov's film to an extreme: "Цветов не рвет, венков не вьет,/ Любимой куклы нет / А все плавает, плавает, плавает,/ Все десять тысяч лет!/ ... Ей надо – плавать./ И плавать./ И плавать./ И первой быть!.." (She doesn't gather flowers, doesn't weave garlands,/She has no favorite doll./She only swims, swims, swims,/For a full ten thousand years!/... She's got to swim. And swim. And swim. And be first!). Galich was one of the first to look at the Soviet sports apparatus as a factory grinding away people's lives: "Какой же сукин сын и враль/ Придумал действо – /Чтоб олимпийскую медаль/ В обмен – на детство?!.." (What son of a bitch and cheat/Thought up this farce –/An Olympic medal – /In exchange for childhood?!) (383-84). Here and throughout, unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
2. Not accidentally, such sport as chess (the body of its players, significantly, reduced to the head) became popular in Thaw culture, replacing dominoes in private as well as public spaces, such as the special benches on Tverskoi Boulevard constantly occupied by chess players. *Zabivanie kozla* (slang for the game of dominoes) acquired a negative coloration as symptomatic of intellectual emptiness.
3. That year Soviet athletes received more medals and points than sportsmen from any other country in the history of the Olympics: thirty-seven gold, twenty-nine silver, and thirty-two bronze medals (*Soviet Sport. The*

Success Story 28).

4. Petr Vail' includes the oral recollections of journalist Evgenii Rubin as an example of such a reaction:

Капитан чехов Иозеф Голонка подъехал к советской сборной, взял клюшку наперевес, как автомат, и расстрелял игроков. На трибунах пели, плакали, целовались, молились. Даже чехословацкий тренер Владимир Костка, вполне лояльный партинец, сказал на пресс-конференции, что результат игры **выходит далеко за рамки спортивной победы.** (356, emphasis added)

[The Czech captain, Iozef Golonka, approached the Soviet team, pointed his stick forward like a machine gun, and shot the players. Those in the stands sang, cried, kissed one another, and prayed. Even the Czech coach, Vladimir Kostka, a perfectly loyal Party member, said at the press-conference that the result of the game **far exceeded the bounds of a sports victory.**]
5. However, it would be a mistake to consider Soviet sports a pure reflection and “microcosm of Soviet life, in which all basic characteristics of Soviet society are operative to a much larger extent than is appreciated by the outside world” (Morton 20). Some similarities may be found between Soviet and Western tactics in preparing record holders (see *The USSR: Sport and Way of Life*), which discourage one from viewing the Soviet sports system as unique and independent of practices in the rest of the world.
6. The Greek word is derived from the following: *kalos* – beautiful, *kai* – and, *agathos* – good.
7. The Party Program adopted at the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress described this ideal as a new man who “will harmoniously combine spiritual wealth, moral purity and a perfect physique” (cited in *The USSR: Sport and Way of Life* [75]).
8. Athleticism becomes a defining quality of the protagonist in the youth novel during the Thaw. “Он немножко 'супермен': красивый, высокий, **спортивный**” (He’s something of a “superman”: handsome, tall, and **athletic**) (Al'tshuller 230, emphasis added). In the film *Kavkazskaia plenitsa* (Prisoner of the Caucasus) by Leonid Gaidai (1966), Comrade Saakhov introduces Nina according to the rules and values of the time: “... студентка, комсомолка, спортсменка и, наконец, просто красавица.” (a student, a Komsol member, a sportswoman, and, finally, simply a beauty).
9. The terms belong to Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis.
10. Interestingly enough, by the end of the Thaw articles appeared in the press expressing similar concerns regarding youth’s fascination with Western bodybuilding (*zapadnyi kul'turizm*), which was considered a philosophi-

cally dangerous bourgeois system of physical exercises, advertising flabby bourgeois individualism (*makbrovnyi burzhuaznyi individualizm*).

Помочь молодежи разобраться в новом явлении, взять у атлетизма все полезное, **осудить и отбросить все вредное, чуждое** нашей советской системе физического воспитания должны были прежде всего наши ученые в содружестве со специалистами тяжелой атлетики, наша печать. (*God sportivnyi* 1966 30, emphasis added)

[Above all, our scholars, in cooperation with our specialists in weight-lifting and our press, should have helped our youth to understand the new phenomenon, to glean everything useful from athleticism, and **to condemn and eliminate everything harmful and alien** to our Soviet system of physical education.]

11. For more about these movements see Riordan 1980.
12. This tradition came to an end by 1951, when “the defiant nationalism of the prewar Physical Culture days would eventually be replaced by a defensive internationalism that was more consistent with participation in the Olympic movement” (Edelman 121).
13. These images recall Volodia Makarov’s self-definition in Olesha’s *Zavist'*:
 Я человек-машина. [...] Я превратился в машину. Если еще не превратился, то хочу превратиться. Машины здесь—зверье! Породистые! Замечательно равнодушные, гордые машины. [...] Я хочу быть машиной. [...] Чтоб быть равнодушным, понимаешь ли, ко всему, что не работа! Зависть взяла к машине— вот оно что! Чем я хуже ее? (59)
 [I’m a man-machine. I’ve turned into a machine. If I haven’t turned [into one] yet, then I want to. Machines here are beasts! Pedigreed! Wonderfully indifferent, proud machines. I want to be a machine. So as to be indifferent—you understand?—to everything except work! I’ve been seized by machine-envy—that’s what it is! How am I worse than a machine?]
14. Curiously enough, the portraits are arranged in the shape of a sport pedestal.
15. Later the phrase was immortalized in the ironic popular saying, “Ученым можешь ты не быть, но кандидатом быть обязан” (You needn’t be a scholar, but you’re obliged to have a master’s degree).
16. For instance, in the early 1920s the organization RSI (Red Sport International), led by the Soviets, opposed a West European organization, LSI (Lucerne Sport International), on the grounds that RSI’s goal was “to use sporting contacts with worker-athletes to enlighten them politically and

- prepare them for the class struggle with the bourgeoisie” (Peppard 28).
17. In Soviet ideology, the distinction between socialist and capitalist sports was always based on a materialist view of history, one that posited the fundamental dependence of physical culture and sport on the superstructure of a given society. Accordingly, capitalism and socialism allegedly treat the worker’s leisure time differently: while the former tries to transform it into a means of additional exploitation, the latter aspires to enhance it, giving the workers more time for physical and intellectual improvement (see more in *The USSR: Sport and Way of Life*). For a discussion of the different reasons for the fetishization of sport in capitalist and socialist countries see Riordan 1993.
 18. After the defeat of the Soviet skaters in the Finnish city of Turku in 1948, Romanov himself was replaced by General Apollonov, an internal security officer, in order to improve the functioning of the organization. The isolated victory—1948 also brought the first two Soviet world champions: Maria Isakova in speed skating in combined events and Mikhail Botvinnik in chess—were not considered sufficient to challenge the bourgeois world.
 19. The Thaw’s transformation of fighting armies in the sport arena into fraternizing soldiers, and the consequent change of vocabulary (reflecting an “us vs. them” mentality), is ridiculed in Galich’s “Otryvok iz radiotelevizionnogo reportazha o futbol'nom matche mezhdru sbornymi komandami Velikobritanii i Sovetskogo Soiuza” (Excerpt From Radio and Television Reportage on the Soccer Game Between the British and Soviet Teams) (1969-70). The French referee receives a high evaluation from the Soviet journalist commenting on the soccer game until he imposes a penalty on the Soviet team for violating the rules. Thereupon accusations of political crimes, an old trick of Soviet propaganda ([...] этот судья Бидо просто прекрасно известен нашим журналистам, как один из самых **продажных политиканов от спорта**, который в годы оккупации Франции сотрудничал с гитлеровской разведкой [this Judge Bidot is well-known among our journalists as one of the most **bribeable politicians in sports**, who collaborated with Hitler’s reconnaissance during the occupation of France] [199]), replace the laudatory tone at the beginning of the game (“... Судья Бидо [...] **великолепно** проводит матч этот арбитр из Франции, великолепно, по-настоящему спортивно, строго, **по-настоящему арбитр международной квалификации**” [Judge Bidot...this French referee is running the match **wonderfully**, in a really sporting manner, strictly; he’s a **referee of truly international caliber**] [198-99, emphasis added]).
 20. A similar opposition shapes the plot of Boris Dezhkin’s cartoon *Shaibu, shaibu!* (The Puck! The Puck!) (1964). The professionalism of the “bad” team does not suffice to triumph over the “good,” but worse-trained, team.

21. The resurrection of the protagonist in Anatolii's Gladilin's *Khronika vremen Viktora Podgurskogo* (A Chronicle of the Times of Victor Podgurskii) (1956) also occurs during a sports event, specifically, a chess tournament. The match is intense, and though Viktor comes close to winning, he ultimately loses. Despite his disappointment, he experiences a resurgence of life. The words of his opponent ("А все-таки молодец парень!") [Still, this fellow's really okay!] and the presence of the girl waiting for him afterwards signal his revival (397).
22. Iashin was a renowned soccer player, whose performance a sports journalist described as follows:
- В воротах стоял Яшин. Один английский обозреватель пошутил, что при слове *Яшин* у итальянских форвардов начинают дрожать колени. [...] Во время одного матча на Кубок Европы, проходившего в Италии, его ворота обстреливали с 10 метров, с 5, с 3, и он брал все эти мячи. Потом он взял пенальти. Итальянские обозреватели после той игры написали: "Дайте нам Яшина, и мы готовы играть со сборной мира!" (*God sportivnyi 1966 92-93*)
- [Iashin was at the goal posts. One English journalist joked that upon hearing the word *Iashin* the Italian forwards began to quake at the knees. During one European Cup game, which took place in Italy, his goal was attacked from a distance of ten, five, and three meters, yet he saved it from every shot. Then he saved a penalty shot. After this game Italian reporters wrote, "Give us Iashin, and we're ready to play the best in the world!"]
23. Brumel' was doubly a popular hero, both for reaching ever-new heights during sporting competitions and, after 1965, for recovering from an accident and being determined to jump again. The film *Sport, sport, sport* emphasizes that the qualities that brought him to stardom later allowed him to overcome his trauma.
24. His glasses, which he never took off during competitions, symbolize the Thaw.
25. Vladimir Vysotskii wrote more poems about sportsmen than any other poet. At one of his concerts in 1978, he told the audience that he planned to write forty-eight poems about sport—the number of sports in the Olympics at that time.
26. *Sport, sport, sport*, in the sequence of a masseur's vision of future sport, in which there would be no struggle, no winners, and no losers, parodied the Thaw's attempt to create an idyllic mode of sport. Art and sport would converge right there on the track, the boxing ring as well as the boxers would be decorated with flowers (Fig. 14), and runners would stop for a while to read, paint, and play the piano (Fig. 13).

Figure 13. *Sport, sport, sport.*Figure 14. *Sport, sport, sport.*

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