

# The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Sporting Women in Russia and the USSR

*Jim Riordan*

*University of Surrey, Guildford, UK*

## *Overview of "Sport" and Gender in Russia and the Soviet Union*

That sport and gender are reflections of society is sufficiently axiomatic to excuse a few words on Russian and Soviet society. In view of the enduring ignorance and myths among denizens of the West about that vast land and empire (reciprocated by its denizens in regard to the West), a few words are woefully inadequate. I shall nonetheless attempt to provide a minimum of social background to sport and gender development.

In sport the reality is further blurred by a Western media-induced proclivity for "visible notables" with "visible assets"-from Olga Korbust (Sebastien Coe) with her (his) "elfin grace" to Tamara Press (Ben Johnson) with her (his) "muscular power." This approach is as distracting as it is to portray Margaret Thatcher as a symbolic image of British womanhood (or manhood). Both notables and assets obscure deeper realities of society, such as what the other ninety-nine plus percent of the population are doing and why. It tells us virtually nothing about either sport or gender or the underlying, if less visible, social forces.

A further stereotyping problem about "Russia" is that to regard the country as linguistically and culturally "Russian" is to ignore over half the population. Over one hundred distinctly different ethnic groups, from some fifty million Ukrainians to forty million Moslems or erstwhile Moslems (Turkic in language and Islamic in culture) who inhabit the southern republics, from the three Baltic nations presently seeking severance from the Union (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) to the three nations of the Caucasus-Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaidzhan, which also have independence aspirations. That the empire is now falling apart should not detract from the importance of its ethnic composition in any understanding of Russian and Soviet historical development.

A study of sport and gender in regard to Russia (i.e., the pre-1917 Russian Empire) and the USSR is of some importance because of the prime place the country holds in regard to both. The Soviet Union has for some time been the world's leading all-round sporting nation-as demonstrated by its domination of the twenty-three sports in the summer Olympics and the twelve sports in the winter Olympics (a domination to which its sportswomen have played a crucial

part). The country's socialist experiment has provided a number of influential and revolutionary gender writers—such as Alexandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Vera Zasulich, Inessa Armand, Lev Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin—and role models; what is more, Soviet socialism has often been regarded in the West as a litmus test for revolutionary change in society and its effect on the emancipation of women and men.

Marxist views of gender roles are pertinent to Soviet policy in all areas, including sport, in so far as the leaders of the Soviet state have openly espoused those views and sought to abolish the major forms of exploitation. Commitment to sexual equality became a declared policy of the Russian Social Democrats (forerunner of the Bolshevik and Communist Party) in 1903 when, at the Party's Second Congress, the Party program added demands, on Lenin's initiative, for equality in education and in civil and political rights. Socialist theory on the woman question, on which those demands were based, had first been expounded by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and subsequently developed by the German Marxist August Bebel, in his *Women and Socialism* (1879), and by Engels himself five years later in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. By 1917 further contributions to the debate had been made not only by European Marxists but also by Russian Socialist women, notably Nadezhda Krupskaya in her pamphlet *The Women Worker* (1901), and Alexandra Kollontai in *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909).

The solution for all these writings to the problem of sexual inequality lay in the abolition of capitalism. The phenomena of oppression and exploitation were seen as the essential superstructural reflection of the economic base of capitalist society. It was thus inevitable that in a society based on private property women would be oppressed. With the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialist production relationships, human relationships would be unbounded by economic necessity and all exploitation would cease. For Engels, the oppression suffered by women was a function of their exclusion from public production and their confinement to private production and reproduction within the family. Within the context of the bourgeois family, he argued, women were reduced to domestic slaves while their husbands held exclusive power conferred by their economically dominant position. Women's inferior status in society was a consequence of their dependence on men within the family. The family itself was seen as a social institution whose relationships were determined not by biology but by economics. Under socialism, as the means of production passed into common ownership, women would gain equal access to economic, social and political activities, private housekeeping would be transformed into a social industry and child care would become a public affair. "The emancipation of women," Engels wrote, "becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree." As property was seen as the exclusive definer of personal relationships, then the absence of private property under socialism would result in a profound change in the quality of relationships

between men and women. The domination of women by their husbands would simply vanish, Engels believed, as male economic predominance disappeared. With full economic equality, he argued, there would be no basis for marriage other than “individual sexual love” which, being by nature exclusive, would result in a new and higher form of monogamy. Under socialism, “monogamy, instead of declining, would finally become a reality.”<sup>1</sup>

This view of sexual relationships expounded by Engels formed the basis of Russian Marxist thought on the question. Yet only Alexandra Kollontai, in her much criticized and misunderstood writings of the early 1920s, was to appreciate how complex were questions of personal relationships and to attempt a more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between love, sex and social change.

### *Sport and Physical Education in Pre-1917 Russia*

One might imagine from the list of feminist writers, the novels of Tolstoy (e.g., *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*), or the chronicles of Russian history that feature strong women rulers like Catherine the Great, Anna and Elizabeth, and even the last Empress Alexandra, that liberated women were common in Russia and that the status of women was comparatively high. Far from it. Before 1917, women in all social classes were essentially slaves of their husbands. Right up to the Revolution, the tsarist law proclaimed that the wife was held to obey her husband, as the head of the family, to remain with him in love, pay him respect, and unlimited obedience, to do him every favor and show him every affection, as a housewife. The law explicitly permitted a man to beat his wife, and in some rural areas women had to wear veils and were not permitted to learn to read and write.

Tradition continually reinforced women's subordination. “A crab is not a fish—a woman is not a human being” ran the proverb which succinctly summarized attitudes in the countryside, where eighty-six percent of women lived up to the outbreak of World War I. Most peasant families adhered to a strict division of labor between the sexes. Contemporary observers of the extended peasant family invariably described it as hierarchical, patriarchal and authoritarian. Peasant marriages were usually arranged. As a newcomer to her husband's family, a bride came under the authority of the older women as well as the men. Primary education was far from universal by the outbreak of World War I, and only one in eight women under the age of fifty could read. For most women in rural Russia, unwaged work in the home and on the family's land was the dominant feature of their lives. Time for sport, even folk games, hardly existed.

During the eighteenth century, the need for physically fit men, conversant with modern skills, in the army, navy, and civil service had led to the introduction of physical training in the newly-established military and some civil colleges. Further, mounting diplomatic and commercial intercourse with the

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1. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private, Property and the State* (Peking Foreign Languages Press, 1978):92-93.

West brought an acquaintance with foreign sports and pastimes, especially those pursued by the cultured and officer elite.

With the whole of Russian society being subjected to an intensive military-bureaucratic regimentation from the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), the new "sports" became more and more associated with military training, and less with the type of aristocratic leisure activities prevalent in North American and Western Europe. The large measure of state control, the "militarization" of sports activities, and the considerable foreign influence were three distinguishing features of Russian sports development that were to persist for many years.

The nineteenth century saw the development of gymnastics and experimentation with the principal systems then current in Europe. The Russians first tried the German (i.e., Guts Muths and Jahn) and the Swedish (i.e., Ling) schools. Prussian drill sergeants who had trained the Russian army according to the Prussian model (goose step and all) introduced Jahn's ideas and gymnastic equipment. The Russians, however, subsequently became more attracted to the Czech Sokol gymnastic method advanced by Miklos Tyrs owing to its pan-slavist overtones.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, foreign entrepreneurs and skilled workers, members of the well-to-do middle class, and liberal noblemen had begun to establish clubs in the major cities for the pursuit of such sports as yachting, tennis, skating, fencing, cricket, croquet and gymnastics. For their entertainment as spectators and gamblers, professionals and promoters provided horse racing, boxing, cycling, soccer and various displays of strength. Table 1 (from L. I. Samoukov's *Encyclopedia of Physical Culture and Sport*) shows the earliest sports organizations formed in Russia. These range from Neva Flotilla in 1718, through the aristocratic Neva School of Swimming and St. Petersburg Horse-Racing Society of the early 1800s, to the middle-class St. Petersburg Circle of Amateur Sportsmen and Victorian Football [Soccer] Clubs of the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>2</sup>

Although these sports were the preserve of men-no women's names are to be found in the lists of participants in pre-revolutionary championships-other women in tsarist Russia did take an active part in certain muscular, professional sports. It may be that Russian peasants had fewer inhibitions than their masters about women's participation in sport, in view of the male peasant ideal of a strong woman for child-bearing and hard work. Certainly, there were women who took part in both weightlifting and wrestling at the end of the nineteenth century. Since such events were largely confined to the circus, a certain voyeuristic, commercial motivation cannot be excluded. Such weightlifters as "Madame Atletka" pressed 89.5 kg and raised 52 kg with one hand on one occasion, and a certain Mrs. Trefilova-Bubnova, weighing only 52 kg, pressed 57 kg, which was enough to earn her third place in a men's featherweight contest at the turn of the century. Women wrestlers were regular members of

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2. F. I. Samoukov (ed.), "Istoriya fizicheskoi kulturey," in *Entsiklopedichesky slovar po fizicheskoi kulture i sporta*, 3 (Moscow, 1964): 216-222.

circus troupes; the redoubtable Masha Poddubnaya (wife of the great wrestling champion Ivan Poddubny) was women's world wrestling champion six times before 1910. Circus bills advertise her as inviting all comers into the circus ring to try their luck against her after she had disposed of her fellow troupers.<sup>3</sup> The foremost Russian boxing club was run by a woman, although women did not compete. The Russian authorities tended to regard boxing as a *muzhik's* (peasant) sport, violent and dangerous, even when confined to the Marquis of Queensbury Rules. Baron Kister had been discharged from the army for championing boxing (an activity regarded as unbefitting an officer and a gentleman). He had established a boxing club in Moscow in 1894, and subsequently transferred the club to his wife. It therefore became Baroness Kister's Boxing Arena. On the whole, however, where female sport did exist in tsarist Russia, it was kept separate from that of men. An advertisement in a 1897 newspaper is typical of the sexual apartheid of the period: "Sanitas Physical Development Club, 98 Nevsky Prospect, St. Petersburg. Heavy athletics: Wrestling, Gymnastics, Therapeutic Body Building with guarantee of expanding chest by 5-15cm. *Special hours for women.*"<sup>4</sup>

Russian women also benefitted from a rise of interest in physical culture in the late 1800s. Toward the end of the century, a number of social reformers campaigned for the inclusion of physical education in civilian schools. (At the time the authorities still regarded physical education as frivolous and tending to encourage academic idleness.) Among the reformers was biologist Pyotr Franzevich Lesgaft (1837-1909), who had studied medicine at the Imperial Academy of Medicine. In 1892, Lesgaft founded the Society for the Encouragement of the Physical Development of Student Youth in Odessa. His work quickly spread to branches in St. Petersburg, Kiev and Moscow. Besides encouraging public discussion of children's and young people's physical development both in the home and in school, this philanthropic organization persuaded the Minister of Education in 1896 to set up the first civilian physical training courses for men *and* women instructors-with Lesgaft in charge. However, he was subsequently accused of inciting student unrest and the courses were closed in 1907. After the 1917 Revolution, Lesgaft's "Courses" were reorganized into the famous Physical Culture Institute in Leningrad which today bears his name.<sup>5</sup>

The admission of women to such training courses was certainly novel for tsarist Russia. The official view had long been that such activities were the preserves of men and women were not suited to participate in such endeavors as a consequence of both their social status and anatomical structure. For much of his academic career, Lesgaft espoused the cause of women's rights, giving official physical education and anatomy courses to women students at his home and, after 1896, at the University of St. Petersburg. One hundred women

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3. James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 18.

4. *Ibid.*

5. James Riordan, "Pyotr Franzevich Lesgaft, the Founder of Russian Physical Education," *Journal of Sport History*, 4 (Summer 1977): 229-241.

students attended in the first year and one hundred sixty-six in the second year. Lesgaft regarded women's participation in sporting activities as a means to social liberation. He wrote: "Social servitude has left its degrading imprint on women. Our task is to free the female body of its fetters, conventions and drooping posture, and return to our pupils their freedom and suppleness which have been stolen from them. We must develop in them firmness, initiative and independence, teach them to think and to take decisions, give them knowledge of life and make physical educationalists out of them."<sup>6</sup>

Lesgaft opposed the exercise systems currently popular in Europe, favoring a type of free gymnastics that is today known in the USSR as "artistic gymnastics"—a form rather like modern rhythmic gymnastics. This type of activity, he said, would satisfy girls' and boys' natural desire for physical movement and achievement, and also encourage will power and initiative.<sup>7</sup> He considered games to be a useful means of character training, but he did not advocate competitive sports, which he felt encouraged selfishness and were educationally harmful in that they encouraged victory of the physically strong over the physically weak (and typically boys over girls). Games appropriate for schools should encourage group spirit, unselfishness, social awareness and respect among the sexes.<sup>8</sup>

The implications of Lesgaft's ideas went far beyond what the tsarist authorities were willing to allow. Certain of his views are reminiscent of Rousseau's advice to Emile—character training through physical activity, the political and national ends of physical culture and its therapeutic value. He himself was no revolutionary; if anything, his educational philosophy reflected the ideology of the small, but growing Russian middle class. It was, though, Lesgaft, more than anyone else who was to influence the Soviet system of physical education. Several major tenets of his theory and system today underlie the physical culture system in the USSR: Ideas of "harmonious development," social awareness through physical education, belief in a biological justification for exercise and games, and a belief in women's social emancipation through the bodily liberation of games and physical education. On the other hand, his hostility to competitive sport (with its trophies and flags, victory celebrations, and other paraphernalia) and sexual discrimination found ready accord in the 1920s. However, with the onset of full-scale industrialization and the widespread application of incentives throughout the Soviet economy, these values gave way to the interest in competitive athletics which emerged with the Soviet entry into Olympic competition in 1952.

#### *Sport and Physical Education in Post-Revolutionary USSR*

The Russian Revolution was actually begun by women. In 1917, on International Women's Day (March 8 according to the Western Calendar), women textile workers in Petrograd went on strike, sending an appeal to other workers

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6. *Ibid.*, 237.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 240.

to support them. Their demands were modest (bread; against war and the autocracy). This strike was the beginning of the revolution that was to culminate first in the overthrow of the tsar and then in the overthrow of the capitalist class. When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917 they found the country on the verge of economic collapse. The ensuing Civil War and foreign intervention accelerated and intensified radical transformations in the economy and politics.

In the political context of the Russian Civil War (1918-1920) it was hardly surprising that solving the "woman question" was not a top priority of the Bolsheviks, who were more preoccupied with basic political survival. Yet, women's issues did not go ignored either in theory or in practice. The Bolsheviks were committed, on a theoretical level, to the liberation of women. The new government expressed this sentiment, which was reflected in policy. The principles of equality of the sexes and equal pay for equal work were enshrined in early legislation. Married women also gained a freedom of movement previously denied them. They no longer were obliged to live with their husbands if they chose not to; nor were they obliged to follow when their husbands moved elsewhere. Divorce was made simple and marriage became a civil, not a religious, affair. Children born to single women were given the same rights as children of married mothers; and maternity pay was granted to working women. Abortion was legalized on the grounds that it was a necessary evil. Homosexual relations between consenting adults were also legalized. These laws, which even the most liberal democratic regimes flinched from passing, substantiate the claim that early Soviet legislation was truly revolutionary for its time.

A Women's Department (the *Zhenotdel*) was set up in 1919 to campaign among women. Reaction to its work was particularly acute in Moslem communities as many Party and non-Party males did not want their women to abandon traditional practices. Men even murdered their female relatives rather than bear the humiliation of a family member having cast off the veil. Thousands of Moslem women died in this way. Female Party activists often suffered the same fate. Although Moslem men were especially concerned that women's liberation would be a threat to their way of life, the concerns were not limited to them. Rural areas across the nation were rife with rumors about what Bolshevik power would bring to women: And the agitations continued well into the 1930s.

Yet despite the hostility to the *Zhenotdel*, it achieved a great deal, particularly in the early 1920s when Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai were its directors. They gave it an energy and commitment which it subsequently lost. The extensions of Marxist theory, particularly in regard to domestic labor, maternity and sexuality, were halted and even reversed in subsequent decades. As one writer has put it, "The initial radical freedoms in marriage, divorce, abortion, child care and the family were largely abridged and reaction increased so that by 1943 even coeducation was abolished in the Soviet Union. The sexual revolution attendant upon the 1917 revolution was over, and the counter-revolution was triumphant. In the ensuing decades conservative opinion else-

where rejoiced in pointing to the Soviet Union as an object lesson in the folly of change.”<sup>9</sup>

In terms of sporting activities, the tone for the 1920s was set by the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. Lenin derived from and shared with Marx a belief in the potential of fully developed individuals. Under socialism everyone would have a chance to choose the physical activity he or she wished to pursue to attain complete self-realization. Accordingly, it was to be not simply a matter of satisfying the needs of members of society, but of ensuing “complete welfare and free *all-round* development of *all* members of society.”<sup>10</sup>

Influenced by his own experiences of physical and mental training during periods of privation, and confronted by the practical problems of power, Lenin added an emphasis on character training that was absent in Marx. For instance, Lenin recognized the effects that sport might have upon those qualities of character that were valuable to individuals and to society, the social behavior of citizens, and the promotion of health. In his commentary on the advocates of “free love” and on Leftism in the cultural revolution, Lenin took a position on the moral effects of sport which was not that far removed from that of such English “Muscular Christians” as Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes and Matthew Arnold. “Young people,” Lenin held, “especially need to have a zest for life and be in good spirits. Healthy sport-gymnastics, swimming, hiking, all manner of physical exercise-should be combined as much as possible with a variety of intellectual interests, study, analysis and investigation. . . . That will give young people more than external theories and discussions about sex. . . . Healthy bodies, healthy minds!”<sup>11</sup> When asked how young people should spend their spare time, Lenin once replied, “Young men and women of the Soviet land should live life beautifully and to the full both in public and private life. Wrestling, work, study, sport, making merry, singing, dreaming-these are things young people should make the most of.”<sup>12</sup> Games playing was, then, in his view, conducive to moral as well as physical health; it was a valuable ingredient in character training.

On another occasion, Lenin indicated the powerful force that sport might exert on women’s emancipation: “It is our urgent task to draw women into sport. . . . If we can achieve that and get them to make full use of the sun, water and fresh air for fortifying themselves, we shall bring an entire revolution in the Russian way of life.”<sup>13</sup> Further, the first sports minister, Nikolai Podvoisky, has observed that Lenin stressed the “huge significance . . . of training people in physical education, so as to attain a cultural, comradeship mutual relationship between young men and women.”<sup>14</sup> Lenin, therefore, saw in sport and physical education a convenient vehicle for drawing women into public activity and an

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9. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 176.

10. V. I. Lenin, *Polnoye sobranie sochineniy*, 6 (Moscow, 1963): 232. For more on Lenin’s views on sport, see Jim Riordan, “Marx, Lenin and Physical Culture,” *Journal of Sport History*, 3 (1976): 152-161.

11. Quoted in Clara Zetkin, *Vospominaniya o Vladimire Ilyche Lenine*, Part 2 (Moscow, 1955): 84.

12. Quoted in A. Bezymensky, *Vstrecha komsomol'tsev s V. I. Leninom* (Moscow, 1956): 18.

13. Quoted in N. I. Podvoisky, *Rabotnitsa i fizicheskaya kultura* (Moscow, 1938): 3.

14. N. I. Podvoisky, “Lenin i fizicheskoye vospitanie,” *Krasnyy sport*, 4 (1940): 3-4.

area where they could relatively quickly achieve a measure of equality with men-and be seen to do so.

In practice, after 1917 the new concept of “physical culture” became a means of inculcating standards of hygiene and regular exercise in a predominantly socially backward peasant population. However, physical culture and sport were not to be confined solely to improving physical health. They were also important in combating anti-social and anti-Soviet behavior in both town and country. The Ukrainian Party, for example, issued a resolution in 1926 expressing the hope that “physical culture would become a vehicle of the new life . . . a means of isolating young people from the baneful influence of the street, home-made liquor and prostitution.”<sup>15</sup> The role assigned to “sport” in the countryside was equally ambitious even if rather ambiguous. In general, it was to be part of the campaign against drunkenness and uncivilized behavior, attracting village youth to important goals of the Soviet authorities and useful in combating religious influences.

In Central Asia, Soviet authorities attempted to promote sporting activities to encourage the acculturation of national groups, and to involve women in public life, and counter all-embracing cultures like Islam which impinged on large areas of life. (Enticements to Central Asian youth, particularly women, through sports activities organized by the Soviet authorities were seen by local peoples as a breach in the feudal-bey and religious order.) The progressive values supposedly imparted by sport, it was hoped, would confront what the Soviet authorities considered to be the “irrational,” “superstitious,” “mystical,” and “subservient” aspects of Islamic culture. Thus, central government authorities arranged a grand sports festival known as the First Central Asian Olympiad. This was held in Tashkent in October 1920, and featured a wide range of both local and European sports. The event was the first time in the area’s history that Muslim peoples and Europeans competed in any sporting event together.

The organizers conceived of the festival as more than an effort to use sport to foster integration in a multinational nation. To a community in which women historically had been excluded from public life and discouraged from baring face, arms, and legs in public, the involvement of Uzbek and other Central Asian women in the festival, it was hoped, would be a vivid demonstration of opportunities for a new life and social liberation. An American boxer, Sidney Jackson, living and working in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, described how the sports parade of 1920 was intended to strike a blow for women’s liberation. The hoped-for success, however, was not forthcoming. Two of Jackson’s helpers, a Russian named Umarov and an Uzbek young woman named Aigul had gone into the old part of Tashkent to persuade women to join the parade without their veils. For these efforts, they were stoned and badly beaten. Umarov died and Aigul spent a long time in the

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15. A. M. Landar, “Fizicheskaya kultur-sostavnaya chast kulturnoi revolyatsii na Ukraine,” *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kultury*, 12 (1972): 13.

hospital, but was luckier than some women who were stoned to death on their way to join the sports parade.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, in the 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet women took up a wide range of sports-including some like soccer and ice hockey- which they would be deterred from playing in the post-World War II era. Table 2 (from Riordan's *Sport in Soviet Society*) provides a list of organized men's sports that had their first national championships, with comparable information for the first women's championships. From the viewpoint of women's sport development, it is noteworthy that over half the organized competitive sports for men as of 1980 had had their first national championship before 1929; for women, the number is just less than half.<sup>17</sup>

In the early years of the Revolution, therefore, one finds few inhibitions about women taking up *any* sports, including soccer and ice hockey. From the 1930s onwards, however, official Soviet policy discouraged women from participating in certain sports that male leaders believed to be contra-indicated, harmful, or morally degrading. As a male writer was to put it years later, the prevailing view came to hold that "in choosing a sport girls should be motivated by a beautiful figure, grace and plasticity; boys by strength, stamina, skill and speed."<sup>18</sup>

In the decade or so following the Civil War, other forces were shaping Soviet physical education and sport. In the new coeducational schools developed in the 1920s, physical education for the first time became part of the school curriculum. At the same time, sports played a prominent part in the new uniform youth organization for boys and girls-the Young Pioneers (ages 9-14) and the Young Communist League or *Komsomol* (ages 15-26). Now that the cobwebs of tsarist obscurantism had been swept away, it was felt possible to introduce into Russian schools some of the sports models that were currently popular among women in the West. After all, people reasoned, if Russia was to be an industrialized urban society, she would need a pattern of physical culture befitting such a society. The former secretary of the Russian Olympic Committee, Georges Duperont, advocated the French "dynamic" gymnastic system of Georges Demenie. Others favored the "natural" system of Jacques Hébert, who opposed specialization and favored the cultivation of games involving both girls and boys to achieve all-round development. Still others favored the calisthenics school of François Delsarte propounded by its contemporary exponent, Isadora Duncan. The Soviet education minister Anatoly Lunacharsky invited Duncan to Soviet Russia in 1921 to set up her own academy in Moscow. She took Soviet citizenship, married the poet Sergei Yesenin, and undoubtedly had an influence on the formation of the Soviet "artistic gymnastics" movement. Duncan left the country in 1923, and although she returned briefly in 1924, took no further direct part there in promoting women's dance.

Toward the end of the 1920s, the Soviet economy had begun to recover. In the

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16. Personal communication from Sid Jackson (1964).

17. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 407-408.

18. V. Rodichenko, "Fizicheskaya kultura i zhenshchiny," *Sovetsky sport*, (25 January 1973): 3.

fiscal year 1925-1926, industrial production reached ninety percent of its 1913 level. The scene was set for the implementation of an industrialization program that was forcibly to hurl the whole of the country into a gigantic campaign to "build socialism," then lead to the forcible collectivization of agriculture and transform the USSR from a backward agricultural into an advanced industrial, if unbalanced, economy. The First Five-Year Plan went into operation on October 1, 1928 on a scale and with planning that more resembled a military campaign than peacetime construction. The fear of military defeat-which had precipitated this industrial and agricultural revolution-helped to create a society that became more and more totalitarian. By the early 1930s, the first members of a new Soviet-trained class of specialists had been educated. They would replace the old, non-proletarian "intelligentsia" and be "uncontaminated" by tsarist or bourgeois-liberal ideas. Stalin's rise to supreme power climaxed with the great purges of the late 1930s that carried off most early Soviet policy makers.

It was at this time that women's issues were removed from the agenda, swallowed up in Stalin's five-year plans, and the collectivization of agriculture was set in motion. The Women's Department (*Zhenotdel*) was dissolved-and was not revived until 1988. In the 1930s, then, many of the earlier gains for women were watered down by a renewed stress on the nuclear family, by financial barriers to obtaining divorce, and a ban on abortion, which continued until 1955. These measures, along with the introduction of internal passports, labor books, and labor discipline, were part of the regulation of society that came with Stalin's industrialization. Stable nuclear families were seen as necessary and very desirable at a time of industrial upheaval. The liberation of women in practical ideology now meant no more than participation in economic production. And so it remained until the mid-1980s.

The implications for the sports movement of these socio-economic and political processes were extremely important for it was in the 1930s that the pattern of Soviet sport as we know it today was principally formed and its main role and functions set. If the decade of the 1920s may be described as having been dominated by *physical culture*, the 1930s may be characterized as a decade of competitive *sport*-with sports societies, sports schools, a formal physical education syllabus, the national fitness program (known as "Be Prepared for Labor and Defense" and "Prepared for Labor and Defense). This was initially based on the marksmanship and athlete badges that had been devised by Lord Baden-Powell for the Boy Scouts, with uniform ranking systems for each professional sport. The Soviet Union of the 1930s differed from that of the preceding period in seeing the flourishing of all manner of competitive sports (soccer, basketball, volleyball-with the latter two involving women as well as men) with mass spectator appeal, and the official encouragement of leagues, stadiums, cups, championships, popularity polls, cults of sporting heroes-all the appendages of a sub-system consciously designed to provide general recreation and diversion for the fast-growing urban populace.

So, in essence, the sports system has remained to this day. So, too, has its

gender differentiation, at least until the break-through of Gorbachev's coming power in March 1985. This ushered in a new era of *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and immense uncertainty about the future. There has been one major development within Soviet and international sport, however, that has had a considerable impact on sport and gender, with wider ramifications for sport universally. That is the entry of the USSR and other communist states into international sport after 1945 and participation of the Soviet Union in the Olympic Games of 1952. In so far as communist leaders have generally regarded the sports arena as being in the spotlight of world attention and a suitable place to demonstrate the superiority of their ideology, the major effort in sports competition has been to win world, especially Olympic, superiority over leading capitalist nations, particularly the USA. One effect of this policy since the 1950s has been to encourage women's sport in all the events of the Olympic Games.

Soviet women, in fact, not only make up a large proportion of Soviet teams in multi-sport tournaments like the Olympic Games. They also make an important, sometimes decisive, contribution to Soviet success overall. The same might be said for other leading communist sporting nations. A comparison of the part played by women from leading sports nations in the Olympics gives some indication of the relative encouragement given to women's Olympic sports. At the 1976 summer Olympics in Montreal, for example, Soviet sports-women made up over a third (35%) of the Soviet team (overall women comprised 20.58% of all competitors) and contributed 36 of the 125 Soviet medals (almost 30%). The women of East Germany made up 40% of the GDR team and won more than half their team's gold and silver medals. By contrast, women comprised just over a quarter (26%) of the United States contingent, or 112 out of 425 competitors. British and West German women comprised slightly over a fifth (20.6% and 21% respectively) of their nation's teams; and French women less than a fifth (18.3%) of theirs. The teams from Latin America had virtually no women at all, with the notable exception of Cuba with 55 women out of its team of 200. Cuba provided the first-ever black woman athlete to win an Olympic *field* event-Maria Colon in the javelin in 1980. In the winter Olympics of 1976, Soviet and East German women contributed more than half their teams' medals-more than double the number won by US, British, West German and French women together.<sup>19</sup>

As another example of the contribution of Soviet women to overall Soviet sports success, in the 17 track and field matches held between the USA and USSR between 1958 and 1981, the USSR amassed the higher points total 13 times (one match being drawn, the USA winning three). Of note, Soviet men won only *five* times (US men winning 12 times), while Soviet women *lost only once* (winning 16). In other words, if it had not been for the Soviet women competitors, the USSR would have *lost* the majority of matches. This is a point not missed by Soviet officials in striving for international success.

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19. James Riordan, "The Social Emancipation of Women through Sport," *The British Journal of Sports History*, 2 (1985): 53-61.

Such commitment to international success (the only area-apart from space conquest-in which the USSR has been able to demonstrate superiority over the USA) has had far-reaching implications for sport and gender, with far fewer official prejudices directed against high-level Soviet women's (Olympic) sport than has generally been the case in the West. Indeed, Western sportswomen have been able to point to examples of Eastern women's success to gain more attention and acceptance for themselves. As one example, Soviet women gymnasts like Olga Korbut and Nelli Kim have helped draw millions of girls and women into gymnastics. More than that; they have done much to counter traditional prejudice against serious and dedicated sportswomen (who, as some Western male commentators have asserted, "look old before their time" or who "have to be trained to smile"- both pieces of male wisdom applied to women alone). At the other end of the spectrum, Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak sportswomen (like the Soviet Press sisters, Irina and Tamara) in *field* events have helped shatter the illusions of those men brought up to regard the "ideal woman" as weak in head and arm, submissive and nubile. Despite their "violation" of the docile female stereotype and the continuing insinuations about their sexuality, the muscular female field athletes from Eastern Europe struck a blow on behalf of women elsewhere, encouraging them to flout social norms and change them.

But while women from communist countries have helped enhance Western women's performance in track and field, gymnastics and rowing, Western women have returned the inspirational compliment in sports such as soccer, marathon running, and horse racing-all of which initially received social disapproval from male authorities in Eastern Europe. For example, a resolution drawn up by the USSR Sport Committee (all men!) in 1973 discouraged women from taking part in sports that were harmful to the female organism and encouraged male voyeurism. Sports singled out for non-approbation were physical-contact activities like soccer, wrestling and judo. Women's soccer was said to be "harmful to a woman's organism. . . . Physical stress typical of playing soccer can cause harm to sexual functions, varicose veins, thrombophlebitis, etc ."<sup>20</sup> What the resolution did not address was why playing soccer was harmless for men, or why those ailments did not afflict women in approved (Olympic) sports like field hockey or basketball.

In spite of such pronouncements, up and down the USSR, women have ignored the pontification of male leaders about their participation in "harmful" sports-soccer, body building, ice hockey, judo, weight lifting, water polo and long distance running. During the 1980s, for example, Soviet women held four national judo championships and a world judo championship, and as many as 15,000 women were registered in judo clubs. The first women's soccer championship was held in August 1987. (Eight teams took part in the first year; twenty in 1988. In 1989, fifty teams from virtually every part of the country

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20. V. G. Fedotova, "Osobennosti vozrastnovo razvitiya vynoslivosti u zhenshchin," *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kultury*, 10 (1973): 62.

participated.) The first international women's soccer meeting (against Czechoslovakia) took place in 1988. Moscow State University formed its first women's water polo team in 1982; this women's sport has now spread to several other cities; and the Soviet women's water polo team played its first international (against Hungary) in 1987. Weight lifting and body building have been developing apace: The first women's body building championship was held in Siberia's Tyumen in 1988; and women have been members of body building clubs in the Baltic republics at least since 1986. Women's ice hockey has reappeared for the first time since the 1920s; and women are now competing in the marathon, pole vault, triple jump, and hammer throw. Unlike in China, however, Soviet women have not yet taken up boxing.<sup>21</sup> These changes all came about thanks to women who were prepared to defy official sanctions, ridicule, and even persecution in order to establish their right to pursue the sport of their choice.

An interesting corollary of the discriminatory attitude by the Soviet authorities to women's sport is the discouragement of certain male sports that have been perceived as narcissistic. Body building was long discouraged because, as the Sports Committee put it in the 1970s, it could turn into "egotistic love and 'bourgeois' dandified culture of the body and one-sided unhealthy development of the organism that are alien to the Soviet sports system." "Athletic gymnastics," however, was permitted as long as it was kept "strictly within scientific, medical and hygienic bounds, thus precluding all manner of exhibitions that include posing and judging the body."<sup>22</sup> In the more liberal (and uncontrollable) situation of the late 1980s, such strictures were ignored, as were strictures on pursuits like yoga, karate, bridge-playing and other card games.

### *Sport and Gender Under Perestroika*

According to the 1989 census, the female population of the USSR was 149.2 million (of a population of 286.7 million)-that is, 16 million more women than men.<sup>23</sup> As with class and ethnic relations within the USSR, there are still considerable differences between the sexes with regard to the distribution of income, status, political power and opportunities, although the importance of the Revolution, Party control, and economic planning on ameliorating the status of women cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. The present legal and economic position of women compared to conditions which existed before 1917 is palpably improved. A real attempt has been made to emancipate women, who now have the same legal rights as men, and to abolish discrimination on the basis of sex. This has affected women's rights to property, inheritance, divorce, and other issues. Through opportunities for work (including in and through professional sport), access to education (and to sports training), control over abortion, and the widespread social services which exist for women and children, women in the USSR, probably more than in Western countries that

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21. James Riordan, "Playing to New Rules: Soviet Sport and Perestroika," *Soviet Studies*, 42 (1990): 133-145. For women's boxing in China, see *China Sports*, 12 (1989).

22. See *Sovetsky sport*, (25 January 1973): 3; and *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kultury*, 10 (1973): 63.

23. "Komu reshat problemy zhenshchin," *Argumenty i fakty*, (3-9, March 1990): 1.

have attained similar levels of development, have acquired independence from-but not equality with-men.

Soviet women are less represented among the various elites. Of the top one hundred leading Soviet political officials in 1988, only one, Alexandra Biryukova, was a woman. Until Biryukova's election as candidate (probationary) member of the Politburo, not one top official of the Central Committee apparatus nor any member of the government was female. Only 15.8% of the first Soviet parliament elected in 1988 were women. In industry, women's average monthly pay is 170 rubles compared to 233 rubles for men.<sup>24</sup> There can be little doubt that the present array of positions in the division of labor gives rise to lower average levels of skills and wages and subordinate positions of authority for women. Women also bear the brunt of domestic chores such as shopping, housework and cleaning. Numerous surveys conducted in the USSR show that women spend more than 28 hours per week in such activities whereas men spend 10 hours. Of a working day, men have an average 4.03 hours free time compared to women's 2.24 hours; of holidays and weekends men have 9.14 hours compared to women's 6.32 hours.<sup>25</sup> The amount of free time available to women is therefore much less.

There is clearly a dissonance between the goal of female liberation in society, which involves equal rights to occupation and a career, and the socially defined role of women, which entails responsibility for child rearing and domestic chores-reinforced by the government's pro-natalist policy to encourage births and the rearing of children by women. Under *perestroika*, a growing consumerism and market orientation have lifted previous restrictions on activities demeaning to women. Beauty contests involving bikini-clad women are now an accepted part of Soviet life. Prostitution and the marketing of sex seem to be more acceptable, and the media regularly feature female nudity and "plastic sex." In this regard, it appears that *perestroika* may be providing more freedom and less equality, a situation not at all unknown to women in many Western countries.

The same processes as have just been described for Soviet society are reflected in sports participation rates and leisure patterns of men and women. An average of surveys conducted in the mid-1980s, for example, shows that men spend four times more time on recreational activities than do women.<sup>26</sup> There has also been a marked discrepancy between the two sexes with regard to casual sport and recreational opportunities on the one hand and "serious" sport and physical education on the other. For example, Soviet women make up an overwhelming majority of teachers of scholastic programs in physical education. Women are also a slight majority of the graduates in sport and physical education institutions. During the 1988 academic year, 57% of such students were women; and of all the physical education graduates who embarked upon

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24. Z. Krylova, "Neravnaya zaplata," *Argumenty i fakty*, 51 (1989): 3.

25. David Lane, *Soviet Society under Perestroika* (Boston: Unwin Hyman 1990), 221.

26. *Ibid.*

teaching careers, 84% were women.<sup>27</sup> Also in 1988, women made up 37% of all the full-time coaches in the country.<sup>28</sup> Of the students attending the 40 residential sport-oriented boarding schools in 1988, 43% were women.

However, as elsewhere in Soviet administration, women are conspicuously absent from leading posts in the sports hierarchy. For example, only two of 23 members of the USSR Sports Committee and one of 18 members of the USSR Olympic Committee are women. There has only been one woman who has had control of Soviet sport-and she for only three months in 1937. Evidently, sports officials have never heeded the words of the early Soviet leader Leon Trotsky who once wrote: "In order to change conditions of life we must learn to see them through the eyes of women."<sup>29</sup> While there seems to be little disagreement among Soviet writers about the desirability of women, in general, taking part in sport (except in the Muslim areas of the country), there has been no coherent policy in regard to which sports women should be encouraged to take up.<sup>30</sup>

### *Concluding Observations*

As we have seen, attitudes regarding the participation of women in sporting activities and female athletic attainments have both reflected and reinforced processes of social change in the role and status of women in the Soviet Union. The reasons why there has been official encouragement for women to engage in sport and related physically exacting and "muscular" activities must be sought in the state's economic, military, and social needs as well as in its ideologies. First, the work of women has been vital to economic advance: And sport has been thought to help make workers (especially erstwhile peasants) physically fit, mentally alert, and disciplined. The important role of women in the Soviet economy has been heightened by the dramatic reduction of males in the population as a result of World War II. Given the need for women to engage in physically exhausting jobs (for example, 34% of road menders and 44% of heavy manual laborers today are women), the physical and psychological characteristics required for or developed by successful participation in sport are not incongruent with conditions which have shaped Soviet notions about the "essential nature of femininity" and desirable feminine demeanor. In certain salient ways, the qualities of physical vigor and competitiveness which have traditionally been seen as "masculine virtues" in the West are compatible with the ways in which women are expected to present themselves in everyday life in many parts of the Soviet Union. Both Olga Korbut and Tamara Press, therefore, may represent acceptable role models for young Soviet girls.

No better illustration of the importance of women to the country's defense and national preparedness is the role of women as tank drivers, ship captains and fighter pilots in World War II. Although women are exempt from peacetime

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27. O. M. Marchenko, "Vypuskniki institutov fizicheskoi kultury," *Fizkultura v shkole*, 3 (1989): 33.

28. R. G. Davletshina, "Zhenshchiny-trenery," *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kultury*, 3 (1990): 57.

29. Leon Trotsky, *Women and the Family* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970): 8.

30. "Komu reshat problemy zhenshchin," *Argumenty i fakty*, (3-9, March 1990): 1.

military service, it is noteworthy that females have made up half of the recipients of the national GTO fitness program awards. Additionally, the authorities have used sport as a vehicle for a perception of women's emancipation along lines set forth by official Soviet ideology. Women displaying courage, grace, skill, even strength, in the sporting area, winning prestige for club, factory, farm, region, ethnic group and republic and, combining with men to compete at home and abroad (winning recognition for the country and its ideology), have done much to foster a certain image of "the Soviet woman," particularly in the Muslim-dominated areas where women traditionally were virtually excluded from public life. It remains to be seen whether Soviet women in the 1990s, in the new liberal atmosphere, will be able to break the predominantly functional mold of Soviet sport.