

Edelman, Robert. *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the U.S.S.R.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pp. xvi, 286. Illustrations, photographs, index. \$27.50.

Sports lovers and historians alike will find Robert Edelman's *Serious Fun* an enjoyable and revealing work, with a title appropriate for the book as well as its subject. Edelman's emphasis is on soccer, basketball, and ice hockey because of their mass popularity, but he additionally highlights the production of Stalinist athletic spectacles and Soviet participation in the Olympics and other international games. The book is based on a plethora of sources including extensive personal interviews with major figures of the Soviet sports world.

Several episodes from Soviet sports history provide spicy material for lectures on Soviet political, cultural, and social history. For utopian revolutionaries in the early Proletkult movement, spectator sports were anathema because of their link to capitalism. In their place they devised participatory games with a propaganda function, such as "Rescue from the Imperialists" or "Smuggling Revolutionary Literature across the Frontier." As with its artistic and literary experiments, Proletkult's innovations in sports were forgotten once traditional forms found governmental favor in the late 1920s.

With the rise of Stalinism, spectator sports revived: the state's emphasis on military values, Stakhanovite competitiveness, and abandonment of egalitarian

tarianism were expressed well in athletics; after the first Five-Year Plan, the Soviet population had more leisure time, which increased the demand for sporting events; and the government could use its sponsorship of sports to help convince the people that their lives were getting better even as the Great Terror was underway. Behind the scenes of Soviet soccer, a tragi-comic competition took place as Lavrenti Beria, the head of the security services and patron of the Dinamo team, determined to bring about the demise of the rival—and unbeatable—Spartak team, which was sponsored by Stalin's son, Vasilii. Despite the latter's attempts to protect his men, Beria succeeded, by having representatives of Spartak arrested, exiled, or liquidated. Edelman thereby gives us a rare glimpse into the Stalinist inner circle.

The relative normalcy of Russian life in the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent stagnation and disarray of the 1980s were equally reflected in sport. Soviet success in the Olympics was a facade, concealing, as its space program, fundamental weaknesses of the system stemming from the low level of funding channeled toward endeavors unrelated to heavy industry or the military. Stadiums went up in every major city, as symbols of the socialist accomplishment, but far less was spent on popular sports (as opposed to Olympic sports) than in the West. Soccer was no different than any other branch of the Soviet economy or society—it was marred by corrupt, shady practices, and indeed could not function without recourse to informal, black market mechanisms. By the mid-1980s, Soviet fans formed loutish gangs in imitation of British soccer hooligans, a clear sign of the loosening police control connected with glasnost. Therefore, Soviet sports collapsed, along with economic life as a whole. Lack of funds resulted in worsening conditions at stadiums and the decay of public transport. These annoyances combined with the distractions of economic and political turmoil to bring about a sharp decline in audience turnout at sporting events in recent years.

Edelman places his research into several conceptual frameworks. He sees an elite-popular culture dichotomy in the differences between high-performance sports and spectator sports, a distinction that enables him quite fruitfully to draw on theoretical literature in mass cultural history to elucidate his subject. Here he steers a middle course, between those who focus on the production of popular culture and its uses for mass control and those who stress the consumption side to portray sports as an expression of mass spontaneity and creativity. He slightly favors the latter approach, but not to the point of denying the former when relevant.

In line with his emphasis on mass spontaneity Edelman joins many other scholars in questioning the "totalitarian" nature of the Soviet regime. In this regard, however, his arguments are not fully persuasive. He rejects the paradigm of an all-powerful state and passive society as posited by totalitarian theorists, asserting that spectator sports demonstrate the limits of government control over society. The bases of this assertion are that throughout Soviet history the populace preferred different aspects of sports than those promoted by the govern-

ment, rooted for antiheroes, complained about sports to the media and, above all, engaged in persistently unruly behavior at soccer matches. "It is by no means clear that the watching of professional sports in the Soviet Union generated . . . consent for the authority of the Party and the government. If anything, there were ways that Soviet spectator sports fostered forms of behavior that can be called destabilizing, even counter-hegemonic" (p. 15).

The totalitarian concept has certainly been misapplied and is rightly subjected to criticism for its nebulousness. But totalitarian theorists have not claimed, as Edelman contends, that the state "must have been capable of enforcing both its aims and its presence, not to mention its will, in virtually *all* of society's institutions" (pp. 239-241). Rather, they claim that the Communist Party throttled the autonomous public realm by effectively controlling all *politically relevant* behavior. Edelman provides ample evidence to show that for both the regime and Soviet society as a whole, sports were just not all that relevant. Moreover, the leisure-time rowdiness and misbehavior of sports fans would never have been tolerated in most other sociopolitical arenas and never much went beyond the stadium for fear of police intervention. Thus, even if behavior at sporting events does indicate the creativity and non-passivity of society, there are limits to what it can tell us about the nature of the Soviet political system.

The overall quality of the book does not suffer for attempting to find those limits. The theoretical discussions inform rather than overwhelm the narrative, which is rich in material shedding light on seven decades of life in the U.S.S.R. For these reasons with *Serious Fun* Edelman makes a valuable contribution to Soviet history.

Clemson University

Steven G. Marks