

“Fists flew and blood flowed”¹: Symbolic Resistance and International Response in Hungarian Water Polo at the Melbourne Olympics, 1956

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Weaving the Thread: An Introduction

Nationalism or national character may emerge slowly, generationally, with small and large turning points serving, to direct the evolution of a national *je ne sais quoi*. Andrews has argued passionately for the emergence of a Welsh national identity through Wales' cultural alliance with rugby at the turn of the century.² Dyreson linked an internationally-emerging United States with the international forum of the Olympic Games, and pointed out American athletes' proselytizing in the political-cultural arena.³ And Hobsbawm, Trevor-Roper, and Lowenthal, in different ways, all point to the use of invented tradition in [re]constituting the past.⁴ Scholars have thus examined the gradual emergence of a national identity through sport (e.g., rugby in Wales) or a system of sport (e.g., Olympism in America), or, indeed, the cultural or political nature of how nations themselves determine just what is their “national sport” concept.⁵

1. "Hungarians beat Russian team, 4-0," *New York Times*, 6 December 1956, p. 49.

2. David L. Andrews, "Welsh Indigenous! and British Imperial? —Welsh Rugby, Culture, and Society 1890-1914," *Journal of Sport History* 18 (Winter 1991): 335-349.

3. Mark Dyreson, "America's Athletic Missionaries: Political Performance, Olympic Spectacle and the Quest for an American National Culture, 1896-1912," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 1 (1992): 70-91.

4. See Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14; Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15-41; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 336-337.

5. See Matti Goksøyr, "Our Games—Our Virtues?—'National Sports' as Symbols: An Attempt to Establish Idaltypes." Paper given at the 3rd Annual International Society for the History of Sport and Physical Education, July 1995, Capetown, South Africa.

Just as surely, however, national identity may crystallize around a highly charged moment. If the metaphor of evolutionary change may be extended, these crystallized moments of national identity might be seen as clear and dramatic mutations of the original which, in retrospect, are epiphanic definers of a new way for nation-builders or -citizenry to view the world.

In this paper, I intend to examine one crystallization of national identity for Hungarians during the time of the 1956 Summer Olympics, held in Melbourne, Australia. Because resistance may be both symbolic and real, I begin by examining resistance literature—and resistance in sport particularly—and provide a brief theoretical discussion of signs and symbolism. I continue with an overview of Hungarian life (including sport) up to 1956, which serves to demonstrate two major points: 1) that Hungarians highly valued their sport, and 2) that football (soccer), while considered by many the Hungarian national sport, was not, in the fall of 1956, aptly prepared to provide symbolic resistance to the Soviet occupation. Finally, I frame the Olympics within the context of the Hungarian Revolution, show the nature of expatriate nationalism, and speculate as to the import of the Hungarian men's water polo team's victory over the Soviet Union, most especially for the athletes and expatriates of Hungary.⁶

Signs

Dick Hebdidge's examination of style as a form of signification serves as a starting point for a discussion of collective, albeit polysemous⁷ readings of signs as determined by the reader. However, tying signs and their signification in terms of their audience—to acts of resistance is quite another issue. As Scott, in studying Southeast Asian peasant revolutions, puts it, there has been an "inordinate attention to large-scale ...insurrection"⁸ yet less scholarly interest in more subtle—and symbolic—forms of resistance.

According to Scott, there appear to be at least two categories of peasant rebellion and revolution which historians have examined. The first is large-scale peasant revolutions, which

are few and far between. Not only are the circumstances that favor large-scale peasant uprising comparatively rare, but when they do appear the revolts that develop are nearly always crushed unceremoniously. To be sure, even a failed revolt may achieve something: a few concessions from the state or landlords, a brief

6. Since the major focus of this paper is on the symbolic power of the Hungarian-Soviet Union match on Olympic athletes and Hungarian expatriates, English-language material provided the primary sources for this paper. An equally interesting angle on this "crystallized moment" would be to explicate home reaction (war tends to obliterate, among many taken-for-granted, communications) of Hungarians involved in the Revolution to their country's Olympic defeat of the Soviets.

7. "Whereby each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings": Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979) 117.

8. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 28.

respite from new and painful relations of production and, not least, a *memory of resistance and courage that may lie in wait for the future*. [emphasis added]⁹

The second form of peasant "rebellion and revolution," which Scott calls resistance, is made up of subtle,

...quiet, unremitting guerrilla warfare that [takes] place day-in and day-out. [This includes such forms as] foot dragging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, false compliance, manipulation, flight, slander, theft, arson, sabotage, and isolated incidents of violence...¹⁰.

I suggest that there is at least one other form of rebellion and revolution, a symbolic form which finds one of its most profound expressions through sport. This is a middle area¹¹ between outright, open rebellion and underground, passive resistance, and it involves the socially-accepted practices of symbolically "killing" one's enemy and regaining one's land while being monitored by the world according to the rules of sport. Such a middle-area practice was enacted at the 1956 Summer Olympics in a water polo contest between the Soviet Union and Hungary. This match came to signify anti-Soviet sentiment to many athletes, Hungarian expatriates, Hungarian nationalists, and much of the western world press.

Resistances

There exist at least three basic forms of resistance to a dominant culture through sport: political, colonial, and cultural resistance. While a subordinate culture may overtly submit to the prerogative of the dominant culture, there may remain overt or covert "oppositional aspects of sport"¹² which illuminate forms and degrees of resistance to the dominant culture.

These three forms of oppositional resistance are not mutually exclusive. Political resistance in sport may emerge when a group feels that a sporting event can be used as an effective tool for political change. There may be planned or spontaneous political resistance: the key element is the attempt at effecting change.

The 1972 Munich massacre and the "Black Power" salute at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968 are cases of political resistance/rebellion surrounding sport. The photograph of a victorious yet somber Hungarian water polo team is

9. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 29.

10. Jim Scott, "Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance," in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia*, eds. James C. Scott and Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1986), 5.

11. See Milton J. Esman, "Commentary," in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colburn (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), 223 and his note 5.

12. Peter Donnelly, "Resistance Through Sports: Sport and Cultural Hegemony," in *Sports Et Sociétés Contemporaines: Proceedings of the VIIIe Symposium de L'ICSS in Paris 6-10 July, 1983* (Paris: Société Française De Sociologie Du Sport, 1983), 398. Much of this discussion is drawn from Raymond Williams "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

also an example where “...objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed ...at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is. at the level of signs.”¹³ In a broader though more subtle sense, the use of an international forum to exact political gain, whether spontaneous or planned, serves every bit the same purpose, and is not “superficial,” but, rather, is the more profound, accurate depiction, “representative of human life.”¹⁴ As some Hungarian athletes said, “We had a duty to come to Melbourne and tell the world about our wonderful revolution.”¹⁵

Colonial resistance emerges when colonized peoples struggle to retain their cultural heritage, in sport as in other societal institutions.¹⁶ Donnelly notes that “expression of nationalism through sport”¹⁷ falls into this category; “more subtle forms of cultural hegemony” in culturally-diverse societies may induce “attempts to retain or revive traditional cultural forms.”¹⁸ Political and colonial resistance are implicated in cultural resistance, with the added possibility of the emergence of new cultural forms.

Observation of resistant behaviors may not tell the whole story, and may require intertextual analyses. Overt, confrontational resistance may prove genocidal: as a result, the “weapons of the weak are deliberately nonconfrontational in style.”¹⁹ Thus, acceptable gestures are directed at dominant cultures, with the intent to gradually erode dominance:

...whenever an autocratic or totalitarian system of government prohibits the expression of overt opposition. antagonism against the regime is likely to find expression through other channels and in forms approved or at least tolerated by the rulers.²⁰ ...[This was demonstrated] during the summer of 1954, [when] the unsportsmanlike behavior of the Soviet water polo team had given rise to anti-Soviet demonstrations in Budapest.²¹

Thus, colonial and political resistance to a dominant culture or ideology may evidence itself broadly; it may evolve slowly over time and/or crystallize in a single event or moment; and it may be covert or overt, directly oppositional or tangential, direct or circumlocuted. The sport of water polo served as an impetus for public demonstrations known as “disguised antagonism.”²²

13. Hebdige, *Subculture*, 17.

14. Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), xiii.

15. “Hungary's Heroes in their Hour of Staggering Strain.” *Sports Illustrated*, 3 December 1956:22.

16. See, e.g., Victoria Paraschak, “Organized Sport for Native Females on the Six Nations Reserve, Ontario from 1968 to 1980: A Comparison of Dominant and Emergent Sport Systems.” *Canadian Journal of History of Sport*, 21(2): 70-80.

17. Donnelly, “Resistance Through Sports,” 399.

18. Donnelly, “Resistance Through Sports,” 400.

19. See Esman, “Commentary,” 222.

20. Ferenc A. Váli, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 207.

21. Váli, *Rift and Revolt in Hungary*, 209.

22. *Ibid.*

Post-WWII Soviet Occupation of Hungary, to 1956

Hungarian nationalism in the face of Soviet occupation after World War II took on gradual yet dramatic form. Neighbored by Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, and Rumania, with the Soviet Union an omnipresent force, Hungary had a proud and fairly homogeneous citizenry, many of whom were deeply interested in sport.²³ In Budapest, the Danube River neatly cleaves Buda and Pest in almost equal halves. Folklore ties this Danube presence to many of Hungary's late 19th and early 20th Century Olympic victories in swimming and aquatic sports.²⁴

Between World War II and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, a Hungarian underground certainly existed. The pre-Revolution incarceration of many intellectuals, students, and writers evidences opposition to Soviet incursion. While forces oppositional to the dominant Soviet ideology were at work from 1945 on, their effects were largely driven underground and inward through a systematic program of exile, imprisonment, and execution orchestrated by the Soviet-installed regime.²⁵

Hungarian resistance prior to the October 23 Revolution, according to Hungarian popular idiom, consisted of "a three-class society: those who have been there, those who are there, and those who are heading there.' By 'there', they meant prison."²⁶ The uprising was "powered" by blue-collar workers, not just a few disgruntled students. Popular and humorous rhetoric was cynical, but pithy.²⁷ Mutterings of the people demonstrated anxiety and verbal resistance: the Hungarian Revolution erupted from such mostly private demonstrations.

Similarly, Hungarian resistance through sport imitated peasant resistances: day-to-day impediments to the system. Athletes performed their athletic jobs steadily: in retrospect, however, they appear to have likewise bided their time. Hungary was, at least superficially, an orderly society. Despite this, "Revolutionary newspapers like *Truth* were printed even when the Russians returned [after the Revolution]."²⁸ Fear of the secret police enforced the apparent order, yet public (but anonymous) disavowals of the Soviet presence were common. In fact, at the European basketball championship in 1955, "when the Soviet team padded out into the arena there were catcalls from the audience;

23. Sandor Molnar, "Physical Education in Hungary" (Monograph #2), in *Physical Education Around the World*, ed. William Johnson (Indianapolis, IN: Phi Epsilon Kappa Fraternity, 1968), 18-25; F. Mezö, *Golden Book of Hungarian Olympic Champions* (Budapest: Es könyvkiadó, 1955).

24. As early as 1896, popular myth linked Hungarian aquatic prowess to the Danube River: Hungarian hero Alfréd Hajós, the Athens' (1896) gold medalist, was, it is said, spurred on to swimming glory at age thirteen by the drowning of his father in the waters of the Danube. See Mezö, *Golden Book of Hungarian Olympic Champions*.

25. David Ray, ed., *From the Hungarian Revolution: a Collection of Poems* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966).

26. David Irving, *Uprising!* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1981), 7.

27. For example, "' What is the difference between Communism and slavery?; 'Easy. At the time of slavery there was no telephone or radio.'" Irving, *Uprising!* 58.

28. Irving, *Uprising!* photo caption 321-m.

there were many arrests. and news of the demonstration grapevined all over the country."²⁹

Rabid sports fans. the Hungarians followed club and national sport intently. Indeed, "The Hungarians' love of viewing and participating in sports is matched only by their delight in talking about them. It probably is the most popular topic of casual conversation on the street, at work. in cafes. and in the home."³⁰ In 1986, an editorial in the *Hungarian Digest* stated that, while "interest in soccer and attendance at soccer games has fallen back somewhat...everybody seems to be an expert, and soccer is more often than not the object of passionate debate. even enthusiastic demonstration of patriotism."³¹ Sport has always contributed greatly to the warp and weave of the Hungarian cultural fabric.

Post-World War II Hungary supported water polo, swimming, fencing, wrestling, and soccer football. The Hungarian soccer team of the 1950s, called the "Golden Team" by Hungarians, captured the gold medal in the 1952 Olympics yet failed to win the 1954 World Cup. The goalkeeper of that defeated 1954 team, Gyula Grosics, said: "...we were far more than mere soccer players: we represented a country and our results could secure Hungary more favorable treatment both politically and economically. When we failed to become world champions, we fell from grace overnight."³²

The World Cup. held in 1954 and 1958, did not coincide with the October Revolution of 1956. As well, an Olympic preview from 1956 reported: "In September.. the Hungarians announced that the [soccer] team was being withdrawn from the Olympic competition: ...there have been rumors of crippling personal dissensions within the team."³³ If sport was to be a medium for timely resistance against the Soviets, the 1956 Melbourne Olympics (in November. during the Australian summer) was the most opportune event. The great investment (socially, emotionally, financially) Hungarians had in soccer would logically have encouraged the Soviets to anticipate (if they anticipated sport as a site of resistance at all) soccer, not water polo. as a site of symbolic resistance—yet the Hungarian Olympic soccer team had withdrawn.

So even though soccer football was and is considered the Hungarian national pastime, the Hungarian Revolution and the World Cup did not mesh. nor did a significant "political" opportunity in sport arise for the soccer team soon after the Revolution. It did, however, for the bulk of the Hungarian Olympic Team, and no more fortuitously, as fate would have it. than for the water polo team. It is this "wrinkle in time" that made water polo a focal point of nationalistic and patriotic fervor for Hungarians—including expatriates—everywhere.

29. Irving, *Uprising!* 165.

30. A. Handler, *From the Ghetto to the Games: Jewish Athletes in Hungary* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1985), 129.

31. "Letter to the Reader," *Hungarian Digest* 3 (1986): 3.

32. Quoted in István Zsiday, "Myth and Reality," *Hungarian Digest* 3 (1986): 76.

33. "Before the Olympics: A Review of Sports in the Satellites," *News From Behind the Iron Curtain* 5 (1956): 18.

To assume that the Hungarian Olympic water polo team took on greater importance than the crushing of the Revolution by the Soviets would be grossly inaccurate. War has been, and remains, much more compelling to most people than sport.³⁴ Nonetheless, by the end of 1956 when an estimated 200,000 refugees escaped Hungary,³⁵ any decisive Hungarian victory, especially in sport, was bound to rouse the spirit of Hungarians. According to Western sources, prior to 1956,

much more deeply resented by the captive population [was] the pressure on their teams to allow Soviet teams to beat them ...[Sports] provided a most amusing example of the rawest and most blatant pressures applied by a physically dominant nation, sugar-coated in ideological double-talk.³⁶

The occupying force's control over the Hungarians thus was carried over into sport, and the skirmishes turned into ideological verbal matches.

The Hungarian water polo team was highly successful internationally. From 1926, when Hungary's national team took first in the European championships in Budapest, to the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, Hungary won six of eight European championship titles and four of six Olympic gold medals.³⁷ The water polo teams of Hungary were "masters in this game since [at least] the end of the Second World War."³⁸ Considering the dampening effects of the post-World War II occupation by the Soviet Union on Hungarian national life, which included intimidation in many forms, this success is remarkable.

Molotov Cocktails and Polo Balls: The Hungarian Revolution and the Olympics, 1956

In October of 1956, athletes' dedication to their sports and hopes for Olympic glory suddenly seemed less important than their sense of national pride. An interview with two Hungarian athletes illustrates this view. The first:

When October 23 came, ...our hearts leaped and sport and the Olympics were forgotten. A yearning for national independence, a decent democratic life and freedom and dignity took their place. None of us was thinking of physical condition, training, sleep, departure dates or gold medals.³⁹

The second athlete's comments:

...[on the ship over] there was no clash between Hungarians and Russians. but this was perhaps due to the fact that at no stage of

34. See, however, Avery Brundage's and J. Lyman Bingham's comment on pp. 12-13 of this mss.

35. Irving, *Uprising!*, 547.

36. "Before the Olympics": 15.

37. B. Rajki, *Water Polo* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1958).

38. W.J. Juba, "Introduction," in *Water Polo*, B. Rajki (London: Museum Press Limited, 1958), 5.

39. "Hungary's Heroes in their Hour of Staggering Strain," *Sports Illustrated*, 3 December 1956: 22.

the voyage were we aware of what really had happened in Hungary. After what I heard on my arrival in Melbourne. I will never mix with those butchers again.⁴⁰

Clearly, the revolution became foremost in the athletes' minds. But their sense of the influential power of the Olympic Games as a forum for lodging complaints symbolically is clear as well. This sense may be seen in their comments and in the resistant acts they employed during the highly-visible Olympic Games.

Athletes felt that the continuing effort to educate the western world of "Hungarians' right to Hungary," where "the strength of the fallen somehow fired those who lived, and ...continues to fire them in their spirited exile..."⁴¹ partially lay with themselves, that they might contribute to an articulation of cultural, physical, monetary, and popular inspiration. The ideology that sport can serve as a powerful reminder of a strength of spirit and hope in resistance is one to which many athletes, including the ones previously quoted, subscribed.

The Hungarian Revolution was a spontaneous uprising of students, but more than that, it was inspired by western models and hope of western intervention.⁴² The encouragement of Radio Free Europe (RFE) was significant:

Of one thousand refugees to be expertly sampled in December 1956 as to why, given that the uprising was triggered by other causes, they personally joined in, *ninety-six* per cent will state that they expected the West to come to Hungary's aid, and seventy-seven per cent will say that they anticipated actual military intervention. Of course, when the balloon goes up, both [Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles and [President Dwight] Eisenhower will indignantly deny responsibility.⁴³

For the Hungarian people to expect intervention was not mere wishful thinking. In fact, propaganda leaflets were dropped by western sympathizers via balloons which "talked of a resistance movement being raised in Hungary."⁴⁴

From post-World War II until the very recent *perestroika*, Hungary was—with this eleven-day exception during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution—a satellite of the Soviet Union, though yearning for self-determination. The events of the night of October 23, 1956, resulted from the spontaneous foment and grass-roots resistance of Hungarian students responding negatively to Erno Gerö's speech, in which he "incited the crowd by his reckless words."⁴⁵

In the shadow of the Hungarian Revolution, the Melbourne Olympic Games were held. By early November, 1956, Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands had all withdrawn from the Olympics in support of Hungary.

40. "Hungary's Heroes": 23. The Soviet and Hungarian Olympic teams travelled together, on the Soviet steamship *Gruzia*.

41. Ray, *From the Hungarian Revolution*, viii.

42. Ferenc A. Váli, *A Scholar's Odyssey* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1990).

43. Irving, *Uprising!* 158.

44. Irving, *Uprising!* 155.

45. Váli, *Scholar's*, 216.

It was a volatile time, and athletes were not immune. The Revolution's significance, their place in it, and their decisions to participate in athletics during such a time weighed heavily. Expatriated Hungarians cited the "Hungarian athletes fighting on the rebel side"⁴⁶ and Hungarian athletes arrived in Melbourne to a crowd of 500 cheering Free Hungarians. A water polo player, Martin Nikolas, announced, "There are no Communist party members in this group."⁴⁷

Indeed, the "touchstone for genuine national feeling in Hungary is still, and will remain for a long time to come, the attitude towards the revolution of 1956."⁴⁸ Hungarians divided into supporters of the regime or of the revolution.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the "national awareness of the masses"⁵⁰ demonstrated that they did not accept the government's hastily-constructed reasons for the revolution. The masses were being physically, but not intellectually, suppressed.

In the 1950s, the international press and media largely reproduced and reinforced their own chosen (dominant) ideology. When discussing this issue, for example, the *New York Times*, on November 10, 1956, carried linked news items regarding the proposed Olympic withdrawal of six nations. In one, Avery Brundage, then International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) President, said, "Every civilized person recoils in horror at the savage slaughter in Hungary, but that is no reason for destroying the nucleus of international cooperation... The Olympic Games are contests between individuals and not between nations...."⁵¹

Further on in the news piece, J. Lyman Bingham, "the executive director of the United States Olympic team, called the withdrawals 'ridiculous.' 'This is a track meet, not a political rally,' he said. 'To withdraw from the Olympics is ridiculous.'"⁵²

46. "Hungary Will Send Team to Olympics," *New York Times*, 30 October 1956, p. 49.

47. "National That Withdrew Urged to Return to Olympic Games," *New York Times*, 10 November 1956, p. 22.

48. Ferenc A. Váli, "The Regime and The nation: Resistance and Coexistence," in *Ten years After: The Hungarian Revolution in the Perspective of History*, ed. T. Aczel (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 149.

49. During the Revolution, a few of the Soviets, as well, were sympathetic to the Hungarian people. On October 25, 1956, for example, Italian Ilario Fiore wrote,

"It appeared that the Russian army, after twenty-four hours of procrastination, had finally decided to wipe out the rebels. The procession of Hungarians moved slowly towards the tanks, and then suddenly the "miracle" occurred: the Russians got down from their tanks and beamed to the Hungarians, as though inviting them to come on without fear. They mingled, they talked, and finally the civilians were seen to mount the tanks with the soldiers..." (Cited in Irving, *Uprising!* 344)

(But many of the sympathetic Soviets were later executed.) Certainly, this ambivalence between the Soviet and Hungarian people may have contributed to the curiosity reported, that "the Hungarian, on the [water polo] winners' rostrum, applauded the Russians as they received their medals." British Olympic Association, *Official Report of the Olympic Games XVIIth Olympiad* (London: World Sports, 1956), 70.

50. Váli, "The Regime and the Nation," 149.

51. "Nations that Withdrew," 22.

52. *Ibid.*

But nationalism, political maneuverings, and the contest between nations. not just individuals. has had historical precedent.” Up to that time. one of the most blatant was Hitler’s 1936 Olympics. Many of the Hungarian athletes reported having fought against the Soviets. They were frustrated and anxious for their families’ welfare back home. Reports from the Olympic Village indicate that “athletes sat around in groups talking in church whispers. Some still wore a black ribbon across the Hungarian flag on their track suits.”⁵⁴ The choices were limited: defect and withdraw from the Olympics, or compete with honor. The water polo team chose the latter alternative.

Sport as Metaphor: Hungarian Resistance and Olympic Water Polo

The 1956 Hungarian water polo team. ready to defend its 1952 Olympic gold medal. was made up of athletes torn between yearning for a free Hungary and fearing reprisals. Shipboard radio reports of Soviet fighting in Budapest exacerbated the athletes’ anxiety as the Soviet steamer *Gruzia* carried members of the Hungarian Olympic team to Melbourne. Still they carried on. though

all but 12 members of the team [were] married and parents of children ...even they realized at this crossroads that we had a duty to come to Melbourne and tell the world about our wonderful revolution. It was that feeling which brought us here.⁵⁵

Other athletes had been “involved in the fighting and ...they told us how they had manned machine guns and barricades. fought secret police and Soviet troops and helped carry wounded.”⁵⁶ Such commitment to the revolution carried over to an arena in which nationalistic pride could be demonstrated with less ruinous consequences. The water polo venue became just such a synchronic event.

The Hungarian water polo team was bracketed in Group B. Group A included Yugoslavia and the U.S.S.R.⁵⁷ The top two teams in each group qualified for the final group. Final qualifiers were. from Group A. Yugoslavia (3-0) and the Soviet Union (2-1); from Group B. Hungary (2-0) and the U.S. (1-1); and from Group C. Italy (2-0) and Germany (1-1).⁵⁸ Each team was then to play the other survivors.

53. For further discussion of this "Olympics as political maneuvering" concept, see, e.g., Wendy Gray and Robert Knight Barney, "Devotion to Whom? German-American Loyalty on the Issue of Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games," *Journal of Sport History* 17(2) (1990): 214-231; Steven R. Wenn, "A Suitable Policy of Neutrality? FDR and the Question of American Participation in the 1936 Olympics," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 8(3) 91991: 319-335; for a slightly different view, see Bill Murray, "Berlin in 1936: Old and New Work on the Nazi Olympics," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 9(1) (1992): 29-49.

Brundage himself, after the Melbourne Games, asked that the I.O.C. be considered for a Nobel Peace Prize, citing previous "Pax Olympica: (my term) efforts of the I.O.C. ("Olympic Committee Bids for Nobel Peace Prize," *New York Times*, 8 December 1956, p. 23.)

54. "How Foul Can the Games Get!" *London Daily Mirror*, 7 December 1956, p. 19.

55. "Hungary's Heroes in their Hour," 23.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Group A included Rumania and Australia; Group B included the United States and a combine Great Britain and Northern Ireland team; Group C was made up of Italy, German, and Singapore.

58. Organizing Committee, *Official Report of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956* (Melbourne: W. M. Houston, Government Printer, 1958).

The Hungarians dominated Italy (4-0). Germany (4-0). and easily beat the United States (6-2). Following their victory over the Soviet Union (score 4-0, called). which had practically assured them of the gold medal,⁵⁹ they squeaked out a win over the Yugoslavs (2-1).

The Hungary—Soviet match could have been viewed as just another game. After all, the Hungarians were practically guaranteed the gold. Prior to the game, the world press and Australian media downplayed the happenstance of Hungary versus “Russia.” yet their soothing words did not convince. The significance of the match was hinted at when 5,500 spectators, many of them Hungarian expatriates, crowded into the natatorium.⁶⁰ Additionally, a Hungarian refugee “said he was carrying ‘Stay in Australia’ messages to some of the Hungarian Olympic team.”⁶¹ Clearly, this was not going to be a typical Olympic moment.

The game itself deteriorated from its opening. Reports indicate that this game was not ordinary. even by current water polo standards.⁶² Melbourne writer Ken Knox, for example, asserted, “I am not trying to excuse yesterday’s incidents but I am certain it was the inconsistent refereeing which touched off the displays of temper.” Mr. Knox continued. “when you also have—as yesterday—political feelings among players and a demonstrative crowd, serious trouble is inevitable.”⁶³

This is how it was reported: “The game was a minute old when Russia’s Peter Mchvenieradze hammer-locked a Hungarian player and wound up in the penalty box.”⁶⁴ “The crowd showered him with catcalls,”⁶⁵ and, as the second half began (with Hungary leading 2-0), “Russia’s Boris Markarov delivered a haymaker to the right eye of Hungary’s Antol Belvari,”⁶⁶ “and the ball was all

59. *Sports Illustrated* (December 17, 1956), *The Melbourne Herald* (December 7, 1956), and the British Olympic Association (1956) all report that the Hungarians played the Yugoslavs last to win the gold; *The Official Report of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956* indicates a more dramatic chronology, with the Soviets and Hungarians playing for the gold. This appears to be a mistake: the *United States 1956 Olympic Book* (New Haven, CT: United States Olympic Association, 1957, p. 191) cited the results of the contest for the gold medal as Hungary 2, Yugoslavia 1, and the “Final Round,” the one prior to the medal round, concluding with the Hungary/Russia [sic] match. The reason that the victory over the “Russian” “practically assured” the Hungarians of the gold was because Yugoslavia and Germany tied 2-2 in the Final Round. At any rate, the Hungarian-Soviet match was uncommonly bloody, even by water polo standards, to many signifying oppressed versus oppressor, with the oppressed winning the sympathies of a partisan crowd.

60. “Hungarians Beat Russian Team, 4-0,” *New York Times*, 6 December 1956, p. 49.

61. “Messages from Team Brought,” *The Melbourne Herald*, 3 December 1956, p. 3.

62. “[Russians in Rough Game,” *The Melbourne Herald*, 6 December 1956; Ken Knox, “Polo Clash Not Players’ fault,” *The Melbourne Herald*, 7 December 1956, p. 30; “A Sweet and Bloody Victory for Hungary,” *Sports Illustrated*, 17 December 1956: 22-23; “Hungarians Beat Russian Team, 4-0,” *The New York Times*, 6 December 1956, p. 49.; “Fire in the Ashes,” *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 13 December 1956, p. 1; “Olympic Games Water Polo Incident,” *The London Times*, 7 December 1956, p. 10; and Peter Wilson, “How Foul Can the Games Get!” *The London Daily Mirror*, 7 December 1956, p. 19.

63. Knox, “Polo Clash,” p. 30.

64. “A Sweet and Bloody”: 22. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that the term “penalty box” is not appropriate to water polo; perhaps this misappropriation of the term by this journalist serves to indicate the lack of knowledge of the sport of water polo.

65. “Hungarians Beat Russian.” p. 49.

66. *Ibid.*

but disregarded as fighting broke out all over the pool."⁶⁷ Throughout the match, fighting above and below the surface of the water was going on. and. at one point, the "crowd went wild as the short-handed Hungarians [playing man-down⁶⁸] held off the Russian attack."⁶⁹ In the final minutes. "a Russian hit a rival, Ervin Zador, such a vicious and violent blow over the right eye that it split his brow and stained the water red."⁷⁰ The partisan crowd became incensed. the police were called to quell a potential riot, and the "Hungarian officials and reserve players stood on the side of the pool screaming abuse at the Russians."⁷¹

Later, Zador decided to stay in Australia. He was joined by four other players, including the brilliant Gyorgy Karpati. One of the defectors, Miklos Martin, said of the Soviets. "'They play their sports just as they conduct their lives—with brutality and disregard for fair play'"⁷²

Perhaps in part because the Australian media were interested in putting on a good show at "their Olympics." the game's intensity was downplayed in the press and in later historical reports. Fighting between the Hungarians and Soviets in the water polo match was seen as an aberration: Avery Brundage "brushed aside such incidents as the bloody water polo match between Russia and Hungary. [He said] 'People are only human and these conflicts have been at a minimum.'"⁷³ Further, Mandell wrote. "The Olympic Games of 1956 closed rather harmoniously. So many dissidents had left. Happily there had been only one confrontation between the Hungarians and the Soviets."⁷⁴

"God Save Hungary": Expatriate Reaction

Many of the "older generation of Hungarian refugees, fascist exiles who had fled Hungary at the end of the second world war"⁷⁵ had established themselves in Western countries. including Australia. Additionally. by December 11, 1956—after Soviet troops attacked Budapest on the early morning of November 4—an estimated 126,000 refugees fled Hungary.⁷⁶

While the official (that is. the one sanctioned by the Soviets) revolutionary government discouraged overt foreign intervention in the Revolution, many of the people anticipated aid." At first, intellectuals and expatriates were not so sure.

67. "A Sweet and Bloody": 22.

68. "Man down" or "man up" are water polo terms signifying imbalance of number of players, generally due to ejection for some sort of foul.

69. "Hungarians Beat Russian," p. 49.

70. Wilson, "How Foul," p.19.

71. *Ibid.*

72. "A Sweet and Bloody": 23.

73. "Olympic Committee Bids," p. 23.

74. Richard D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 249.

75. Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 128.

76. Irving, *Uprising!* 546.

77. Irving, *Uprising!* 154-164 and 475-491.

[D]emonstrators and the subsequent freedom fighters were acting instinctively, led by their hatred of the regime and its representatives. Finally, when Soviet forces intervened, this fact aroused nationalist passions even among those who up to that point had remained unmoved by events.⁷⁸

RFE broadcasts, while not "foment[ing] the revolt,"⁷⁹ may have excited some hope for intervention. Certainly, expatriates' nationalistic responses were flavored by the western press.⁸⁰

Many expatriates, living in western countries and physically removed from Hungary, demonstrated their support. In Melbourne, 500 former Hungarians greeted the Olympians. They brought "crepe-draped Hungarian flags" which they "dipped in mourning as members of Hungary's Olympic team arrive[d] in Australia."⁸¹ These were the tri-color "national flags" raised during the Revolution, with cut-out hammer-and-sickles representing the expulsion of the Soviet presence.⁸²

The symbolic gestures of the expatriates carried over to the athletes' behaviors. The athletes wore uniforms with black arm bands or "proudly wore the emblem of the revolt on their breast pockets."⁸³ The water polo team, on the award podium

...stood with tears streaming down their faces and sang their national anthem during the victory ceremony. Olympic officials departed from procedure and played the slow and sad Hungarian anthem from start to finish. Just before that, Hungarians in the crowd jumped and shouted for joy while the players embraced.⁸⁴

The Australian Hungarians cheered them not only for the gold medal, or for the victory over the Soviets, but for their courage. Of the estimated 200 "athletes from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia [who] elected not to return to their homelands,"⁸⁵ the world press averred:

78. Váli, *A Scholar's*, 219.

79. *Ibid.*

80. See B. Lotze, "While the World Was Watching: Coverage of the Revolution in German and American Newsmagazines," in *War and Society in East Central Europe, Vol. XI: The First War Between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Its Impact*, ed. B. K. Király, B. Lotze, and N. F. Dreisziger (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1984). In this analysis of coverage of the Hungarian Revolution by three newsmagazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Der Spiegel*), Lotze found that the two United States' publications viewed the revolution as "an uprising against communism... [while] *Der Spiegel* sees the significance of the events in the fact that one socialist country has rebelled against another" (p. 446). These, she infers, reflect nationalistic ideologies.

81. "Hungary's Heroes in Their Hour" : 22 [photo caption].

82. On the mutilation of flags and placards, see Irving, *Uprising!* 261. On the symbolic significance of the "red-white-and-green flag," see Irving, *Uprising! passim*, but especially p. 323.

83. "45 Hungarians Stay Behind in Australia as the Olympic Athletes Start for Home," *The New York Times*, 8 December 1956, p.3.

84. "Hungary Retains Water Polo Title," *The New York Times*, 8 December 1956, p.23.

85. Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1994), 223.

...these athletes are not pitiful creatures. They are proud men and women who have attained recognition at home and honor abroad. Their flight is therefore the more impressive. because it is completely rational. They cannot stomach the regime in Budapest. Neither can we.⁸⁶

Since the Revolution had been, for all intents and purposes, quelled by the Soviets with little material assistance from the West, words and opinion were the last resort. The athletes' decisions to publicly demonstrate their loyalties were courageous and poignant, and transcended material self-interest.⁸⁷

Expatriates understood their fellow Hungarians' choices. One, citing fundamental political differences with a friend who chose to remain in Hungary, wrote. "We parted as good friends, and I wished him luck. I do not know whether he has since changed his mind. I have not changed mine."⁸⁸

Australian Hungarians at Essendon Airport in Australia parted sadly with those athletes returning to Hungary. "Tears flowed profusely when the first plane took off yesterday. A small group of Hungarian refugees at the airport stood at attention and sang the old national anthem. 'God Save Hungary.'⁸⁹ The athletes' decisions to remain or to return home were private,⁹⁰ yet they received worldwide coverage in the English-speaking press and became public, political decisions. And yet more refugees poured into Sydney.⁹¹ Eight of the eleven water polo team contingent would "not go back to Hungary."⁹² and remained in Australia.

The 1956 Melbourne Olympics created high visibility and opportunity for Hungarian athletes, which meant that their participation and subsequent victories could form oppositional signs of political resistance to the Soviet regime in Hungary. The athletes believed they could demonstrate Hungary's resilience to the world. Additionally, expatriates exploited every symbolic opportunity (when greeting the team's arrival, at the swimming pool, during the water polo awards ceremony, and at the airports) to show the world Hungarian tenacity and pride.⁹³

86. "Hungarian Sidelight," *The New York Times*, 9 December 1956, p. 8E.

87. Athletes on the Hungarian Olympic team, by challenging the system, were sacrificing security for their families and friends, but also lucrative financial situations. See "Before the Olympics": 14: "...a player would have a token job at which he [sic] would put in a few hours of work or none. From this he draws an excellent salary. In addition, he has special bonuses (called in Hungary, 'calory money') ...It is estimated that an average Hungarian 'Ace Athlete' earns 2-3,000 forint a month; a Class 1 soccer player, 4—5,000 forint (the average industrial worker earns less than 1,000 forint a month)."

88. Váli, *A Scholar's*, 242.

89. "45 Hungarians," p. 3.

90. "Most of those going back to Hungary ...are doing so because they have wives and children at home, and not because they approve of the Soviet-supported Government in Budapest": "45 Hungarian," p. 3.

91. "Hungarians Sob in Airport Welcome," *The Melbourne Herald*, 3 December 1956, p.1.

92. "This Team Won't Go Back to Hungary," *The Melbourne Herald*, 7 December 1956, p.1.

93. Unfortunately, according to Stephen Wenn, "The Olympic Movement and Television, 1936-1980: Critical Dates," handout from panel discussion ("The Impact of Television on the Olympic Movement") at the North American Society for Sport History annual meeting, Long Beach, CA, May 27, 1995: "[when] international television networks refuse to pay the 1956 Melbourne Organizing Committee for the right to use delayed newsreel footage... [there was a] virtual television blackout." For the Hungarian athletes, this, of course, resulted in less visual impact upon the world's Olympic audience.

Flickering Hope: A Conclusion

The Hungarian water polo team's victory over the Soviet Union and its anticlimactic garnering of the gold medal at the Melbourne Olympics demonstrated more than a simple victory of a proud and capable water polo team. It contained symbolic messages. The victory, and the context surrounding it, restated to the world that the politically-significant terrain of sport still nourishes forms of resistance.

Until very recently, open and public discussion about the Hungarian Revolution has been a taboo subject in Hungary. Most discussion was done in private. As well, the biases of popular ideology and its reinforcement made the Revolution difficult to discuss.⁹⁴ The widespread support for the Hungarian Revolution evidenced itself in many, varied sites⁹⁵—the “contested terrain” of symbolic resistance. Such resistance was most profoundly effected in the streets of Budapest during the Revolution,⁹⁶ but also emerged, particularly for expatriates of Hungary, in places such as the water polo venue at the 1956 Olympics.

The Hungarian water polo victory was a bittersweet one for Hungarians: 45 of the 175 Olympic team members, including an official from the Hungarian Olympic Committee, sought political asylum after the Games. Yet, this exodus itself served one of the same functions as everyday peasant resistance does: it managed to tell the “haves” that they could not control the freedoms of the “have-nots.”

The Olympic water polo victory served to coalesce, if not a whole nation embroiled in life and death, at least the Hungarian refugees and athletes. At minimum, as a form of political resistance, the Soviet-Hungarian water polo match became a fragment for Hungarian collective memory,⁹⁷ a tiny taste of satisfaction for Free Hungarians in Australia and for soon-to-defect athletes. The water polo victory largely became an indirect icon for the revolutionary movement, and a symbolic sign of resistance to “those butchers,”⁹⁸ the heretofore “physically dominant”⁹⁹ Soviet Union.

94. Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, 17: “in the West, the uprising was presented as national rebellion against communist dictatorship while in the East the Communists saw it as an attempt to overthrow socialism and restore Western-style capitalism. Both these viewpoints ignored the real issue of Hungary—that it was a social revolution aimed not at restoring a previous régime but at creating a radically new social order, one that would be both more democratic than the capitalist West and more socialist than the communist East.” In fact, Lomax argues against Zinner and Kecskemeti (cited in Lomax), who, says, view “the mass revolution of workers, peasants and youth... [as] a secondary development and not an activating force.”

95. The fact that its participants consisted of the people, Olympic athletes as well as writers and factory workers supports a social heroglossic, polyphonic view as proposed by M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263. See, for varied sources, e.g., *Ten Years After: The Hungarian Revolution in the Perspective of History*; Lotze, “While the World Was Watching: Coverage of the Revolutions in German and American Newsmagazines”; Ray, *From the Hungarian Revolution: A Collection of Poems*.

96. *Time* magazine cited the Hungarian Freedom Fighter as their Man of the Year for 1956.

97. This whole paper serves as evidence for this pint; however, see, e.g., Váli, “The Regime and the Nation:” Ray, *From the Hungarian Revolution*; Lomax, *Hungary 1956*.

98. “Hungary’s Heroes”: 23.

99. “Before the Olympics”: 15.

Photographs of successful Hungarian water polo teams clearly show the players’ feelings (see photos 1-4). The Hungarian water polo gold medal teams (1932, 1936, 1952) are portrayed as bemusedly jubilant, smiling, cocky, arrogantly intense, and confident.¹⁰⁰ In the photograph of the 1956 Hungarian gold medal winners, team members hold their medals unsmilingly. In fact, one player has his head bowed, while two others look extremely pensive.¹⁰¹ The mood of the team is reflective of the inner turmoil they are feeling.

To determine the significance of the water polo victory would be akin to deciding which one of thousands of bits of glittering glass actually turned a mosaic into a piece of art. Yet, to the post-Revolution Hungarian expatriate and Olympic athlete, there must have been satisfaction in the victory itself, followed by word-of-mouth reportage of the victory over the Soviet Union’s waterpolo team. As well, the subsequent defection of more than a quarter of their Olympians likely carried the message that the fire of the Revolution was alive.

During the Hungarian Revolution there was grass-roots and large-scale revolution in Hungary itself. But, in part out of fear for their families remaining at home, the athletes’ (and expatriates’) acts of “rebellion and revolution” within the sporting milieu remained, for the most part, within the rules structure. The overt violence I have discussed in this paper (particularly the altercation resulting in Hungarian Ervin Zador being cut above the right eye) was directed from Soviet to Hungarian athlete. However, there was symbolic significance in these acts—from the easily-recognized photo of a bleeding Ervin Zador, to the water polo victory of a supposedly humbled satellite of the Soviet Union, to the expatriate prideful reaction to the Hungarian Olympic team. These signs of resistance came to signify Hungarian anti-Soviet sentiment to the world and to and for thousands of Hungarian expatriates.

Furthermore, the significance of grass-roots resistance stemming from symbolic acts of resistance cannot be overestimated. Chantal Mouffe interprets Gramsci’s “new collective will [which] must be formed through moral and intellectual reform.”¹⁰² While Gramsci saw hegemony as being driven by an intellectual elite, by definition, the mass of people must accede to dominant ideology. Thus, the significance of symbolic gestures of resistance, while (and perhaps *because*) not easily documented, may have much more importance than previously thought. According to Scott, it seems that grass-roots resistances employ time in order to wear down opposition. But for time to remain an effective tool, key symbols must hold significance for the oppressed.

100 Mezö, *Golden Book*.

101. Much as several crew members of the celebrated U.S. naval vessel *Pueblo* demonstrated resistance to capture by extending their middle fingers to the photographer

102. Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in *Culture, Ideology, & Social Process: A Reader*, ed. Tony Bennett (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd., in association with the Open University Press, 1981), 225.

Anything which reinforced a notion of difference (such as the superiority of the Hungarian over the Soviet water polo team) burned brightly for Hungarians. This ember of hope was reinforced in the Western press. According to the Manchester *Guardian Weekly*:

The thing that Soviet power has quite failed to attain is to make a subject State go back on its own revolution and consent to the re-establishment of the old order.... Physical power lies—mostly held in reserve—with the Soviet troops. Political power lies scattered amid the rubble and the broken promises, waiting to be picked up.¹⁰³

As this statement implies, resistance to force uses time and cultural memory as tools for success. Ferenc Váli, an expatriated Hungarian author, in 1966, wrote of Hungary's wait for a "traditional nationalism":

The pessimism of society is a current topic of Hungarian socio-logical-political articles... in the wake of the 1956 uprising to the present [1966]... [m]uch evidence available demonstrates that the alienation from public affairs, from politics and the affairs of party and state, is the reaction against the concepts and ideology of the communist regime. It is not an indifference towards the interests and future of the nation, it is not an attitude devoid of national feeling.... Even in the background of complete nihilistic attitudes nationalism may even more prevail.¹⁰⁴

The Hungarian people, according to Váli, had gone underground with their hopes of a "traditional nationalism." If Western-style, traditional nationalism was to prevail in Hungary, shared and crystallized cultural moments in time like the Olympic water polo matches between the Soviet Union and Hungary might serve to keep it alive, albeit simmering below the surface.

Yet the coalescence of the rich tradition of Hungarian Olympic water polo with the team's victory over the Soviet Union in December of 1956 provided some inspiration.¹⁰⁵ The win became a symbol, much like Scott's "quiet, unremitting guerrilla warfare."¹⁰⁶ which served to diminish the fact of the Soviet Union's brutal military superiority over Hungary. This crystallized moment of resistance became a sign which could easily be alluded to and called upon as a cultural icon for the anti-Soviet sentiment felt by expatriated Hungarians.

103. "Fire in the Ashes," p. 1.

104. Váli, "The Regime and the nation," 142.

105. Hungarian prowess in the pool has been legendary, and continues to this day: on a water polo tour to Australia and New Zealand, this author met several outstanding water polo coaches who were Hungarian. Additionally, Hungarian innovations in swimming (e.g., the over-the-water recovery of the arms in the "Hungarian breaststroke") and water polo (the high-finesse at ball-handling) have been legend (see, e.g., "Mixed Bag").

106. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance," 5.

A case for the recognition of cultural icons as forms of resistance is cited by Allen Guttmann:

“Every Tunisian sports victory against the European sports organizations,” wrote Ben Larbi Mohamed and Borhane Errais. “contributed to the destruction of the myth of colonial power.”¹⁰⁷

As Morgan puts it, the water polo victory and the context surrounding it, became “collectively oppositional.... [this type of action] represent[s] ‘counterhegemonic’ assertions that are based in a recognized opposition of interest.”¹⁰⁸ From without and within Hungary, small, guerrilla-like resistances like the 1956 Hungarian Olympic water polo victory in Melbourne, Australia, continued to erode remaining Hungarian respect for the Soviet-directed regime.

107. Ben Larbi Mohamed and Borhane Errais, “Un Siècle d’Histoire du Sport en Tunisie, 1881-1981.” in *Geschichte der Leibesübungen*, ed. Horst Überhorst, 6 vols (Berlin: Bartels & Wernitz, 1971-1989), 6:277. 283-84, cited in Allen Guttmann. *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 69.

108. William J. Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport: A Critique and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 100.

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Hungarian Water Polo Gold Medal Teams



1932



1936



1952



1956