

Julie Gilmour
University of Chicago

The Responsibilities of an Athlete: The New Soviet Person and Athletics, 1945-1960

One of the most perplexing aspects of Soviet studies is the paradox between a state that attempted to control society on every level while at the same time facing serious shortages in the resources necessary to attain all of its desired goals. This paper places elite athletes in the context of Soviet attempts to build the “New Soviet Person” after 1945 when the USSR was pulling out from under the devastation of the Second World War.

The idea that human beings can, are, and should be, altered by their material circumstances and that these changes should be channeled towards an ideal has been the basis of the Soviet project since the beginning. It has had significant implications for the political and social systems built upon it. Raymond Bauer’s seminal work *The New Man and Soviet Psychology* showed that this approach made it possible for the Soviet state to focus on potential without ignoring “natural” gifts and to place the responsibility for change on specific agencies and individuals within the Soviet system rather on the State itself. Using the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the former Central Party Archive, the Moscow city archive, and the primary sports newspaper, *Sovietskii sport*, this paper traces the discussion in the Party and State about the role of athletes in the construction of a future for the Soviet Union as a superpower and as the first Communist nation.

Each Soviet “sportsman” had three primary responsibilities. First, they were to maintain a high level of proficiency in their events. Second they had to display a high level of kul’turnost’ (an idiosyncratic Soviet combination of proper hygiene, education, collective responsibility and deportment). Finally, they were expected to work with young athletes to pass on any experience and knowledge that the athlete may have gained while a privileged member of the sporting elite.

This paper provides considerable evidence that athletes were one of many problematic groups in this project because of the tensions between individual and collective achievement, traditional approaches to masculinity, and pragmatic desires to attain a level of material well being in times of scarcity. The state had to come to terms with its need to support and develop elite athletes despite their tendency to become “stars” with personal demands. This was especially difficult in events such as soccer and hockey where athletes reached high levels of popularity independent of state intervention because of the popularity of the sport itself. There was a continuous balancing act between the official demands of massovost (mass based sport) and elite athletic development which required the channeling of scarce resources into facilities unavailable to the general public. During the winter of 1946-47 the USSR experienced famine and a crippling housing shortage. It is not surprising then, that we would find numerous examples of the ways in which athletes, administrators,

and officials would use the athletic apparatus to redistribute resources to themselves or to the prevalent “second economy”.

It is clear from this evidence that to talk about a “Big Red Machine” is to miss the central dynamics of the Soviet state apparatus. The apparatus was a location for many agendas to compete as long as they were expressed in the terms provided by the state and as long as the athletes continued to provide evidence that they were fulfilling the “responsibilities of an athlete”.