



# Soviet women's sporting superiority: a Cold War issue

**Sylvain Dufraisse**, TRANSLATED BY **Dina Leifer**

IN **CLIO. WOMEN, GENDER, HISTORY 2023/1 No 57**, PAGES 111 TO 128  
PUBLISHER **BELIN**

ISSN 1252-7017

Uploaded: 06/13/2023

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-clio-women-gender-history-2023-1-page-111?!lang=en>



Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...  
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.



**Electronic distribution Cairn.info for Belin.**

You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at [cairn.info/copyright](https://cairn.info/copyright).

Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

## Soviet women's sporting superiority: a Cold War issue

Sylvain DUFRAISSE  
*Translated by Dina Leifer*

Sport's international visibility and media coverage, its focus on the body, and the physical investment it requires make it an effective means of measuring and comparing social and political models, such as the "gender regimes"<sup>1</sup> embodied by athletes.<sup>2</sup> Behind the symbolic statements associated with sporting performances there lies a combination of preparatory regimes, athletes' status, and sporting and training techniques, which may either be garlanded with victories, or left tainted after the event. In the final decades of the Cold War, many accusations (of gender ambiguity, dubious age declarations, ill-treatment, and aborted pregnancies for hormonal boosts) helped tarnish the reputation of Soviet women's sport, and of the wider socialist world. They offered an explanation for its apparent success in rivalry with the capitalist camp. Men's sport, however, was not marked by a similar storm of derision. In the West in the 1970s and 1980s, the bodies of female athletes from socialist countries came to symbolize the oppressive violence of communist regimes, to reinforce the idea of female vulnerability in high-performance sport,

---

<sup>1</sup> For a historian's discussion of the concept of "gender regime", see Lett 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The author warmly thanks Gwenaëlle Biet, Claire Nicolas, Florence Carpentier and the editors of this issue for their comments, which helped improve the proposed text.

and to demonstrate what were considered the harmful effects of practising intensive sport – claims dating back to the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This sports mythology of the Cold War gradually replaced what had been a triumph for the socialist regimes: increasing women’s access to international competitions.

As the historiography of gender and the Cold War has shown, the question of the “distinction between the sexes” was an issue in the conflict between the political leadership of the two blocs.<sup>4</sup> A gendered approach to the history of sport has shown that the sporting movement which evolved from the late nineteenth century onwards was characterized by three parallel processes: the long-term, institutionalized exclusion of women from practising sports at all, but particularly at a high level; the favouring of binary gender categorization and normalization of sex distinction; and a moral panic inspired by the idea that sport produced and promoted the masculinization<sup>5</sup> of women. Throughout the 1950s, the sporting arena became an important theatre in the Cold War, as a venue for competition, for promoting different models, and for staging possible cooperation. The USSR joined the international sports federations in 1946, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1951, enabling it to participate in the World Championships and Summer Olympics from 1952 onwards, and in the Winter Olympics from 1956. The Soviet Union then seized on the issue of women’s sport as an opportunity for global influence. Tactically, this allowed Soviet athletes to collect more medals, which were useful in the competition for first place in the results table, while showcasing how advanced sex equality was in the USSR.

This article analyzes how women’s sporting superiority became a matter of symbolic prestige and a strategic issue for the USSR, key to establishing athletic dominance in the Cold War years. The existing historiography has analyzed the criticisms expressed in the West of Soviet athletes, their representation in the Soviet press, and the development of international regulations. The present study examines the

<sup>3</sup> Vertinsky 1990.

<sup>4</sup> De Haan 2014; Dumančić 2014; Dumančić 2017; Clastres 2020; Nagornaâ 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Wiederkehr 2007, 2009, 2010, 2018; Hillbrenner 2010; Kordas 2010; Bohuon 2012; Parks Pieper 2014; 2016; Castan 2017; Castan-Vicente, Nicolas, Cervin 2019; Cervin 2021.

way in which the USSR central government and its media constructed Soviet women's sporting superiority, both in practice and through representation, in interaction with international authorities and regulations; the controversies which emerged in the western media; and the reactions provoked by the Soviet athletes' performance.

Various sources have been drawn on, from both blocs and from areas where they intersect.<sup>6</sup> The administrative archives of both the Soviet state and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) – that is the chancellery of the Physical Culture and Sport Committee, the Supreme Council of Sporting Societies and Organizations, and the CPSU agitation and propaganda department – demonstrate how standards of sporting excellence were established, and how the dysfunctions and performances of the athletes were discussed. The Soviet sporting press – the monthly *Fizkul'tura i sport* throughout the period, the journal *Sovetskij Sport* during the Olympic Games or when controversies arose – alongside documentary and fictional films, is drawn on to highlight major figures in women's elite sport and the narratives associated with them. Finally, western sporting and general media, mainly British, American and French, have been quoted to convey the way USSR elite sportswomen were described there and to demonstrate the kind of stigmatization which took place when international controversies arose.

This overview article identifies three major inflection points during the period studied. The first is when elite Soviet sportswomen began to participate in international competitions, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, demonstrating an excellent level of sporting practice. The sporting superiority of these female USSR champions was clear, particularly in athletics, gymnastics, skating and skiing. The second is the transition into the period of peaceful coexistence, from 1956, which initiated a favourable period for sporting competitions, where performances were harnessed to promote competing "gender regimes". However the victories of the socialist women champions provoked suspicion and criticism. Women representing Eastern bloc

---

<sup>6</sup> This article is based on research undertaken for a doctoral thesis which has been revisited using a gendered approach. Dufraisse 2019.

countries were considered too masculine. As a result, the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) in 1966, and the IOC in 1968, imposed sex testing on women competitors. In the final sequence of events studied, there is an analysis of the way in which Soviet leaders then adapted their concepts of women's sporting performance to these criticisms from abroad.

### **Soviet sportswomen enter the international arena (late 1940s – early 1950s)**

When competitive sport, international sporting federations and the IOC were first developed at the turn of the twentieth century, women were excluded. Most activities prescribed for them at the time centred around therapeutic or artistic gymnastics. Between the two world wars, a number of pioneering women took up competitive sport and came together as the International Women's Sports Federation (IWSF), organizing the Women's World Games from 1922 onwards. The Federation met with disapproval from the IOC and the IAAF, and it folded in 1936.<sup>7</sup> The Olympic Committee had however opened some athletic events to female elite sportswomen from 1928 onwards, in order to compete with the Women's World Games. The range of physical activities performed by the Soviet trailblazers in the 1920s, and then taken up more widely during the 1930s, led to government-sponsored mixed-sex physical activities in the USSR, as reported by Ella Maillart, the Swiss journalist, explorer and accomplished sportswoman, when she travelled throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> Female sporting champions could thus be viewed as pioneers of women's emancipation, like female machine operators, factory workers and collective farm employees. From the end of the 1930s, the Soviet authorities not only heaped public praise on sporting figures such as the skater Maria Isakova, they also supported women's access to sporting excellence with measures which in theory applied equally to all athletes. From 1934, female champions could thus receive the title of "emeritus master of sport" which honoured top athletes. From 1947 their performances were incorporated into the single sporting classification system which established a series of

<sup>7</sup> Carpentier, Castan-Vicente, Nicolas 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Maillart 1932.

ranks (master of sport, first, second, third, junior) corresponding to criteria based on gender categories and disciplines. Women athletes could commit to daily training too, because they could enjoy fixed rates of payment. Like their male counterparts, if they achieved national or world records, they received very high bonuses – similar to the men's.<sup>9</sup> They also received more regular incomes: extra material rewards from their sports organizations, salaries linked to fictitious employment before 1947, and bursaries from the government or from their sports organizations after that.<sup>10</sup>

Soviet athletes took part in world-ranked competitions wherever USSR organizations were tolerated or accepted by the international federations.<sup>11</sup> The prevailing global context was the creation of more women's championships and women-only events at the Olympic Games. The Soviets came to dominate disciplines with a history of women competitors, namely athletics, gymnastics, speed skating, and certain team sports: volleyball and basketball. At the 1946 European Athletics Championships in Oslo, six of the nine events reserved for women were won by USSR representatives. Only one of their male counterparts managed to pick up a European title, in the 200 metres. Four years later, in Brussels, the Soviet women occupied eight of the ten podiums and garnered four gold medals, including three in the throwing events, which became a Soviet speciality. They clinched the team title at their first World Gymnastics Championships in Rome in 1954 and Galina Rudko won the individual event. In 1958, their dominance was even more clear: team gold, plus gold and bronze in the individual general competition; three medals in the apparatus finals and nine medals out of the 13 awarded. In 1957, the USSR women's basketball team took part in the World Championships for the first time, reaching the final, where they took second place.

Soviet women's sporting superiority was even more evident at the Olympic Games, by then a multisport event attracting journalists from all over the world, whose audience grew steadily from the 1950s onwards. Few Olympic events were at that time open to

---

<sup>9</sup> *Gosudarstvennyj arhiv Rossijskoj Federacii*, State Archive of the Russian Federation, hereafter GARF, f. R7576, o. 29, d. 27, l. 42; d. 40, l. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Dufraisie 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Dufraisie 2022.

women, either at the Summer or the Winter Games (25 out of 149 at Helsinki in 1952; seven out of 24 at Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956). They were concentrated in a restricted number of disciplines (athletics, gymnastics, swimming, skiing and speed skating). The Soviets shone in these events right from the start: particularly in track and field events, and gymnastics. In Helsinki, Nina Romashkova, (later known as Ponomareva), Yelisaveta Bagryantseva and Nina Dumbadze all shared the discus podium. Aleksandra Chudina won two silver medals for the long jump and the javelin, and a bronze in the high jump. At the Winter Olympics from 1956 onwards, Soviet sportswomen were particularly dominant in the Nordic skiing and speed skating events.

Covered in the USSR by the press, then refracted through radio and television, their triumphs and records helped propagate the idea that the Soviets were leading in the field of gender equality, while not neglecting the female champions' family life. Elite sporting performance did not interfere with the maternal role the Stalinist regime assigned women. Soviet media aimed at an overseas audience, such as the *USSR Information Bulletin*, and the press in the communist satellite states celebrated their achievements.<sup>12</sup> Shot putters and discus throwers like Tatiana Sevriukova and Nina Dumbadze were honoured with appreciative profiles in the magazine of the France-USSR Friendship Society (France-URSS), in 1948 and 1950.<sup>13</sup> As in *Fizkul'tura i Sport*, aimed at a Soviet readership, these articles highlight the fact that athletic success did not prevent these high-profile athletes from having a domestic and family life. They all joined in the promotion of a feminine ideal, developed during the Stalinist era, of *ženšina-mat'* (wife and mother), despite taking part in intensive, high-level sport.<sup>14</sup> Nina Dumbadze pointed out that becoming a mother did not spell the end of participation in sport and that sometimes one's results improved afterwards. She said it was possible to juggle work, study, family and education all at once. The gymnast Galina Urbanovitch became USSR gymnastics champion after giving birth to her daughter. She became Olympic champion in 1952 in the general team competition, and world champion

<sup>12</sup> *USSR Information Bulletin*, 1947, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Robin-Hivert 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Nakachi 2006.

in 1954. In a themed edition of *Fizkul'tura i Sport* published on 8 March 1951, she added that many sportswomen had several children.<sup>15</sup> Women athletes thus acted as spokeswomen for the late Stalinist pronatalist narrative.

It was in the early 1950s, particularly from the 1952 Helsinki Olympics onwards, that the question of women's sporting performance became an issue in the East-West conflict. In 1950, the US press was already reporting the Soviet victories. According to *Life* magazine, the crowd at the European Athletics Championships in 1950 could admire the "strong red ladies".<sup>16</sup> Journalists began to describe the women athletes as "Amazons of the steppes" or "stocky" women.<sup>17</sup> At the conclusion of the Helsinki Games, the *Washington Post's* Shirley Povich (a male journalist) highlighted the strength of the USSR athletes:

These 1952 Games wouldn't even have been close between Russia and the USA save for the almost complete dominance of the Russian women in the heftier field events and gymnastics . . . In the non-bicep division, though, in the more graceful swimming and diving events where feminine form counts more than feminine muscle, the American girls were all-conquering.<sup>18</sup>

This comment immediately casts the Soviets as "on the wrong side", that of women who are "masculinized" by sport, whereas the Americans stayed true to "femininity". This awareness of the dominance of "red" sportswomen was part of a more global shift in American reaction to the "huge Soviet cultural and sporting offensive".<sup>19</sup>

The growing antagonism between the superpowers, just as the international competitions were enjoying a resurgence, gave those competitions a new significance. Sporting arenas became places of symbolic confrontation and a test of power, with the medals table as a gauge. In this context, women's medals counted for just as much as those of their male counterparts.

<sup>15</sup> "Naše sčast'e", *Fizkul'tura i Sport*, 3 March 1951, p. 8-10.

<sup>16</sup> "The Stronger Soviet Sex", *Life*, 18 September 1950, p. 60-61.

<sup>17</sup> Cahn 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Shirley Povich, "This Morning", *Washington Post*, 4 August 1952, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Richard B. Walsh, "The Soviet Athlete in International Competition", *Department of State Bulletin*, 24 December 1951, p. 1007-1010.

### The clash of gender models in international sport (1950 to 1966)

The period of peaceful coexistence coincided with a time when sporting competitions proliferated. This phase of the Cold War, initiated by the death of Stalin, shifted rivalry towards economic, ideological and social spheres. It encouraged interaction and opportunities for symbolic confrontation. Displays, tournaments, world and European championships and bilateral competitions offered both sides the chance to meet more often, get to know each other and to confront each other in sports venues. This state of affairs also boosted opportunities for media coverage. US vs USSR matches gave Soviet women champions the chance, like their male counterparts, to test themselves against their key opponents.<sup>20</sup> Their performances at these events were acknowledged and interpreted by journalists. Raymond Marcillac of *Le Monde* accounted for their lead in these terms: “In the USSR, women do the same work as men, which allows them to build up strength and endurance, unlike their American rivals, who are treated with much more consideration in day-to-day life.”<sup>21</sup>

The US government became noticeably more engaged in using sport as a lever of diplomatic influence from 1953 onwards. It enlisted news agencies to spread the word about the benefits of the American way of life. Highlights of the competitions occupied an important place in the schedules of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Pamphlets published by the United States Information Agency (USIA) showcased model female athletes,<sup>22</sup> although they were portrayed in ways which conformed to the social role assigned to them. At the time of the 1956 Olympic Games, the USIA published a series of captioned newspaper cartoons, designed to popularize male and female US champions. The 15-year-old swimmer Wanda Werner, a member of the team at the Pan-American games in 1955, is shown sewing, knitting and helping her mother with domestic chores. The gymnast Judy Howe, as well as being a talented sportswoman, worked as a stenographer. “Recently married, she loves

<sup>20</sup> Turrini 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Marcillac, “URSS-États-Unis en athlétisme à Moscou”, *Le Monde*, 28 July 1958.

<sup>22</sup> Rider 2016.

cooking and other household tasks.” The skier Andrea Mead Lawrence, when not competing, was said to love spending time at her ranch in Colorado and raising her children.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, Soviet propaganda of the Khrushchev era gave prominence to women athletes who combined several roles, tending towards professions such as engineering or medicine, and who were clearly “builders of socialism”.<sup>24</sup> In *Fizkul'tura i Sport*, Tamara Press (1937-2021) was presented as the perfect young woman, participating in social, economic and political life. A shot put and discus thrower, Press was born in Kharkov in 1937 and trained in Leningrad with her younger sister Irina under the eminent coach Viktor Alekseev. She won the Olympic shot put title in Rome in 1960 and in Tokyo in 1964. As well as being tenacious in training, she was also a brilliant student at the Institute of Construction Engineers in Leningrad, and the author of stories and newspaper articles. Her attitude was praised in the Soviet press as exemplary.<sup>25</sup> Outside the stadium, at ceremonial occasions like the 1960 Olympic champions' reunion ball, filmed by Kirill Eggers in *Geroj Rima v Moskve* [Heroes of Rome and Moscow], Press appeared with a glamorous hairdo and make-up, wearing elegant evening dress.<sup>26</sup> But the US image of this same sportswoman was very different: it questioned her gender identity. Along with her sister, and other sportswomen such as Aleksandra Chudina she was suspected of really being male. When Tamara Press was forced to retire from sport by the Soviet authorities in 1967, after sex tests were introduced, she was described in the *New York Times* as “A female athlete who is not really a woman.”<sup>27</sup>

The Nina Ponomaryova affair in September-October 1956 opened up a new front in the attack on Soviet sportswomen. This discus thrower was accused of stealing hats from a London department store during her time off in England, and the charge led to

<sup>23</sup> Rider 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Ilic 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Viktorov V., “Terpenie i trud”, *Fizkul'tura i Sport*, 6, June 1961, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Dufraisse 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “Tamara Press Retires as Track Competitor”, *New York Times*, 3 December 1967, p. 63.

diplomatic repercussions reaching all the way to the British Prime Minister and the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko.<sup>28</sup> The international media followed the episodes of what became a real-life soap opera. It also offered an opportunity to discredit Soviet women athletes by referring to their greed for luxury clothing items which were not available in the USSR because of shortages. They called Ponomareva “Ninotchka, 1956”,<sup>29</sup> in reference to the 1939 movie in which a Soviet envoy Ninotchka, played by Greta Garbo, is attracted to a Parisian man and to western consumer goods. Following the Ponomaryova scandal, journalists became even more interested in side issues and shopping trips, highlighting how often Soviet sportswomen bought nylons, shoes and other accessories unavailable in the USSR.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, the Soviets were putting pressure on international bodies to widen access for women to competitive sport. They were keen promoters of the democratization of these bodies and acted as a driving force for women’s access to competitions, in particular the Olympic Games. Alongside their allies from the people’s republics, they constantly defended, in the sports federation committees and the IOC, the retention of women’s competitions and called for the inclusion of new, women-only events. In April 1953, the Olympic Games Reduction Commission met to discuss decreasing the number of events and participants. The range of the Games was thought to have become too wide and the number of athletes too high. Excluding women from certain events (shot put, javelin, discus) was among the options considered. These were the very events where the Soviets and their allies shone.<sup>31</sup> In 1955, at the Paris session of the IOC, the USSR National Olympic Committee supported the introduction to the Olympics of women’s teams in volleyball, basketball, speed skating and rowing; all their requests

<sup>28</sup> Dufraisse 2019.

<sup>29</sup> “Ninotchka, 1956 Model”, *New York Times*, 1 September 1956, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> “Reds Pass Up London Hats in Shopping”, *The Washington Post*, 27 August 1957, p. 21; “Soviet Athletes Go Shopping”, *The Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1957, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> International Olympic Committee (IOC), B-1004-PROOL/11/030, Commission for the Reduction of the Olympic Programme, 1950-1964, Report of the Reduction Commission, 17 April 1953, p. 3.

were rejected.<sup>32</sup> They again proposed an amendment to the rules at the 54<sup>th</sup> session in Sofia in 1957, as follows: "That women be admitted to participate in the sporting events included in the programme, in accordance with the rules of the international federations which allow for women's events". The proposal was discussed during the following session.<sup>33</sup> The Soviet members of the IOC, Konstantin Andrianov and Aleksei Romanov, along with delegates from other Eastern Bloc countries, gradually managed to establish the idea of creating new women's events, as is shown by the later development of the Olympic programme. Their joint stance on the feminization of Olympic events had been agreed in advance. Representatives of the "leading bodies" of sport in the socialist countries met in Moscow in July 1960 to propose joint decisions on the subject. They agreed to vote within the sports federations to support the expansion of women's events in the European and World Championships, for example in canoeing. The socialist delegates also worked together in the IAAF to support the introduction of the women's 400 metres and pentathlon to the Olympic programme and, in basketball, of a women's Olympic tournament.<sup>34</sup>

The opening-up of sports contests to women, a process which the Soviets drove at international level, while hosting women's championships and supporting women's events within the federations, greatly increased opportunities for women to compete in front of a worldwide audience. It strengthened the development of sporting exchanges which were encouraged under peaceful coexistence and the beginning of *détente*. However the Soviet women's performances had an unanswered accusation hanging over them: that the Soviet sportswomen were too masculine.

### **The introduction of sex verification testing and its repercussions (1966-late 1970s)**

The predominance of socialist women champions provoked international concerns and reactions, as is shown by the introduction of sex verification testing to the European Athletics Championships in

---

<sup>32</sup> IOC, minutes of the 51<sup>st</sup> session, Paris, 13-17 June 1955, p. 57.

<sup>33</sup> IOC, minutes of the 54<sup>th</sup> session, Sofia, 23-28 September 1957, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Bulgarian National Archives, f.597, inv.1, d.97, 83-88.

1966, then to the Olympics from 1968 onwards. The idea that Eastern Bloc women athletes might not be “real women” emerged in the US press, in the sports sections and in a few articles in specialist medical journals, reopening debates that had already taken place between the wars.<sup>35</sup> Commentators stigmatized the demeanour and body shapes of the women champions, which did not fit the normative criteria of femininity promoted in the West. Some athletes were particularly victimized: Tamara and Irina Press and Maria Itkina, from the USSR, Iolanda Balas from Romania and Eva Kłobukowska from Poland.<sup>36</sup> For their opponents, it was a case of demonstrating that socialist leaders were ready to promote cheating in their quest for victory.

These campaigns led the IAAF to decide to subject women athletes participating in the 1966 Budapest European Athletics Championship to a gynaecological examination.<sup>37</sup> From 1967, the IAAF carried out chromatin assessments. Kłobukowska from Poland, who had undergone the examination of her genital organs the previous year, was then banned from international competition. The IOC medical commission imposed a chromosome check known as the “Barr Body Test”, on one in five female participants at the 1968 Winter Olympics. This approach was then extended to all women athletes at the Mexico Summer Games.<sup>38</sup>

These new conditions had repercussions in the Soviet Union. Sportswomen had to undergo an examination before they left for Budapest in 1966, so that doctors could check whether there was a “deviation from the [international] norm”. Four Soviet women were then prevented from participating, to avoid controversy. Two of them changed careers, becoming a trainer and an engineer respectively. However the other two decided to ask the Central Committee of the CPSU to review their cases, so that they could pursue their international sporting careers. The report sent to the CPSU Central Committee was to allow arbitration of the issue. It concluded that, in context, their participation would only damage the prestige of the

<sup>35</sup> Tebbutt 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Pieper 2014; Wiederkehr 2007, 2009 and 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Krieger 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Bohuon 2012; Dufraisse 2019.

USSR and offered instead to organize a celebratory event for the sportswomen. The foreign press saw the retirement of some women champions as confirmation of Soviet cheating and became highly focussed on sportswomen's gender.<sup>39</sup> As well as reinforcing binary categorization, sex testing posed questions about the approach taken to intersexuality, the absence of care or management of the condition during early childhood, and developments in the treatment of children whose sex was indeterminate. In the late 1950s in the Soviet Union, the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology began a study of intersex people and developed protocols for hormonal treatments. Specialists who favoured medical management and surgical intervention thus became dominant there.<sup>40</sup>

The introduction of the sex test came at the same time that a narrative denouncing the dangerous erosion of gender roles was emerging in the USSR.<sup>41</sup> It was in this context that the attitude to women's sport changed in the Soviet Union. Pavel Ljubimov's 1968 film, *Noven'kaja* [The New Girl], is an excellent example. It tells the story of a young gymnast, Valentina Tchernova, and two other women: Valentina's instructor, whose sporting career ended when she chose to get married and bring up her children, and another member of the Soviet team, who is tired of the intensity of her high-level career and the sacrifices it imposes on her personal life. Unlike the characters shown in the preceding decades, this film portrays the difficulty of reconciling family and sporting excellence and the incessant doubts it arouses in elite sportswomen.<sup>42</sup> Around this time, national sporting policies began to specify appropriate activities for Soviet women and to proscribe others. Thus an order from the Physical Culture Committee dated 24 January 1972 called for the winding up of women's football and SAMBO (Soviet combat sport) teams, on the pretext that they had a harmful effect on women's bodies.<sup>43</sup> This was highlighted by the American media. In *Sports*

---

<sup>39</sup> *Rossiiskij gosudarstvennyj arhiv novejšej istorii*, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), f. 5, inv. 56, d. 36, l. 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> Meyers 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Claro 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Dufraisse 2019.

<sup>43</sup> GARF, f. R7576, inv. 31, d. 1519, l. 12-17.

*Illustrated*, 23 October 1972, the “Russians” are branded as reactionary. This magazine featured an American anti-communist argument shattering the emancipatory image of Soviet sport. It claimed that the head of the council of the USSR Sports Medicine Federation had advised against women playing European football, because it caused varicose veins, and the ball could damage their sexual organs and breasts.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, as the historian Anke Hillbrenner has shown, Soviet media now gave less space to sportswomen who did not conform to the ideal of “*ženstvennost*” (femininity). The discus thrower Faina Melnyk received less media coverage than the Press sisters, even though she won the Olympic gold medal in 1972. The time when women were lauded as champions in track and field events had passed. Soviet propaganda during the 1970s and 1980s tended to promote graceful athletes, such as skaters and gymnasts, whose performances conformed more to the national and international sporting criteria of beauty and elegance.<sup>45</sup> The emphasis on youth in certain disciplines, such as gymnastics and diving, allowed new female figures to emerge. Olga Korbut, whose acrobatic achievements made a huge impact on the gymnastics competition at the 1972 Olympics, was the inspiration for numerous children’s publications in the US and helped popularize the sport there.<sup>46</sup> The crowd loved her for her somersaults on the beam and the asymmetric bars, which she executed with ease and mastery; for the grace and femininity which she expressed on the floor and on the beam; but also for the independence and daring she seemed to embody. The historian Georgia Cervin also points out that Korbut and her team mates did not present a threat to the gender status quo.<sup>47</sup> Not everyone felt the same about the new direction for gymnastics. Korbut’s acrobatics provoked criticism from the women’s technical committee of the International Gymnastics Federation, which decided that her innovative moves were too dangerous. The leaders of world gymnastics rejected the development of a more risk-taking, powerful version of

---

<sup>44</sup> “Reactionary Russians”, *Sports Illustrated*, 23 October 1972.

<sup>45</sup> Hillbrenner 2010; Timm 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Dufraisse 2019; Cervin 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Cervin 2021: 68.

the discipline.<sup>48</sup> Following their demonstration gala at Wembley in 1977, the leaders of the Soviet gymnastics delegations were now concerned about the colour of the gymnasts' leotards, which should not be dull, and the demeanour of the participants, which had to be vivacious and smiling.<sup>49</sup>

\*  
\* \*

The aim of this article was to explain how Soviet women champions were able to become important figures in sporting rivalry with the West. Although there were only a few women's events in the 1950s, the participation of Soviet women athletes had a double purpose in asserting the superiority of the USSR: it showed its success in terms of sexual equality, and enabled it to win medals, which were essential in measuring supremacy in the sporting arena. In order to achieve this aim, the Soviet leaders encouraged women's access to sporting performance, allowing them levels of training and pay which were close to those of their male counterparts, while campaigning within international sporting bodies for the introduction of more women's events. The appearance in the stadium of athletes whose gender codes seemed too masculine to their opponents provoked various forms of opposition in the West: the promotion of models of femininity which conformed more closely to Western norms, and the establishment of measures to "feminize" international competitions and limit access to competitions of intersex individuals and women considered too muscular. The reaction of the Soviet authorities reflected the more traditional vision of women's role which was emerging in the USSR at the time. From the late 1960s onwards, the Soviets endeavoured to promote other forms of female sport nationally and internationally, those which prized grace, youth and femininity. Discus throwers and shot putters still won medals, but were not showcased in the same way. Gymnasts and skaters offered alternative incarnations of Soviet virtuosity, which conformed more to the national and international gender norms in force at the time.

---

<sup>48</sup> Cervin 2021.

<sup>49</sup> GARF, f. R7576, inv. 31, d. 3400, l. 63.

## Bibliography

- BOHUON, Anaïs. 2012. *Le test de féminité dans les compétitions sportives. Une histoire classée X ?* Paris : Éditions iXe.
- CAHN, Susan. 1998. *Coming on Strong: gender and sexuality in twentieth-century women's sports*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- CARPENTIER, Florence, Florys CASTAN-VICENTE & Claire NICOLAS. 2020. Dirigeantes du sport au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe* [on line] 22/06/20, consulted 01/05/2022. Permalien <https://ehne.fr/fr/node/12260>
- CASTAN-VICENTE, Florys. 2021. International intellectual exchanges, women and sports: the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women between 1949 and the 1970s. *Sport in History* 37(3): 353-377.
- CASTAN-VICENTE, Florys, Claire NICOLAS & Georgia CERVIN. 2019. Women in sport organizations: historiographical and epistemological challenges. In *Histories of Women's Work in Global Sport: a man's world?* ed. Claire NICOLAS & Georgia CERVIN, 17-40. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- CERVIN, Georgia. 2021. *Degrees of Difficulty: how women's gymnastics rose to prominence and fell from grace*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- CLARO, Mona. 2015. Interpréter et transformer ? La "question des femmes" et la "question sexuelle" dans les sciences sociales soviétiques. *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 41 : 41-64.
- CLASTRES, Patrick. 2020. Olympisme et Guerre froide. Du paradigme réaliste au paradigme culturel. *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 277(1) : 7-25.
- DE HAAN, Francisca. 2014. Gendering the Cold War. *Aspasia. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* 8: 1-63.
- DUFRAISSE, Sylvain. 2016. Contrôler, mettre en ordre et réguler : la réforme des revenus des sportifs soviétiques au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. *Le Mouvement social* 254 : 103-116.
- . 2019. *Les héros du sport. Une histoire des champions soviétiques (années 1930-années 1980)*. Ceyzerieu: Champ Vallon.
- . 2020. Facing the involvement of youths in competitions: Soviet visions and adaptations to the rejuvenation of elite sports (second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living. The History, Culture and Sociology of Sports* [on line 21/10/20, consulted 01/05/22.]: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fspor.2020.568025/full>.
- . 2022. L'URSS aux portes du monde du sport. Les intérêts croisés de l'entrée de l'Union soviétique dans les fédérations internationales sportives (1945-1952). *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire* 155 : 75-87.
- DUMANČIĆ, Marko. 2014. Spectrums of oppression: gender and sexuality during the Cold War. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16(3): 190-204.
- . 2017. Hidden in plain sight: the histories of gender and sexuality during the Cold War. In *Gender, Sexuality, and the Cold War: a global perspective*, ed. Philip E. MUEHLENBECK, 1-12. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

- HILLBRENNER, Anke. 2010. Soviet women in sports in the Brezhnev years: the female body and Soviet modernism. In *Euphoria and Exhaustion: modern sport in Soviet culture and society*, ed. Nikolaus KATZER, Sandra BUDY, Alexandra KÖHRING & Manfred ZELLER, 295-314. Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag.
- ILIC, Mélanie. 2009. Khrushchev and the revival of the Zhensovet. In *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie ILIC & Jeremy SMITH, 104-121. London/New York: Routledge.
- KORDAS, Ann. 2010. Rebels, robots, and all-American Girls: the ideological use of images of girl gymnasts during the Cold War. In *Girlhood: a global history*, ed. Jennifer HELGREN & Colleen A. VASCONCELLOS, 195-214. New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press.
- KRIEGER, Jorg. 2021. *Power and Politics in World Athletics: a critical history*. London: Routledge.
- LETT, Didier. 2012. Les régimes de genre dans les sociétés occidentales de l'Antiquité au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 67(3) : 563-572.
- MAILLART, Ella. 1932. *Parmi la jeunesse russe*. Paris : Fasquelle.
- MEYERS, Maggie J. 2019. Tragic and glorious pages: the evolution of intersex rights in Russia and reframing law and tradition to advance reform. *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 26: 109-135.
- NAGORNAĀ, Oksana Sergeevna. 2020. Ženšiny v strukturah sovetskoj kulturnoj diplomatii holodnoj vojny: prostranstva mobilizacii i praktiki součastiâ [Women in the structures of Soviet cultural diplomacy in the Cold War: mobilization arenas and practices of cooperation]. *Noveishaya Istoriya Rossii* 31: p. 451-467.
- NAKACHI, Mia. 2006. Population, politics and reproduction: late Stalinism and its legacy. In *Late Stalinist Russia: society between reconstruction and reinvention*, ed. Juliane FURST, 23-45. London/New York: Routledge.
- PARKS PIEPER, Lindsay. 2014. Sex testing and the maintenance of Western femininity in international sport. *The International Journal of History of Sport* 31(13): 1557-1576.
- . 2016. *Sex Testing: gender policing in women's sports*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- RIDER, Toby. 2016. *Cold War Games: propaganda, the Olympics and US foreign policy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- ROBIN-HIVERT, Emilia. 2013. Le sport, vecteur de propagande internationale : le cas des revues d'amitié Est-Ouest dans les années xxx. In *Le Sport dans la presse communiste*, ed. Michael ATTALI & Evelyne COMBEAU-MARI, 179-191. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- TEBBUTT, Clare. 2015. The spectre of the "man-woman athlete": Mark Weston, Zdenek Koubek, the 1936 Olympics and the uncertainty of sex. *Women's History Review* 24(5): 721-738.
- TIMM, Annette F. 2020. "The most beautiful face of socialism": Katarina Witt and the sexual politics of sport in the Cold War. In *The Whole World Was Watching: sport in the Cold War*, ed. Robert EDELMAN & Christopher YOUNG, 143-160. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- TURRINI, Joseph M. 2004. Running for Dollars: an economic and social history of track and field in the United States, 1820-2000. PhD dissertation. Wayne State University.
- VERTINSKY, Patricia. 1990. *The Eternally Wounded Woman: women, doctors, and exercise in the late nineteenth century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- WIEDERKEHR, Stefan. 2007. "Unsere Mädchen sind alle einwandfrei": die Kłobukowska-Affäre von 1967 in der zeitgenössischen Presse (Polen, BRD, Schweiz). In *Sport zwischen Ost und West*, ed. Arié MALZ, Stefan ROHDEWALD & Stefan WIEDERKEHR, 269-286. Osnäbruck: Fibre Verlag.
- . 2009. "We shall never know the exact number of men who have competed in the Olympics posing as women": sport, gender verification and the Cold War. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26(4): 556-572.
- . 2010. ... "if Jarmila Kratochvilova is the future of women's sports, I'm not sure I'm ready for it": media, gender, and the Cold War. In *Euphoria and Exhaustion: modern sport in Soviet culture and society*, ed. Nikolaus KATZER *et al.*, 315-335. Francfort/Main: Campus Verlag.
- . 2018. Frauensport und Männerwelt im Kalten Krieg. In *Europäische Geschlechtergeschichten*, ed. Maria BÜHNER & Maren MÖHRING, 321-332. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- ZYBINA, Galina. 1954. *Zavetnaya Cherta* [The desired line]. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya.