

New York Times Coverage of the Soviet Union's Entrance into the Olympic Games

Anthony Moretti
Point Park University

In 1952, the Soviet Union participated in the Olympic Games for the first time.¹ Its entrance into the Olympic family came at a time of increasing political tensions between the United States and the USSR.

The Soviets contributed to the Allied victory during World War II. But whatever amity between the Soviets and the Americans that developed during the war quickly washed away in its aftermath. In June 1947, the Americans ushered in the Marshall Plan, which involved sending billions of dollars to war-torn Europe in order to assist in rebuilding those countries. The Soviets refused the help and saw the policy as one ultimately designed to slow the potential spread of communism. The Truman Doctrine, which sought the containment of communism, followed in 1948. During that same year, the Russians tried to gain unilateral authority over Berlin, which the Allies had chosen to collectively control after World War II. In August 1949, the Soviets successfully tested an atomic bomb. Ten months later, North Korean troops invaded South Korea, launching the Korean War.

The Soviets and the Americans were involved in numerous cultural, academic, and athletic exchange programs in the second half of the 1940s. But by the end of the decade, the Soviets had begun, according to Walter Hixson, "a campaign to purge the U.S.S.R. of foreign influence."² The Americans responded by ratcheting up the rhetoric about the Soviet Union, while sharply cutting into the exchange programs. The Truman administration also started increasing its propaganda programming targeted to overseas audiences.

Congress quickly joined the propaganda battle. The Smith-Mundt Act, which, quoting Hixson, was created to "promote the better understanding of the United States among the peoples of the world and to strengthen cooperative international relations," was enacted in 1948.³ In 1950, Truman launched a new initiative called the "Campaign of Truth." Gary Rawnsley noted that among its stated objectives was undermining the confidence of Communists in the Soviet Union and encouraging non-Communist forces throughout the Eastern bloc.⁴

Thus, as the calendar turned to 1952, there was tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. The two countries had distinct geopolitical differences that had put noticeable stress on their cultural ties. Sports can be considered a cultural link, and because Soviet and American athletes did not regularly compete against each other in the immediate postwar years, any athletic event involving

The author is with the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Point Park University, Pittsburgh, PA 15222.

the two nations would be closely scrutinized and would have tense undertones. Moreover, international athletic competitions involving the United States and the Soviet Union had begun to take on a quality that would remain evident throughout the Cold War: they were pseudo-war contests. The American and Soviet efforts to be the world's preeminent geopolitical nation included seeking allies throughout the world, spreading their political ideology, stockpiling nuclear weapons, and creating numerically strong armies. However, neither side ever used the munitions or manpower on the other; instead, areas such as the Olympic Games and other important international sports events became the battlegrounds upon which Americans and Soviets (and their respective allies) fought for Olympic medals, individual glory, and the supposed demonstration of the vitality of their political, economic, and social way of life.

The track and field stadiums, ice hockey rinks, basketball courts, and other sports-specific venues became (and remain today) acceptable substitutes for war, for a number of reasons. First, they were structured places of combat. Athletes were not going to be ambushed by their enemies; judges were not supposed to tolerate illegal moves or activities; and no dangerous weaponry was allowed. In other words, the athletic ability of the competitor(s) was supposed to be the sole criterion upon which success or failure was determined. Next, they were visible. Men, women, and children were welcomed to enter the stadium and witness the proceedings. Smoked-filled rooms were not the locations where winners and losers were decided; success happened in the open for anyone to see. Finally, journalists from all over the world also were present, and they provided news accounts of what happened to their readers, listeners, and viewers. In short, the structure, openness, and accountability of the Olympic Games gave them (and other international sports competitions) an air of presumed legitimacy: Olympic officials thus could argue that what happened during these Games were credible demonstrations of athletic success, because there were rules governing them, spectators watching them, and objective observers relaying details about them. Along the same lines, the United States and the Soviet Union were able to use these events to argue that the achievements of their athletes were legitimate demonstrations of the good within their countries.

This article examines how the *New York Times* covered the Soviet Olympic team during the four-year period between the 1948 Olympics, in which the Soviets chose not to participate, and the 1952 Games. The author reviewed all stories relating to the Soviet Union and the Olympic Games that appeared in the newspaper between 1949 and 1952. Stories written by Reuters, the Associated Press (AP), and United Press (UP) were included in this study.

The *New York Times* was selected because of its elite status among America's newspapers. Journalism historian John Calhoun Merrill acknowledged that the term *elite press* is difficult to define.⁵ However, his suggestion that a prestigious newspaper should be "serious, concerned, intelligent, and articulate" would seem to apply to the *Times*. It also was chosen because it had already demonstrated a negative editorial bias toward the Soviet Union. Martin Kriesberg examined the *Times* coverage of the USSR from 1917 through 1946 and found that news unfavorable to the Soviet Union received more attention than favorable news.⁶ Kriesberg added that the *Times* often characterized the Soviet leadership as lacking the kind of virtues that American politicians had.⁷ Finally, his study reported that positive depictions

of the Soviets appeared most often when the United States and the Soviet Union shared similar goals (e.g., defeating Germany in World War II).

Recognizing that the two countries did not share similar interests between 1949 and 1952, it was expected that the *New York Times* would revert to its negative portrayal of the Soviet Union and its Olympic athletes. However, it was also anticipated that the wire services (Reuters, AP, and UP) would not demonstrate this same bias. Because they served multiple newspapers with varying news philosophies, the wire services had to be especially careful to not show a pro- or anti-Soviet bias in their reporting.

The Soviet Union Joins the Olympic Family

The Soviet Union received an invitation to the 1948 London Games, but never responded to it. The Soviets did send a team of observers to the Games. Soviet sports historian James Riordan explained why the athletes were left home, but the observers were not. "To seek an answer to the question: Would we win if we were to enter the Olympic community and take part in the 1952 Games? Any failure would discredit the [socialist] system."⁸ Viewed another way, Riordan reported that "sport had become a weapon of big-time politics." In 1948, the Soviets also refused to seek admission to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a requirement for participating in the Games. Less than a year later, the *New York Times* ran an AP story discussing rumors that the Soviets had no intention of joining the IOC, and, therefore, competing in the 1952 Winter or Summer Olympics, which were to be hosted by Oslo and Helsinki, respectively. An unnamed IOC official suggested, in one *New York Times* account, that the USSR might be "planning to organize its own Olympic Games."⁹

The IOC would become more and more frustrated by the mixed signals it received from the Soviet Union over the next two and a half years. The Soviets never gave any public indication that they were forming an alternative to the Olympics. But they also offered no sign that they were eager to become an Olympic nation. The USSR was joining selected international sports federations, which governed individual Olympic sports, but it was not committing to IOC membership.

In December 1948, another AP story appeared in the *New York Times*. It reviewed an editorial from a Soviet newspaper hinting that the Soviets were ready to challenge some of the world's best athletes.¹⁰ But the pattern of dropping hints and then not following up on them continued. Less than five months later, the *Times* noted that the IOC "complained" once again about the Soviets' unwillingness to candidly discuss their interest in taking part in the 1952 Olympic Games.¹¹

The IOC's urge to learn of the Soviets' plans was misplaced: the deadline to be admitted into the IOC and thus be eligible to take part in the 1952 Winter or Summer Games was more than one year away. Furthermore, the IOC's impatience appeared to have been motivated by the uneasiness that key members of the organization felt about the Soviets entering the Olympics. One of those figures was Avery Brundage, who served as president of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) from 1928 to 1952 and the IOC from 1952 to 1972. Brundage was a staunch anti-Communist, who, according to historian Allen Guttman, "was ambivalent about the notion of the hammer and sickle next to the Olympic rings."¹² As early as 1946, Brundage was exchanging letters with IOC president Sigfrid Edstrom expressing

his concern about whether the Soviets might seek admission into the Games but not seek to operate within IOC rules. Historian Richard Espy quoted the following exchange between the two men: "If we are to prevent the machinery of international sport from breaking up and the high standards of amateur sport from collapsing," Brundage said in one letter, "we will have to watch these things very carefully and stop all deviations from our regulations."¹³

One of the primary concerns the IOC had was whether the Soviet Union was paying its athletes; however, Victor Peppard and James Riordan noted that the IOC leaders were faced with assurances from the USSR that practices had changed to enable athletes to qualify for the Games.¹⁴ That claim did not placate Edstrom or Brundage. "We must face the fact that many [Soviet athletes] are professionals," Edstrom indicated in a November 1950 letter to Brundage, which was quoted by Espy. "We have thus a different idea of sport in Eastern Europe and in the West."¹⁵ Brundage later told reporters that the IOC had taken a firm stance with the Soviets. "My position is that we are going to follow the rules. Anybody who received cash prizes is out [of the Olympics]."¹⁶

A second issue that rankled the IOC centered on conditions that the Soviets said needed to be met before they would accept membership into any sports federation or the IOC. First, they wanted Russian to become an official Olympic language.¹⁷ Second, they asked that Spain be expelled from any sports organization that the Soviets were joining.¹⁸ Every international sports federation and the IOC refused to accept either demand. In another letter to Edstrom, again quoted by Espy, Brundage concluded that the Soviets were determined to "humiliate the West."¹⁹ In the same letter, Brundage added that each time the Soviets forced a "Federation to break its own rules in order to let them compete, Russian prestige is increased and Western prestige is decreased."²⁰

Politics and prestige also motivated the Soviets' "wait-and-see" attitude. As mentioned, they were not going to send a team to the 1952 Olympics unless they knew those athletes would be successful. As early as 1923, the state-controlled press was using the victories generated by Soviet sports teams in any international competition to suggest that the socialist system was superior to all others.²¹ The Soviets "won" the 1950 European Track and Field championships, indicating that (at least in that sport) they would match up favorably against the world's best track and field athletes. The AP wrote that "the U.S.S.R. definitely has some of the best women athletes in the world and many of Russia's male contenders have a fine chance of taking first places when pitted against the best of other nations."²²

On April 25, 1951, the Soviet Union ended the speculation (or so it appeared) about its plans for the Olympics when it announced it would send a team to Helsinki. The *New York Times* placed the story on its front page. "The Soviet decision to enter the Helsinki Games will add considerable drama to next year's top sports event," the report stated. "There is no doubt that Soviet sports directors believe their athletes are now in a position to offer the sharpest kind of challenge to the domination of the Olympiad long exercised by United States champions."²³

An unsigned *Times* editorial was more direct:

Russia's decision to enter the 1952 Olympics is a welcome one, as would be any decision of the Soviet regime to cooperate with other nations of the world on a basis of decency, tolerance and good faith. If the Russians have not been able to

bring themselves around to such a frame of mind in more weighty matters, at least we can be grateful that they seem willing to do so in regard to sports. . . . Possibly Russia's application to enter the Olympics for the first time since 1912 springs just a wee bit more from a desire to show the motherland's superiority over the decadent West than to give young Russians a chance to enter friendly competition with foreign athletes. But whatever the motives, we are glad to see the Russians join the fun.²⁴

New York Times columnist Arthur Daley saw it another way. "There is one thing about this radical move which is extremely puzzling to the decadent capitalists of the West. The Russians have never before entered international competition unless they were certain of winning. Does this mean that Coach Joe Stalin is loaded?"²⁵

The two columns mentioned above offered direct indications that the *Times* held a skeptical view of Soviet participation in the Olympic Games. Prior to April 25, 1951, every story that appeared in the *Times* concerning potential Soviet entry in the 1952 Olympics had been generated by the AP. Those wire service stories were neutral, and in some cases positive, in their tone toward the Soviets. The *Times* editorials were neither.

In reacting to the Soviet decision, Brundage told an AP reporter that he saw no reason why the Soviets should not compete but emphasized that Olympic rules mandated that each country's National Olympic Committee "must be independent and autonomous" of its national government.²⁶

Less than a month later, Brundage cast 1 of the 31 yeas that officially welcomed the USSR into the Olympic family.²⁷ (Three IOC members abstained from voting. No one voted no.)²⁸

Are the Soviets Competing?

However, the April announcement and subsequent entry into the IOC did not end the conjecture about whether the Soviets would compete in the 1952 Winter and Summer Games. On November 24, 1951, an AP story indicated that forty-five countries had accepted their invitations to the Helsinki Games. Russia was not among them.²⁹ Less than a week later, Brundage told the AP that as many as seventy countries might send teams to Finland. He added that Russia's plans remained up in the air. "Russia is eligible to compete in about twelve different Olympic events. Whether Russia will actually compete is still not known."³⁰

One month later, the Soviets again announced they would enter the Helsinki Games. The *Times* report quoted a leading Soviet newspaper, *Soviet Sports*. "The best of Soviet sportsmen will enter select Olympic teams of the U.S.S.R. Great responsibility lies upon the trainers of these collectives. They are obliged to carry out the preparation of sportsmen on a high level to assure that they will show the highest achievement."³¹

Daley, the *Times* columnist, again expressed his doubts about the Kremlin's motives. "The Red brothers are so devious and have such ulterior motives for everything that they do that their official acceptance of the Helsinki bid . . . cannot be greeted in normal fashion. This isn't just another sports-loving nation joining fellow sportsmen. This is the Soviet Union where the Kremlin controls muscles just as it controls thoughts."³²

The *Soviet Sports* article gave no indication that the Soviets would participate in the Oslo Winter Games, which began in about five weeks. The deadline for accepting an invitation from the Norwegians was December 31, 1951. On New Year's Day 1952, the *Times* reported the Soviet's failure to meet the deadline, which in reality was an artificial one.³³ Any nation that failed to respond in time could petition for admission if it provided a legitimate excuse.

Two weeks later, and with no reported reason for the delay, the Soviets requested that their hockey team be permitted to take part in the Oslo Games. The AP report indicated that a director of the International Ice Hockey Federation, the governing body for the sport, supported the Soviet bid.³⁴ But, once again, the Soviets never followed through on the request. On February 1, 1952, the Oslo organizing committee announced that the Soviets, because of their failure to answer the invitation, would not be welcomed at the Games.³⁵ The world would have to wait another five months for the Soviet Union to appear in an Olympic Games.

The *Times* appeared especially eager to determine how successful the Soviets would be in Helsinki. It carried an AP story on August 26, 1951, that reviewed the World Youth Student Games in Berlin. The report suggested that the Soviets would not excel in Helsinki "unless they came up with stronger teams than they presented" in Germany.³⁶ However, the women's track team merited special attention because five different athletes established marks at the World Games that would have beaten current Olympic records.

On April 26, 1952, the *New York Times* ran a piece titled "Stalin Trains His Olympic Teams." The story stated that the Soviet government had a strong "preoccupation" with sports, for which it had one overwhelming objective.³⁷ "[T]he most important is the development and growth of a population which is physically fit for hard work in the factories or for combat service for soldiers," *Times* reporter Harry Schwartz wrote.³⁸ The story also discussed how elite Soviet athletes were identified at a young age and trained not only to be great athletes but also to be coaches once "they have passed the peak of competitive performance."³⁹

On July 16, 1952, Daley returned with another column highly critical of the Soviet Union and its claims that it was ready to challenge the United States for dominance of the sports world.

Soviet Russia already has given everyone the jitters as a new set of Olympic Games is about to begin in Helsinki, just on the fringe of the Iron Curtain. . . . The most baffling question is this: Why is the Soviet entered? The corollary, of course, is: Why is the Soviet exposing itself to the pitiless spotlight of a sports carnival? Performance alone counts, not words. And it seems inconceivable that the Russians can outscore the United States, their own fantastic record claims to the contrary. . . . The Olympic Games will provide for the sports writers their first experience with the Russian enigma, the one that has been perplexing the political, military and every other kind of expert for decades. The bigger puzzler until now is why they entered in the face of remote chances for victory. They never played ball that way before. Or are they so much better than we suspect?⁴⁰

On the eve of the Helsinki Games, *Times* coverage began to exhibit two broad themes: Soviet interaction with athletes from the United States and the rest of the world, and the impending race to see which country would win the most medals.

A headline to a July 6, 1952, AP story boldly predicted that a “Cold War of Sports” would develop in Finland because Soviet athletes were meeting their contemporaries from the West.⁴¹ The story cast doubts on the world records the Soviet Union was claiming some of its athletes had set in various events and indicated that the Olympics “will be the first acid test” for these Soviet athletes. However, there was no mention in the article of exactly how a Cold War atmosphere would be evident. And no American or Western athlete or official was quoted either supporting or refuting the idea.

A second report relating to the Soviet Olympic team appeared on the same day. The UP story described twenty “tight-lipped Russian sailing competitors” arriving in Finland.⁴² It noted that these Soviet athletes would not be housed in the Olympic Village, where almost all Olympic athletes and officials were residing. Instead they would remain at another location along with athletes from other Eastern Bloc countries. The *New York Times* picked up on this theme of the separation of Soviet athletes from their contemporaries in the West. An unsigned editorial indicated that there was “no doubt” that Soviet athletes would remain “roped off from the easy fraternization which other athletes find so inspiring” throughout the duration of the Games.⁴³

Helsinki, 1952

In the days leading up to the opening ceremonies, Soviet and American athletes were meeting each other on a regular basis. The encounters were not friendly at first, but goodwill developed later. The *Times* reported many of these meetings. On July 8, the AP wrote that yachtsmen from both countries “just stared” at each other as they went through a pre-Olympic practice.⁴⁴ One day later, Soviet officials “dropped their icy reserve” and threw open the doors of their camp to Westerners.⁴⁵ The AP indicated that the Finnish Olympic committee, like everyone else, was caught completely off-guard by the Soviet decision. On July 12, an AP story reviewed how rowers from the United States and the USSR shared a workout “and swapped friendly chatter.”⁴⁶ Clifford Goes, the chairman of the U.S. rowing committee, described the Soviets as “a swell bunch of fellows.” On July 14, the Soviet flag was raised at its Olympic village. *Times* correspondent Allison Danzig wrote, “there was a friendly mingling” of athletes from the United States, the Soviet Union and other countries.⁴⁷

The positive atmosphere carried over to the opening ceremonies. Danzig filed a lengthy report that, in part, detailed the Soviet team entering the Olympic stadium.

Various interpretations have been placed upon the significance of the Soviets in permitting its athletes to compete against and mingle with those from the United States and other nations outside the Iron Curtain, and the political implications of their presence has overshadowed at times the sporting side of the occasion during the past week. Whatever designs Russia may or may not have, whether or not she intends to utilize the Games as a sounding board for communistic propaganda, her attitude thus far has been correct. . . . The Soviet team made an impressive picture in the parade. . . .

Dressed completely in white coats, trousers, shoes and hats, and with their women athletes in royal blue jackets and white skirts, the Russians marched rather casually. Once they had taken their place on the arena turf, they seemed greatly interested in all that was going on around them.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, it did not take the *Times* long to find evidence that the Soviets were ready “to utilize the Games as a sounding board for communistic propaganda.” In a report filed on the same day as the opening ceremonies, the Moscow-based *Times* reporter, Harrison Salisbury, noted that Soviet newspapers were calling on every Soviet athlete to “provide a shining example of the superiority of Soviet culture over that of the bourgeois countries.”⁴⁹ Just two days later, another *Times* reporter, George Axelsson, wrote that the World Federation of Democratic Youth was in Finland. He claimed that it appeared to represent a “deliberate Red attempt to spread Communist propaganda among the Olympic crowds, thereby infringing the time-honored world truce always observed in the past during the games.”⁵⁰ However, there were no voices of protest in the article. No one from the IOC, the Finnish Olympic Committee, or the United States spoke out against what the newspaper said was happening in Finland. Less than a week later, Axelsson noted that although the Soviets had continued to welcome visitors to their “segregated Olympic Village” they were especially eager to interact with those “peoples made out by Soviet propaganda to be victims of imperialism and subjugation.”⁵¹ Once again, no Western official was quoted either supporting or refuting Axelsson’s claim.

Times reporters also filed dispatches from both Helsinki and Moscow summarizing Soviet displeasure with some aspect of its Olympic experience. The majority of Soviet criticisms were related to the men and women who judged Olympic events. On July 28, Salisbury summarized reports from Moscow that Soviet officials were unhappy with the judging of at least three Olympic sports. The only quote in Salisbury’s article came from a Soviet news agency report. It stated “crude pressure” was being applied on judges “by certain countries” and that both spectators and other judges had noticed it and reacted negatively to it.⁵² None of those “certain countries” was identified by the Soviets. Salisbury filed another report one day after the Games concluded. Once again, the article suggested that the Soviets were crying foul and complaining that U.S. athletes were catching breaks from Olympic judges whereas Soviet athletes were being unfairly penalized.⁵³ (The *Times* also published numerous wire service dispatches during the Games focusing on Soviet criticisms of the judging.⁵⁴)

At the conclusion of the Helsinki Olympics, the Soviets also voiced their disappointment with selected “officials of the American delegation.” The AP picked up on the story, in which two Russian journalists claimed that “American officials tried to hide their athletes to keep them from meeting Russians.” The report concluded that the Americans were “frightened” about possible friendly exchanges between athletes from the United States and the USSR.⁵⁵ The Soviet allegations seemed out of place for several reasons. First, no accusations were made during the Games that the Americans were shielding their athletes from the Soviets or any other country. Second, the friendly encounters between Soviet and American athletes that developed before the start of the Games continued during the two weeks of competition. Four examples are noted here.

On July 21, eleven members of the American weightlifting team visited the Soviet camp. The AP story indicated that the “Russians were out in full force to

greet the Americans.”⁵⁶ On July 23, Reuters reported that the United States pentathlon team gave the Soviet team a box of ammunition after Soviet bullets failed to fire during the competition. The story indicated that a Soviet official “accepted it gracefully and said the American bullets would be tried in the Soviet pistols.”⁵⁷ On July 24th, the Soviet rowing team hosted a dinner for members of the American team that had beaten the Soviets for the gold medal one day before. Through an interpreter, the head of the Soviet rowing delegation offered a toast. “We are happy for these friendships we have made on the water. We want the sportsmen of Russia and the sportsmen of America always to compete in this friendly spirit.”⁵⁸ Finally, on July 27th, an AP photograph showing a Russian hurdler shaking hands with his American counterpart at the conclusion of the 110-meter hurdles race was carried by the *Times*.⁵⁹ The American athlete, Jack W. Davis, won the silver medal, the photograph’s caption indicated. The caption did not report where the Soviet hurdler finished.

The race to determine which nation would win the most medals was an almost daily theme of *New York Times* coverage of the 1952 Summer Olympics. But the *Times* went beyond merely providing a table listing the medal count. It also provided continuous information stemming from the confusion regarding which country was “winning” the Games.

The IOC has never declared that the country that earns the most number of medals is the winner of an Olympic Games. And for good reason: the IOC does not view winning and losing as an Olympic value. Instead, it considers the ability to compete as the measure of success. But the media have engaged in the unofficial practice of declaring winners for several decades. The generally accepted policy (in the West) is that a gold medal is worth ten points; a silver medal, five; a bronze medal, four; and with three, two, and one points being awarded for fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-place finishes respectively. But the Soviet Union chose to adopt a new “unofficial” scoring system in 1952. It gave seven points for a gold medal with the five, four, three, two, and one point designations remaining the same.⁶⁰

The scoring issue grew in importance as the Games progressed. During the first week of competition (July 19–25), there was no mention in the *Times* of the dispute regarding the scoring system. But there was also no disputing that Soviet athletes were doing well. By July 26, which represented the start of the second (and final) week of the Games, the Soviet Union held a commanding points lead over the United States: 363.5 to 250.⁶¹ The accompanying AP report noted that the Soviets’ advantage was built on the success of their women, who dominated the United States and the rest of the world in gymnastics and track and field.⁶²

The *Times* apparently was not impressed by the collective performance of Soviet athletes. In an unsigned editorial, the paper noted that the “Russians came [to Helsinki] with a supremacy complex that events have tended to reduce sharply.”⁶³ And, in a separate unsigned editorial published on the same day, the *Times* also belittled the Soviet government. The editorial complimented Soviet Olympians and sports officials for their sportsmanship, noting that “if the Moscow Government had not worked so long and so hard to turn the naturally friendly Russian people against us,” then the athletic good will would not have garnered attention. The editorial concluded by claiming that “the Olympic spirit has won at least a little victory and . . . the cold war might give way to a friendlier feeling if Mr. Stalin and the other narrow-minded little tin gods in Moscow would let human nature take its course.”⁶⁴

It was during the final week of the Games, when United States athletes steadily narrowed the points gap between them and the Soviet Union, that the scoring system dispute began to be played out in the newspaper.

By July 30, the Soviets were predicting that their team would win the Olympic Games. The UP story indicated that the Soviets were “asserting that they use the official standings,” which showed them owning 453 points and the Americans 349.25.⁶⁵ The same report noted that if the other scoring system were utilized, the Soviet advantage would be only 55.5 points. An unnamed Soviet spokesperson was quoted in the story. “The Soviet Union will be the winner of the games. We came here to win and we will win.”

The UP released another story connected to the race for the most points two days later. It indicated that the United States “appeared certain” to win the unofficial championship because of the strong showing of American swimmers, divers, and boxers and the poor showing by Soviet athletes in those same sports.⁶⁶ The Soviets held a slight lead (523.5 to 499) if the generally accepted point scoring system was applied. They also continued to hold an advantage over the Americans (51.5 points) under their scoring rules. The report noted that based on anticipated results in the final two days of competition the United States would overtake the Soviet Union and “win under the generally accepted point system.” It added that the Russians would win “under its own code.”

As expected, the United States dominated the final full day of Olympic competition and overtook the Soviets to claim the unofficial scoring title. American athletes won medals in swimming, diving, and boxing, and the U.S. basketball team beat the Soviets in the gold medal game.⁶⁷ (The combined results gave the Americans a 610 to 553.5 lead under the Western-approved scoring system.) Danzig, reporter for the *Times*, summarized America’s “tremendous sweep of honors,” and added that “the Americans have completely killed off the challenge of the Soviet Republic . . . to maintain their traditional supremacy.”

Danzig’s report included a lengthy recap of the basketball game, which the Americans won 36 to 25. But it did not include the positive comments the American team made about the Soviets. A separate story, disseminated by UP and carried in the *Times*, did. The Americans praised the Soviet strategy of playing the game at a slow pace, which prevented the United States from taking advantage of their superior talent.⁶⁸ Bob Kurland, the center on the American team, said the Soviets made an impression on the Americans. “Don’t kid yourself,” Kurland said. “In four years’ time, they will be tough to beat.”⁶⁹

The Soviets responded to losing the points lead, and it was noted by the UP. They had been consistently updating a scoreboard at their Olympic village that showed the total points every nation had garnered throughout the Helsinki Games. But once the Soviet Union fell behind the United States the scoreboard came down.⁷⁰

But the debate raged on even after the Olympic flame had been extinguished. An unsigned editorial appeared in the *Times* one day after the completion of the Games. The editorial included praise for “the good showing made by the representatives of the Soviet Union and the satellite countries.” But a return to the strident criticism of the Soviet government followed in the next paragraph. “It is our earnest hope . . . that some of the real spirit of the Olympic Games will percolate into the enslaved world. The returning athletes can tell a significant story if they are allowed to do

so. Some of them really 'fraternized,' and it is only to be devoutly hoped that such good spirits will not be eventually dampened in Siberia."⁷¹

The editorial dismissed the confusion surrounding the differing point systems that were used to determine which nation was winning the Olympic Games. But just one day later, the Soviets were once again claiming they had won the Helsinki Games. The Soviet newspaper *Pravda* published a story that was picked up by Salisbury, Moscow correspondent for the *Times*. He wrote that the *Pravda* article asserted that the USSR scored more points and won more medals than any other nation. Salisbury pointed out that the Soviet account failed to mention a final point total. He also noted that "there was some question in the minds of Moscow observers [about the Soviet claims] because there has been a continuing discrepancy between the lists published here of the Soviet and American medal winners and those carried by the American press and London radio."⁷²

Two days later, the Soviets issued a new claim: Soviet and American athletes scored the exact same number of points during the 15th Summer Olympic Games. Salisbury reviewed an interview that the head of the Soviet Sports Committee gave to *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. Nikolai Romanov returned to the familiar Soviet theme that biased judging had affected selected events and, by extension, the final scoring totals. He was quoted saying, "There is no doubt that had there been just refereeing in all types of sport, the athletes of the Soviet and of certain other countries would have received a significantly larger number of places." Romanov added that the unfair rulings in the final days of competition consistently favored the Americans and hampered the Soviets.⁷³

The debate about total points and scoring systems clouded the 1952 Games, and medal tables would be an unfortunate part of all subsequent Olympic Games. In the end, the issue remained part of the Olympics because both the Soviet Union and the United States sought to score political points while earning "unofficial" Olympic points.

The *Times* devoted numerous articles and editorials to the actions and attitudes of Soviet athletes. It scrutinized the debate about the scoring system. But during the two weeks of athletic competition, it did provide some reporting about the athletic achievements of Soviet Olympians. The *Times* picked up an AP story on the first day of the Games that reviewed how the Soviets built a lead in men's gymnastics.⁷⁴ (The United States did not enter a team.)

Two days later, another AP report summarized how the Soviet women's gymnastics team also dominated the opening round of its competition. The report, which indicated that the United States was far behind, in ninth place, was two paragraphs long and buried toward the bottom of the page.⁷⁵ Three days later, the AP reviewed the final night of the women's gymnastics events, which the Soviets again dominated. The report, which also did not get prominent play in the *Times*, indicated that the Soviets not only won the competition but also had the top six finishers in the horse vault,⁷⁶ had seven of the top-ten scores in the parallel bars, and placed three of the top six in the floor exercise. By comparison, the top performer for the United States finished 44th.⁷⁷

Another story mentioned that a Soviet male set a new Olympic mark in a rifle event and missed a world record by one point.⁷⁸

Soviet weightlifters were the subject of several stories. One report recapped the opening day of that sport's competition. It described how "Russian muscle

men” won gold medals in two weight classes.⁷⁹ Two days later, the first of two controversies developed after the Soviet team questioned a three-judge ruling that credited an American with completing a lift. A member of the Soviet team, Trofim Lomakin, responded with his own lift that beat the Americans’ mark and secured a gold medal. Lomakin later criticized the officiating, arguing that the judges refused to credit the lift of one of his teammates because they did not want him to set a new world record.⁸⁰ One day later, it was the American’s turn to make an accusation. A team official publicly accused the Soviets of sniffing something during competition. Dietrich Wortmann claimed the following:

It was a drug, or a stimulant, or something. Anyhow, before each bottle of the stuff would be put under the competitor’s nose and he’d take a deep whiff. Then his eyes would become glassy and he’d lift like a maniac. I don’t think it gave them any strength, but it probably relaxed them and made them not afraid of the bars. Whatever it was, it made them seem unconscious of anything else about them. They looked dazed.⁸¹

No Soviet official appeared in the article, meaning only one side of the story was presented. Similarly, no one from the sport’s governing body commented on the claim. And the *Times* never followed up on the story, guaranteeing that its readers never learned whether the allegations were true. The lack of a follow-up story also ensured that the Soviet weightlifting delegation never had the opportunity to explain its side of the story to American readers.

The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had sharp political differences in 1952, and those differences carried over into the Olympic Games. Although Communists governed both countries, the relationship was in decline. Milovan Djilas, a former member of the Yugoslavian Communist Party, suggested that one of the reasons for the break in the relationship was that Stalin wanted the Yugoslavs to subordinate their interests to those of the Soviets, and the Yugoslavs refused. The effect, Djilas argued, was that Stalin no longer controlled the Yugoslavian revolution, and he no longer wanted to support it.⁸² The Soviets and the Yugoslavs met twice during the 1952 Olympic soccer competition. Axelsson—the *Times* correspondent who earlier in the Games wrote the article accusing the Soviets of trying to spread communist propaganda—covered both matches.

The first match occurred near the end of the preliminary competition. The Yugoslavs held a commanding 5-1 lead before the Soviets rallied to score four goals in the final fifteen minutes. The 5-5 tie kept alive the gold medal chances for both countries. Axelsson wrote that those spectators “who had come to see blood were disappointed for play was clean throughout although at times rough. The fouls, fist fights and stretcher cases that had been predicted did not occur.”⁸³

The same could not be said of the rematch, which the Yugoslavs won 3 to 1, knocking the Soviets out of medal competition. The Yugoslavs won the game but lost a couple of important players to injury in the process. Axelsson reported that “as the game wore on the Russians noticed that they had little success in going for the ball, [so] they went for the men instead.” Axelsson added that the Yugoslavs lined up after the game “for the customary handshake but the Russian team would have none of that.”⁸⁴

The achievements of Soviet athletes often included physical descriptions that were not used to describe members of the American Olympic team. Two examples

are cited here. Soviet shot putter Galina Zybina was described as “a big, blonde Russian” after she set a new Olympic and world record in her event. Zybina’s accomplishment was mentioned in one paragraph deep inside a story summarizing how American Bob Matthias had earned in second straight Olympic decathlon gold medal.⁸⁵ Otar Korkia starred in the Soviet’s quarterfinal basketball win over Chile, scoring 38 points. In its report, the AP called Korkia a “balding giant with a fierce black mustache.”⁸⁶

Conclusion

This article reviewed *New York Times* coverage of the Soviet Union’s entrance into the Olympic Games. The author examined stories written by employees of the *Times* as well as reports filed by three wire services. As expected, stories disseminated by *Times* reporters and columnists consistently demonstrated a negative tone toward the USSR. The *Times* adopted two themes in its coverage of the Soviet Olympic team.

First, the Soviets’ decision to join the Olympics was based on politics, not sport. There was substantial evidence to support this theme. The Soviet Union was not going to allow its athletes to compete in an international event unless it was sure that those athletes would succeed. The Kremlin was determined to use sports as a propaganda tool and demonstrate that success on the athletic field was linked to the virtues of socialism. In 1923, the Soviet press lauded the victories that a Soviet soccer team earned against a team from Sweden. That was not the only example of the use of athletic success for political purposes. In 1951, the Soviet basketball team traveled to Paris and won the European Championships. Robert Edelman quoted the following statement from the newspaper *Sovietskii Sport*: “The Soviet basketball team, sent by the army of our physical culturalists [*sic*] to the European championship, convincingly demonstrated in the capital of France the advantages of the Soviet school of basketball, the most progressive and advanced in the world.”⁸⁷ The *Times* criticized the Soviets for this marriage of sports and politics and allowed its columnists to lead the assault. Daley was the most strident critic, but he did not limit his attacks on the Soviets to his columns. He and former *Times* columnist John Kieran wrote a regularly revised book that summarized each Olympic Games. They claimed that the Soviets’ entrance into the Games coupled with their intense use of sports for propaganda purposes permanently scarred the Olympic movement. “Never before were the Olympic values so distorted. Instead of a great athletic carnival involving the athletes of sixty-seven nations, this had become in the eyes of the entire world a dual meet between the United States and the Soviet Union. Not for a moment did (the Olympics) ever escape from that unfortunate characterization.”⁸⁸

The second theme suggested that the Soviets would abandon all morals in pursuit of athletic superiority over the United States and the West. Before the Games began, *Times* coverage wavered between skepticism and wariness about the athletic potential of Soviet athletes. On the one hand, Soviet claims that some of their athletes established world records while participating in events behind the Iron Curtain were seriously questioned by the *Times* and other news organizations. But, on the other hand, *Times* reporters seemed convinced that the Soviets had to be good or (returning to the first theme) they would not be allowed to depart the

USSR and attend the Olympic Games. Once the Games started, the doubts about the legitimacy of the Soviet athletic program continued. The new scoring system may have seemed like a trivial example, but to the *Times* it demonstrated that the Soviets would go to great lengths to show they had created an athletic system that could beat the Americans. The repeated Soviet complaints of biased judging served as another means of demonstrating that the Soviets would not accept that their athletes were “second best.” And the allegations that Soviet weightlifters were sniffing some substance immediately before competing provided even more evidence that the Soviets would do whatever it took to win an Olympic medal.

The criticism of the Soviet Union would not have been possible without the endorsement of *Times* management. And there was little doubt that the men who ran the *New York Times* were no fans of communism. The 1947 Kriesberg study that showed news unfavorable to the Soviet Union appeared more often in the *Times* than did news that was favorable has already been referred to in this article. But that was not the only study showing bias. Journalists Charles Merz, who worked at the *Times*, and Walter Lippmann coauthored a study in 1920. It found that in the first two years of the Soviet Union’s existence (November 1917 through November 1919), the *Times* reported on ninety-one separate occasions that the Bolshevik regime was on the brink of collapse or had already fallen. Salisbury, the *Times* correspondent once stationed in Moscow, noted that Lippmann and Merz concluded “the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see.”⁸⁹ Salisbury added that the paper’s management team was stung by the criticism. But it did not alter its overarching editorial policy toward the USSR. Adolph Ochs and Arthur Sulzberger were the men most responsible for the bias that appeared in the newspaper. Ochs was the *Times* publisher from 1896 until 1935. Under his watch, the newspaper disseminated the incorrect perception that the Bolsheviks were on the verge of being swept out of power. Sulzberger succeeded Ochs and held the title until 1961.

Sulzberger traveled to the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and left with a sense that the Soviet people were despondent and in fear.⁹⁰ Stalin had eliminated all his potential political rivals and secured his grip on power. Toward the end of World War II, Sulzberger made another trip to Moscow, and left even more convinced that the USSR was pursuing a hostile policy toward America.⁹¹ That fear of the Soviet Union and Communism never left him.⁹²

Thus it does not seem hard to understand how this policy of worrying about the Soviet Union’s geopolitical aims could easily creep into *Times* coverage of Soviet athletes. The position of the *Times* was that these athletes were political tokens to be used in any way the Kremlin saw fit. They were programmed to be champions and to convince the world that socialism was the wave of the future. None of this was acceptable for the *Times*, and it influenced the newspaper’s coverage of one of the most critical periods in the history of the Olympic Games.

Notes

1. “Russia” (the Russian Empire) competed in the 1908 and 1912 Summer Games.
2. Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 7.

3. Ibid., 11.
4. Gary Rawnsley, *Cold War Propaganda in the 1950s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 33.
5. John Calhoun Merrill, *The Elite Press* (New York: Pitman Publishing Company, 1968), 13.
6. Martin Kriesberg, "Soviet News in the New York Times" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, winter 1946-1947, 540.
7. Examples include "immoral" or "unreasonable."
8. Jim Riordan, "Rewriting Soviet Sports History," *Journal of Sport History*, 20, Winter 1993, 251.
9. "Accent on Streamlined Games as Olympic Group Meets in Rome, *New York Times*, April 25, 1949.
10. "Soviet Paper Hints Entry in Olympics," *New York Times*, December 28, 1949.
11. "Olympic Group Puzzled," *New York Times*, May 15, 1950.
12. Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 133.
13. Avery Brundage to Sigfrid Edstrom, October 26, 1946, Box 42, University of Illinois Archives, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-1975 in Richard Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 27.
14. Victor Peppard and James Riordan, *Playing Politics: Soviet Sports Diplomacy to 1992* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1993), 66.
15. Edstrom to Brundage, November 14, 1950, Box 43, Brundage Collection in Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games*, 35.
16. John Rendel, "Promise of Soviet Cited By Brundage," *New York Times*, February 6, 1952.
17. English and French were then and are now the only "official" Olympic languages.
18. The Soviets considered Spain a fascist country led by a man (Franco) who had ordered the deaths of many socialists during the Spanish civil war.
19. Brundage to Edstrom, January 21, 1947, Box 42, Brundage Papers in Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games*, 28.
20. Ibid.
21. Peppard and Riordan, *Playing Politics: Soviet Sports Diplomacy to 1992*, 34.
22. "Athletic Successes Stir Russians; Olympics Eyed, *New York Times*, August 25, 1950.
23. "Soviet [sic] to Compete in '52 Olympics; Will Participate for the First Time," *New York Times*, April 26, 1951.
24. "Russia at the Olympics," *New York Times*, April 26, 1951.
25. Arthur Daley, "Welcoming Our Red Brothers," *New York Times*, April 26, 1951.
26. "Brundage Comments on Move," *New York Times*, April 26, 1951. The IOC had a long-standing concern about whether the Soviet National Olympic Committee could act independently of the Soviet government. As early as 1947, a member of the IOC Executive Committee reported that it was "impossible to create a [National] Olympic Committee independent of the government." See James Riordan, "The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, 2, 1993, 28.
27. "Soviet Is Accepted for the Olympics," *New York Times*, May 8, 1951.

28. Ibid.
29. "45 Accept Olympic Bid: Sixty-Five Expected for Helsinki Games—Russia a Question," *New York Times*, November 24, 1951.
30. "Olympics to Attract 70 Nations, Possibly Russia, Says Brundage," *New York Times*, November 30, 1951.
31. "Russia Announces Plan to Enter Select Teams in 1952 Olympics," *New York Times*, December 28, 1951.
32. Arthur Daley, "What Does It Mean?," *New York Times*, January 6, 1952.
33. "28 Nations in Winter Olympics; Russia Out as Deadline Passes," *New York Times*, January 1, 1952.
34. "Russians Request Entry in Olympics," *New York Times*, January 16, 1952.
35. "Russians Out as Curtain Falls on Participation in Oslo Games," *New York Times*, February 2, 1952.
36. "Soviet Girls Seen Best Olympic Bets," *New York Times*, August 26, 1951.
37. Harry Schwartz, "Stalin Trains His Olympic Teams," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 20, 1952, 19.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 58.
40. Arthur Daley, "The Olympic Enigma," *New York Times*, July 16, 1952.
41. "Rivalry Between U.S. and Russia To Enliven Helsinki Competition," *New York Times*, July 6, 1952.
42. "20 Russian Sailors Reach Games Site," *New York Times*, July 6, 1952.
43. "Olympic Weekend," *New York Times*, July 5, 1952.
44. "Curtain of Silence Shrouds U.S., Reds," *New York Times*, July 9, 1952.
45. "Russians Suddenly Turn Friendly and Open Their Camp to Visitors," *New York Times*, July 10, 1952.
46. "U.S., Soviet Crews Hit Friendly Note," *New York Times*, July 12, 1952.
47. Allison Danzig, "East Meets West Under Red Banner," *New York Times*, July 14, 1952.
48. Allison Danzig, "Flame Is Ignited: Games of the 15th Olympiad Begin at Helsinki as the Cannon Roars," *New York Times*, July 20, 1952.
49. Harrison Salisbury, "Pep Talk by Soviet Press Urge Red Athletes to Annex Crowns," *New York Times*, July 20, 1952.
50. George Axelsson, "Communists Defy Truce Tradition to Spread Propaganda at Classic," *New York Times*, July 22, 1952. The World Federation of Democratic Youth had been formed in 1945 as an antifascist group but soon became noted for its leftist and communist leanings.
51. George Axelsson, "Russian Athletes on Good Behavior," *New York Times*, July 27, 1952.
52. Harrison E. Salisbury, "Soviet Press Finds U.S., Russians Speaking 'Language of Friendship,'" *New York Times*, July 28, 1952.
53. Harrison E. Salisbury, "Russians' Note of Joy at Showing Soured by Complaints on Officials," *New York Times*, August 3, 1952.
54. See "Pentathlon Protest By Russia Rejected," *New York Times*, July 25, 1952; "Amicability Drops in Weight Lifting," *New York Times*, July 28, 1952; "Russians Hit Officials: Moscow Radio Charges Unfair Decisions in Boxing Bouts," *New York Times*, August 2, 1952.

55. "Russians Say U.S. Tried to Bar Amity at Helsinki," *New York Times*, August 6, 1952.
56. "Americans Visit Russian Camp," *New York Times*, July 22, 1952.
57. "Russians Get Arms Aid Without Being in NATO," *New York Times*, July 24, 1952.
58. "U.S., Russia Agree On Steaks, Rowing," *New York Times*, July 25, 1952.
59. Photograph, *New York Times*, July 27, 1952.
60. "Russians Trumpet Note of Victory Pitched to Their Own Scoring Key," *New York Times*, July 31, 1952.
61. "Women Give Soviet Edge," *New York Times*, July 26, 1952.
62. Soviet women scored a combined 139 points in those two sports compared with just one point for the United States.
63. "Russians at the Olympics," *New York Times*, July 27, 1952.
64. "The Olympic Spirit," *New York Times*, July 27, 1952.
65. "Russians Trumpet Note of Victory Pitched to Their Own Scoring Key," *New York Times*, July 31, 1952.
66. "U.S. Appears Certain to Defeat Russia for Unofficial Team Title," *New York Times*, August 2, 1952.
67. Allison Danzig, "U.S. Clinches Olympic Games Unofficial Title: Russia Overtaken," *New York Times*, August 3, 1952.
68. See Allison Danzig, "American Quintet Triumphs by 86-58," *New York Times*, July 29, 1952. The teams met during the preliminary round and the United States routed the Soviet Union, 86-58. Danzig filed a lengthy report of that game. He noted that it "was fought ruggedly but cleanly and without the slightest flare-up and ended with the players shaking hands and exchanging friendly pots all around."
69. "U.S. Coach and Players Praise Soviet Strategy," *New York Times*, August 3, 1952.
70. "Russians Decide Scores Don't Matter After All," *New York Times*, August 3, 1952.
71. "Olympic Victories," *New York Times*, August 4, 1952.
72. Harrison E. Salisbury, "Russians Hail Olympic 'Victory' But Fail to Substantiate Claim," *New York Times*, August 5, 1952.
73. Harrison E. Salisbury, "Russians Recount, Then Recant; Concede Tie to U.S. in Olympics," *New York Times*, August 7, 1952.
74. "Soviet Gymnasts Take Early Lead," *New York Times*, July 20, 1952.
75. "Russian Gymnasts Lead: Switzerland Next at End of Compulsory Olympic Tests," *New York Times*, July 21, 1952.
76. Today this event is commonly referred to simply as the "vault."
77. "Russian Women Excel: They Dominate the Competition," *New York Times*, July 24, 1952.
78. "Rifle Mark to Russian," *New York Times*, July 28, 1952.
79. "Russians Set 2 Records: Olympic Weight-Lifters Take Gold Medals in 2 Classes," *New York Times*, July 26, 1952.
80. "Amicability Drops in Weightlifting: Russians Loudly Protest U.S. Athlete's Military Press—Two Americans Triumph," *New York Times*, July 28, 1952.
81. "Russians Sniffed Some Suspicious Stuff, Says U.S. Official After Weight-Lifting," *New York Times*, July 29, 1952.
82. Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 82.

83. George Axelsson, "Yugoslavia Tied by Soviet Eleven," *New York Times*, July 21, 1952.
84. George Axelsson, "Yugoslavia Beats Russia at Soccer," *New York Times*, July 23, 1952.
85. "World Record Set: Matthias Keeps Title as Campbell and Simmons Follow in Decathlon," *New York Times*, July 27, 1952.
86. "U.S. Quintet Takes Sixth in a Row, 57-53: Americans Rally to Beat Brazil as Lovelette Excels—Russia Trims Chile," *New York Times*, July 31, 1952.
87. *Sovietskii Sport*, May 19, 1951, in Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119.
88. John Kieran and Arthur Daley, *The Story of the Olympic Games: 776 BC to 1972* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1973), 233.
89. Harrison Salisbury, *Without Fear or Favor: The New York Times and Its Times* (New York: Times Books Co., 1980), 461.
90. *Ibid.*, 468.
91. *Ibid.*
92. *Ibid.*