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. 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.” 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. 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.

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 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. 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. Kriesberg added that the Times often characterized the Soviet leadership as lacking the kind of virtues that American politicians had. Finally, his study reported that positive depictions