

**DEVELOPING WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP  
ICE HOCKEY IN THE USSR:  
THE INSIDE STORY, 1946-1972**

by  
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### Abstract

This thesis examines the history of the Soviet Union's ice hockey program as a social and political institution. The standard view, as expressed in the currently available secondary sources, is that Soviet sport was highly centralized and heavily politicized. Through an examination of unpublished archival documents and Russian-language biographical materials, this thesis will offer a more nuanced interpretation of one sport, the game of ice hockey. It is the author's contention that ice hockey was not monolithic in its structure, but was subject to the influence of several competing interest groups and individuals. Political indoctrination was superficial and interference by the authorities was limited. In reality, while eager to take credit for major international victories, the bureaucracy was reluctant to sanction international matches, and was content to leave the sport in the hands of professional coaches and specialists. This distance from politics, it will be argued, was the principle reason for the success of the sport in the USSR.



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## Introduction

If one were to briefly summarize the history of the Soviet ice-hockey program as it is usually understood, it would unfold as follows. Shortly after World War II the Soviet leadership decided to reintegrate itself into international sport as a means of enhancing the nation's international prestige. By 1946 the decision had been made to dominate the world of amateur sport, especially the Olympic games. As a part of their preparations for the Olympics, the Soviets created Canadian style ice-hockey.

Up until 1946, Soviets played a different indigenous variant of ice-hockey, known as bandy.<sup>1</sup> But, as Canadian style ice-hockey was the recognized Olympic variant, the sports authorities slashed resources to traditional Russian ice-hockey and forced the nation's best bandy players to adopt the new and unfamiliar Canadian version. Led by the ice-hockey genius and founder of the Soviet program, coach Anatoly Tarasov, the Soviets quickly mastered the new game. Prodded by the Party authorities, who aggressively promoted the new ice-hockey, the Soviet players stepped out onto the international arena. Using iron-discipline and a rigid ideology, Tarasov created a new Soviet style of play, featuring a collective playing style and a cold, rational on-ice demeanour. The Soviets steadily improved, coming to dominate international amateur hockey in the 1960's. They achieved their

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<sup>1</sup> A domestic variant of ice hockey evolved in Russia and Scandinavia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which came to be known as 'bandy'. Although, Canadian style ice-hockey had eclipsed bandy in popularity throughout Scandinavia by the 1930's, the game continued to enjoy pre-eminence in the USSR until the mid-1950's. Bandy can be most easily described as a cross between field hockey and Olympic style ice-hockey. Like Canadian ice-hockey, the game is played on ice with sticks, and the objective is to strike a projectile into a goal, which is defended by a designated goal-tender. However in bandy there are 9 to 11 players on each team; the nets are much larger; the projectile is a small round ball, not a puck; the playing surface is much larger; and the players use short, curved sticks, similar to those used in field hockey.

ultimate triumph in 1972, when they proved themselves the equal of NHL professionals. In short, ice-hockey was a successful example of the potential of the totalitarian state to influence society, and to make significant achievements. In this essay, relying almost exclusively on Soviet archival and published sources, I will attempt to prove that the neat, commonly believed picture presented above is in fact wrong.

### *Review of existing literature*

This standard view is not so much argued as it is assumed by most writers who have touched on the subject in the past. It should immediately be stated that the existing literature on this subject is quite limited. Most Western literature on Soviet ice-hockey to this point has taken the form of newspaper articles, and the recollections of players and journalists who had some sort of contact with the Soviet game. The authors typically examine their subject from a Canadian point of view, and the analysis of the Soviet system *per se* is consequentially superficial.

The only full-length English language book to focus exclusively on the Soviet ice-hockey program is Lawrence Martin's 1990 book, *The Red Machine*. Although Martin's book goes into greater depth than any previous account of the Soviet ice-hockey system, he is generally in agreement with his predecessors about the basic nature of the sports program. Olympic ice-hockey was adopted in the USSR because:

The symbol of sporting supremacy was the Olympic Games. Canadian-style hockey, not Russian hockey, was the Olympic sport. If the supremacy plan [of the Politburo] was to be carried out in the sport, the

mission was therefore clear: rapid development of the Canadian game.<sup>2</sup>

Martin also concurs with the usual judgement that Tarasov was the man most responsible for development of the Soviet program, calling him the Soviet Union's "hockey Buddha".<sup>3</sup>

In spite of its focus on the Soviet game, Martin wrote from a Canadian point of view, for a Canadian audience. His book is not an academic study, but a popular journalistic work, and he places an undue emphasis on the aspects of the Soviet ice-hockey system that would surprise, intrigue or shock the typical Canadian ice-hockey fan. As a result, he is inclined to a certain degree of sensationalism and exaggeration which is evident immediately from the book's subtitle: *The Soviet Quest to Dominate Canada's Game*. His book is, on the whole, an excellent introduction to the history of the Soviet ice-hockey program. But he tends to accept unquestioningly many of the stereotypes of Soviet hockey: the primacy of Tarasov, the iron discipline and dictatorship of its coaches, and the ubiquity of ideology and politics.

In addition to *The Red Machine*, there is a fair amount of literature available on the subject of the Soviet ice-hockey program, which would fall into the categories of biography or journalism. However, almost none of it is available in English. The only other English language book I am aware of which focuses even in part on Soviet ice-hockey -- from a Soviet point of view -- is Yuri Brokhin's *The Big Red Machine*. Brokhin, a Soviet journalist who defected in the 1970's, wrote his book as a muck-raking 'tell all exposé' about the sordid history of Soviet sport. His hockey chapter is certainly interesting. Unfortunately, Brokhin makes so many elementary factual errors, it is hard

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Martin, *The Red Machine*, (Toronto, 1990), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, *The Red Machine*, 50.

to take him seriously as a source. For example, he correctly notes that Czech victories at the 1969 World Championships over the Soviet national team sparked riots in Prague. But he incorrectly places the championships themselves in Prague, and writes that Gustav Husak put the demonstrations down. In fact, the championship itself had taken place in Stockholm, and Aleksandr Dubcek was still the Czechoslovak General-Secretary.<sup>4</sup> His account of Anatoly Tarasov's dismissal as coach of the Soviet Army team -- one of the best known incidents in the history of Soviet sport -- is completely wrong. Later Brokhin asserts that one famous Soviet player, Aleksandr Almetov, died in the early 1970's. This is hard to reconcile with the fact that journalist Evgeniy Rubin recalls Almetov coming to visit him in New York in the early 1990's, apparently still alive.<sup>5</sup> One could go on but, suffice it to say, Brokhin confuses so many well-known details about Soviet ice-hockey that the accuracy of his observations has to be seriously called into question.

To the best of my knowledge there have been no academic books published on the subject of Soviet ice-hockey. There are however, two general studies of Soviet sport, as a social and historical

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<sup>4</sup> It is a little known fact that Aleksandr Dubcek was not deposed immediately after the Prague Spring. Although the 1968 events were doubtlessly the root reason for Dubcek's ouster, the immediate cause for his removal was the Prague hockey riots of 1969:

"It is often forgotten that Dubcek remained First Secretary, and at least notionally in power, for as long after the invasion as he had been before it. Soviet documents published since the end of the cold war confirm what was common knowledge in Prague at the time: that Dubcek's political survival was no part of the Soviet plan. Led on by misleading KGB intelligence assessments and treacherous letters of invitation from hacks in the Czechoslovak Communist Party, the Soviet leaders had believed that they could quickly get the leadership in Prague that they wanted. The failure to achieve this, and the public exposure of the invasion as deeply unpopular, had a lasting impact on the Soviet leadership and on the fate of orthodox communism.

April 1969... marked the real Czechoslovak capitulation. The Soviet leaders had lost patience with the regime's failure to return to the fold of "democratic centralism". Their excuse was the first episode of violence against the invaders, the so-called "hockey match riot" in Prague on 28-29 March, when the Aeroflot airline office in Wenceslas square was damaged."

Adam Roberts, "Prague's late-flowering spring," *New Statesman*, August 14, 1998.

23 February 2004, <[http://www.findarticles.com/m0FQP/n4398\\_y127/21076097/p1/article.html](http://www.findarticles.com/m0FQP/n4398_y127/21076097/p1/article.html)>

<sup>5</sup> Yuri Brokhin, *The Big Red Machine* (New York, 1978), 169-192.

institution: Henry Morton's *Soviet Sport*<sup>6</sup> and James Riordan's *Sport in Soviet Society*.<sup>7</sup> Both of these works were useful in preparing the present study. But, because they covered the history of all sport well, they cover individual sports very poorly. Ice-hockey is almost totally ignored. This decision by the respective authors is hard to reconcile with the sport's popularity in the USSR. Morton's study does not make a single reference to ice-hockey, and in Riordan's 400-page history the Canadian variant garners only one fleeting reference.

Norman Shneidman's 1978 study *The Soviet Road to Olympus*<sup>8</sup> was published in Canada and it gives hockey its due. Nevertheless, Shneidman's study is intended to focus on physical education, rather than history. Schneidman's principal concern is to elucidate what techniques and approaches had made Soviet athletes successful, not to write a history of sport.

It was Robert Edelman's 1993 study of spectator sports in the USSR, *Serious Fun*, which gave Soviet ice hockey its first substantial scholarly treatment. Edelman clues into the fact that there is something unique about hockey, football and, to a much lesser degree, basketball in the USSR, in that they were popular spectator sports, with a broad mass following. Nevertheless, Edelman's study focuses primarily on one aspect of ice-hockey: as a mass entertainment and propaganda tool. He does not attempt to give a general history of the sport's development. Furthermore, as Edelman wrote his book in the early post-Soviet period, he did not benefit from the proliferation of candid biographical materials, and the opening of the relevant archival data, which took place in the mid to

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<sup>6</sup> Henry W. Morton, *Soviet Sports: A School for Communism* (Ph. D thesis, Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society* (Bristol, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Shneidman, N. N. *The Soviet Road to Olympus: Theory and Practice of Soviet Physical Culture and Sport*. (Toronto, 1978).



late 1990's. He tends to rely mainly on accounts from the Soviet press, a smattering of Communist era memoirs, and his personal experiences, as well as the recollections of his Russian contacts and acquaintances.

As the available English language literature is devoid of an academic study of the history of the Soviet ice-hockey program, this thesis will be the first. For this reason, I decided to use a narrative style in laying out as broad a picture as possible of my subject matter. In addition to a new topic, I was also able to gain access to new sources, in addition to the existing literature and available materials from the Soviet press. Most importantly, through the Centre for Research on Canadian-Russian Relations, and my own travels to Russia, I was able to examine to several hundred pages of material from the archives of the Hockey Section of the Soviet Sports Committee, which are stored in the State Archives of the Russian Federation in Moscow. Secondly, while in Moscow I was able to read more than a dozen memoirs and biographies, which have been written since the collapse of the USSR by men who witnessed the evolution of the Soviet sports program first hand.

Of the available Russian works, Semen Vaikhanskiy's *Golden Encyclopaedia* was especially useful. Vaikhanskiy has, for fifty years, been a sports journalists based out of Leningrad, specializing in ice-hockey. His chief source of information, aside from his own recollections, is Nikolay Puchkov. Puchkov is a superb source, having served as the USSR national team's goaltender in 1950's, Anatoly Tarasov's assistant coach in the 1960's and, for brief period of time, coach of the Soviet national team, in the 1970's. Although it is done in a journalistic style, the *Golden Encyclopaedia* lays out the history of ice-hockey's development in a clear chronological

fashion, which was a great help in providing a chronological context for archival materials, and the more chaotic memoirs of other hockey personalities. Evgeniy Rubin's memoirs *Pan ili Propal?* also stands out as an excellent source. Rubin was *Sovetskiy Sport's* principal hockey writer from 1958 to 1969, and with *Football-Hockey* from 1969 until his emigration to the United States in 1977. Thus he was well positioned to interact not only with players and coaches, but also with leading sports bureaucrats and officials. The newspaper, *Sovetskiy Sport*, was also consulted extensively, and extremely useful. In addition to these sources, in writing this thesis I have consulted a wide variety of memoirs and biographies, of varying quality, by or about leading hockey figures such as Anatoly Tarasov, Arkady Chernyshev, Nikolay Epshtein, Vsevolod Bobrov, Vyacheslav Fetisov, Igor Larionov, Vladislav Tretiak, and others. These biographies are listed in the bibliography. Most of them were produced during or after the advent of perestroika, and offer a new, valuable and frank perspectives on the history of Soviet ice-hockey, from the inside.

#### *A Brief History of the Soviet International Ice-Hockey Program*

My examination of the history of Soviet ice-hockey, with the help of these previously unavailable sources, revealed a picture quite different from that which exists in the available English language materials. For this reason, what began as a project to write the history of the Soviet ice-hockey program, soon transformed into a project to re-write it.

As we have already noted, most existing sources take for granted the notion that ice-hockey was deliberately created and aggressively pushed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as an

international propaganda tool. A closer inspection of the available Russian sources reveals a much more nuanced picture of ice-hockey's origins. It is true that Canadian style ice-hockey came about as a result of a decision by bureaucrats in the Soviet Sports Committee during the mid-1940's.

However, far from having a clear, precise plan for developing international ice-hockey in the USSR, the CPSU itself was not the origin of this decision. In fact, the Communist Party was so indifferent to the fate of ice-hockey, that the Komsomol<sup>9</sup> actually made a concerted effort to kill the sport in 1948. This effort very nearly succeeded, and was foiled only through an unusual display of courage on the part of the leading sports figures of the day, head of the Sports Committee Nikolay Romanov.

In his 1993 memoirs, Romanov recalled that the decision to adopt ice hockey was not based on a clear directive from the Party, but rather upon his interpretation of a general directive:

In 1945 the question of the gradual entry into all international sports federations – especially for Olympic sports – was predetermined. Upon acquainting ourselves with the program of the Winter Olympic Games, we could not help but pay attention to puck hockey... However, nobody had yet played the sport, anywhere in the country...

Why was puck hockey not being cultivated in the USSR, when more countries play it than ball hockey? It was difficult to find an answer to this question.<sup>10</sup>

The Sports Committee concluded that it would take too long to develop an independent base for the Olympic hockey program, and that the nation's bandy players constituted the most readily available 'resource' for quickly building a competitive program. Thus in the winter of 1946, an order went out that all the nation's elite bandy players were immediately to switch to play puck hockey. The 1946/47 championship was successfully concluded, with widespread fan interest,

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<sup>9</sup> Young Communist League: the youth wing of the CPSU.

<sup>10</sup> Nikolay N. Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie na Olymp* (Moscow: Sovetskiy Sport, 1993), 38. Unless otherwise noted, throughout this paper all translations have been done by the author.

thanks in large part to the fact that the countries most famous football<sup>11</sup> stars of the day had taken up the sport successfully. However, after the 1947/48 season got underway, puck hockey was nearly wiped out in Russia. As Romanov describes it:

All of a sudden, in January 1948, an article entitled "A legal question" appeared in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which accused the Sports Committee -- and me personally -- of destroying Russian hockey in favour of Canadian hockey, that this was unforgivable, and so on...<sup>12</sup>

Romanov challenged the Komsomol Central Committee on the article; but it responded by asserting that the article was published with their full consent and support. On Romanov's orders, the official newspaper of the Sports Committee, *Sovetskiy Sport*, fired back, publishing a counter-condemnation entitled "Unnecessary Resistance." However, this rather dangerous strategy backfired, as *Komsomolskaya Pravda* responded with a much more aggressive article entitled "Restore the Rights of Russian Hockey!"

Romanov realized that he was playing with fire. *Sovetskiy Sport* could not win a war of words with the Komsomol. The fact that his rival insisted on referring to ball hockey as "Russian hockey" put the Sports Committee on especially treacherous grounds. One must not forget that these events were unfolding in 1948, in the years of high Stalinism. Attempting to replace a Russian cultural institution with a foreign innovation could quite easily be considered a capital crime. To save the sport, and himself, Romanov decided to appeal to a higher power:

I reported the essence of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*'s criticism to K.E. Voroshilov<sup>13</sup>, and expressed our disagreement. I explained in detail that puck hockey -- sometimes called Canadian hockey -- has many good qualities and is useful for the youth. Moreover, we must prepare for the future -- for the Olympic games.

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<sup>11</sup> As in soccer. The term football will be used throughout to describe this sport because this is the term that the Soviets (and British sources) use. The American variant of the sport was, of course, totally absent in the USSR.

<sup>12</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, a leading member of the Politburo responsible for the army.

We asked K.E. Voroshilov to watch a game of puck hockey. He agreed... Already, towards the end of the first period, judging by his comments and questions, I felt that K.E. Voroshilov liked the game.

Romanov had timed Voroshilov's visit perfectly -- it just so happened that his rival, N.

Mikhailov, the Komsomol Secretary of the time, was present at the game:

During a break Voroshilov asked Mikhailov 'What is this hockey called?'

He answered that it was called both Canadian hockey and puck hockey.

Voroshilov jokingly said that this was incorrect, and that [puck hockey] should henceforth be called Russian hockey, because it suits the character of the Russian person: it requires courage, split-second reactions, resourcefulness and great endurance. And if necessary you can fight. All these qualities have to be developed in the Soviet youth. He made a special emphasis of the fact that he intended to recommend that the sport be developed in the Soviet Army.<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, Mikhailov was not about to argue with Voroshilov. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* immediately changed its tune, and began running positive articles about the Canadian variant.

This incident does much to cast doubt on the claim that ice hockey arose as part of a well crafted, conscious plan. The decision to switch to ice-hockey was an innovation of the Sports Committee. The Party was seemingly unaware of it; the Komsomol was hostile; and only through the timely intervention of a high ranking military official, was the sport saved. If Romanov has been less tenacious, or had not been so well connected, the foray into puck hockey could have easily been reversed. As well, this incident shows us, for the first time, the value of hockey's crucial ties to the Soviet Army. As we shall see, by playing off army support against Party meddling, Soviet hockey men were able to forge and maintain the independence their genius needed to take root.

Once ice-hockey was established in the USSR, the skill and passion of the Soviet players and coaches grew quickly. But rather than encouraging the development of the sport, the Party

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<sup>14</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 40-41.

continued to be at best indifferent, and at worst a serious obstacle to be overcome. One of the most serious problems was that, thanks to CPSU sports regulations, the Soviets had to learn international hockey without international matches. Far from encouraging international play, the Party all but forbade it. The Communist Party insisted that, prior to any international match, victory must be guaranteed. If the outcome was felt to be in any way in doubt, then permission to play would be refused.

This policy resulted in an unnecessarily slow integration into World Hockey. Officially, the USSR's first three international matches were played in 1948 against LTTs, the leading club team in the Czechoslovak national league.<sup>15</sup> Even though the Czech side was from a friendly Socialist nation, the Soviet match organizers were so afraid of defeat that the newspapers announced the games not as such, but as 'combined training sessions,' and publicity was kept to an absolute minimum.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, before authorizing these matches, sports authorities insisted on holding two secret games against the Czechs, to verify that the Soviet team was ready for the European champions. Had the Soviet team lost, the subsequent matches would never have been open to the public.<sup>17</sup>

Considering its inexperience, the Soviet team performed very well. The three-game series against the Czechs ended in one victory a piece, and one draw. But the early start in 1948 turned out to be an anomaly. Even though the team had proven that it could play on even terms with the best

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<sup>15</sup> Party authorities were willing to allow tightly contested matches against the Czechs to proceed, as an exception to the general rule. This was almost certainly a result of the fact that unlike other leading hockey nations, Czechoslovakia was a Peoples' Democracy.

<sup>16</sup> Anatoly Tarasov, *Put' k Sebe* (Moscow, 1974), 81.

<sup>17</sup> S.M.Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya Kniga Sbornoy SSSR Po Khokkeyu* (St. Petersburg, 2002).

team in Europe, it would be six years before the Soviets began to compete at the World Championships. It was not until 1952, that the Soviet Union joined the IIHF -- and even then the Soviet Union did not participate in the Winter Olympiad, because the Canadian team was deemed to be too strong.<sup>18</sup>

In 1953, the sports overseers in Moscow finally agreed to allow the USSR to play at the World Championships. However, after the team's best player Vsevolod Bobrov was injured, the Party controllers panicked and summoned the national team coaches in for an emergency meeting. As former goaltender Nikolay Puchkov recalls, coaches Egorov and Chernyshev were bluntly asked by a representative of the Communist Party Central Committee if they could *guarantee* victory. They said no, and the Soviet team was withdrawn.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet National Team went on to win a comfortable, but meaningless victory at the 1953 student games in Vienna.<sup>20</sup>

With Vsevolod Bobrov in good health, Moscow sports authorities finally allowed the team to participate in the 1954 World Championships. Still the fear of repercussions in the event of a defeat was ubiquitous in the sports bureaucracy. Low profile "reconnaissance" matches were held prior to the onset of the tournament. The USSR won easily against the Finnish and Swiss national teams, and against the Swedish second team. Only the Czechs gave them difficulties, as each team won one match in a two-game series.<sup>21</sup> Having proven themselves in exhibition play, the team was finally allowed to compete in 1954, and there won a stunning 7-2 victory against Canada to take first place.

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<sup>18</sup> Morton, *Soviet Sport*, 202; Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 96-97; Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 41; Tarasov, *Put'*, 83

<sup>19</sup> Video: *Velikoe Protivostoyanie: Anatoliy Tarasov i Vsevolod Bobrov*, Telekompaniye NTV, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 20.

The low profile coverage in *Sovetskiy Sport* that preceded the tournament finale gave way to jubilation in the article announcing the surprise victory to the nation. The highlight of the article was a long quotation from the Canadian coach, who was magnanimous in defeat and generous in praise for the Soviet team:

The Soviet sportsman brilliantly conducted the final game... we simply did not imagine that one can play hockey this way. We beat team Sweden by a large margin, but Team USSR only played to a tie... We, Canadian hockey players, were impressed by the work-ethic of the Russian team, and their ability to play the game at an unusually high tempo...<sup>22</sup>

The Soviet jubilation proved premature. From that point onward they would remain the pre-eminent team in Europe. However, the Canadians proved harder to beat. In 1955 the Soviets suffered a resounding defeat against a reinforced Canadian team from Penticton.<sup>23</sup> The Soviet team had grown accustomed to the European style of game, and found themselves unable to cope with the fearsome physical play of the Canadian team. As a remedy, the coaching staff sought more training matches with Canadian style teams. Though not ready for NHL clubs, the prospect of playing tier

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<sup>22</sup> V. Frolov, "Triumf Sovetskikh Khokkeistov: Kommanda SSSR - Chempion Mira i Evropy," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 9 March 1954. Or at least the Soviets claimed that he said this. Though this quote was cited on numerous occasions by the Soviet press, one cannot of course rule out the possibility that the Russians simply made it up, as this would be consistent with the journalistic practices of the day. It is worth noting a rather bizarre citation, also from 1954, which Henry Morton included in his 1959 study. The Soviet journalist in question attributed a long citation to Dwight Eisenhower, in which the then US President made a speech to a meeting of the YMCA, demanding that they must 'cultivate the bloodiest sports possible' to raise the American youth in a spirit of violence and hatred, and to prepare them for the carnage on the battlefield of the 'imperialist war' that he was planning. For the record, Eisenhower's office wrote Morton a letter officially denying that the President had ever made any such statement. (Morton, *Soviet Sport*)

<sup>23</sup> Up until 1954 Canada had usually sent the winner of the annual Allan Cup amateur tournament to represent the country at the Olympics and World Championships, reasoning correctly that any better than average Canadian team could beat European all-stars. However, the European teams steadily got better, and the Canadian margin of victory smaller. After the unexpected defeat to the USSR in 1954, Canada was more careful in its selection of its amateur representative, and began the practice of adding 5-10 top amateurs from other teams, and retired professionals. This ensured Canada victory over the USSR at every major international meet from 1955 until 1961, with the exception of the 1956 Winter games. Defeats in the early 1960's led to the decision to build a team of amateur all-stars that would play together all year round: but not even this was enough to defeat -- or even compete with -- the much improved Soviet team. For this reason, Canadians switched tacks in 1969, and began to intensively pressure the USSR to play against Canadian professionals.



two professionals, or leading amateur teams was of great interest to the teams coaches. But in such a contest, one could not guarantee victory. It would be another three years before the Soviets would get permission to play a series with top Canadian amateur teams. For the time being, they had to settle for matches against inferior English professional teams, which were comprised of Canadian players residing in the UK.<sup>24</sup>

With most of its sanctioned international matches against overmatched Eastern European teams -- games that yielded a predictable result -- it took years for team USSR to rise to the level of the best Canadian amateurs. Before 1963, the Soviets added only one victory -- at the 1956 Olympics -- to their initial triumph, while suffering three more defeats to the Canadians. Fortunately, having already officially entered the world of international hockey, the USSR did not turn back. With at least annual exposure to the best amateurs, the Soviet team got better, fast.

Eventually, in the 1960's the Soviet program would finally come into its own. From 1963 to 1972, the USSR would win three Olympic gold medals and nine consecutive World Championships, ushering in the Golden Era of Soviet ice-hockey. It was at this point, not in 1946, that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began to take a special interest in ice-hockey, eager to tie the team's victories to the nation's Socialist system.

Although state propaganda lauded the invincibility of "Ice Militia", the Party still did not actually believe in the team. The fear of defeat was such that, even at the height of Soviet

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<sup>24</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 29. These matches were certainly valuable in that they acclimatized the Soviets to the North American style, and gave them practice against stiff opposition. However, they would lead to embarrassment later when the Soviets would avoid matches against NHL professionals by claiming that it was ideologically impossible for them to play against professionals and that it would compromise their amateur status. Moreover, the English professional league was at that time run by none other than John Ahern, the future IIHL president who became a bitter critic of professional hockey, and for many years shielded the Soviets from matches with NHL stars.

dominance, Party authorities would not allow the Soviet Union to host a World Championship. For years the Soviet press complained bitterly about the prejudice against the USSR on the part of the bourgeois IIHF, insinuating that the USSR had been excluded from hosting a championship after 1957, by a bourgeois conspiracy. However, it was recently revealed by a former member of the Soviet Hockey Federation's Propaganda Department that the IIHF had in fact pleaded with the USSR to host the World Championships, only to be refused time and again by Soviet authorities. For example, when the Soviet hockey men brought news that the USSR had been offered the games for 1967, they were coldly rebuffed by the responsible official:

The World Championship has been imposed on us, while all of progressive humanity is preparing to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Great October. But where is the guarantee that we will win?... What, do you want the festal mood of the Soviet people and our friends throughout the world to be spoiled, in the event of defeat?<sup>25</sup>

Later, the USSR was offered the 1970 games. Journalist Semen Vaikhanskiy recalls sarcastically that again, the answer was the same:

After all the games would begin a mere five weeks prior to the birthday of Vladimir Ilych Lenin. Again, nobody could guarantee victory by the Soviet national team on the eve of this great event. Again the possible defeat of our hockey players could not be excluded, a circumstance that -- in the opinion of Alekhin [President of Hockey Federation] -- would cast the Soviet people into utter despair and, along with them, the Socialist camp, our Communist brothers and workers parties, and all the simple people of all the world.<sup>26</sup>

The reluctance of Soviet authorities in such cases is truly hard to understand. After all, showcasing their brilliant hockey victories in front of a domestic audience could whip the population into a patriotic frenzy -- thereby achieving one of their central propaganda goals. And while victory in any sport can never be guaranteed, the team's chances were excellent. On the eve of the 1967

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<sup>25</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 97.

World Championship, the Soviet national team had gone *25 consecutive World Championship games* without a single defeat: this streak continued until 1968, to be broken only after 39 matches. In 1969, on the eve of the 1970 World Championships, the Soviets had accumulated six world championships in a row. Nevertheless, top ideologues refused to bend and it would be years before Moscow would see international hockey at the highest level.

By the 1960's, the Soviet Union had come to dominate the world of international amateur hockey. When NHL expansion further diluted Canada's amateur talent pool, Canadian hockey authorities began to insist that professionals should be allowed to play in international competitions. One the whole, the Soviet hockey players and coaches were eager to test their mettle against the legendary NHL professionals. The Communist authorities, on the other hand, balked at the possibility. Not only was victory less than certain, the majority of specialists -- including Soviet specialists -- predicted defeat, even catastrophic defeat. If the vaunted Soviet ice militia was to suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of the professionals, than a decade of hard-won amateur victories would be rendered meaningless.

Nevertheless, as the 1960's drew to a close, the USSR grew increasingly isolated in its opposition to the inclusion of professionals in international competitions. In 1969, the Canadian motion to allow professionals to play, without restriction, was defeated in the IIHF Congress. As a compromise, the Canadian delegation proposed including up to nine non-NHL professionals, on a trial basis for the 1970 championships which were to take place in Canada. The Soviets desperately tried to defeat this motion as well, calling a closed meeting of Socialist IIHF members. Opposition to this watered down plan reeked of cowardice, and the Soviets were not able to persuade even their

client states to protest the inclusion of semi-professionals. The Yugoslavs refused to attend. Worse still, the Czechoslovak delegation was open about its intention to support the Canadian motion.<sup>27</sup>

Totally bereft of support, the Soviets reluctantly agreed to allow the professionals to play.

The Soviets would quickly reverse themselves on this decision. The first Canadian team to include active professionals was sent to compete in the annual *Sovetskiy Sport* tournament, which served as a sort of prelude to the World Championships, in December 1969. Bolstered by their contingent of farm team players, the Canadians vastly improved on previous performances, and tied the USSR for first place. Party overseers panicked, and ordered their hockey men to search for an excuse to opt out of further matches against the Canadian professionals.<sup>28</sup> In early 1970, the Soviets began lamely referring to fears about their Olympic eligibility and refused to play against any team which included professionals. Furious, the Canadian delegation boycotted the World Championship, and would not participate again until the tournament was opened to professionals in 1977.

The actions of the Soviet bureaucrats in this context could only be viewed as the most craven form of political cowardice. By its meddling the Communist Party only reduced the prestige of its amateur hockey program. What's more, it seemed to confirm beyond all doubt the validity of the boastful claims of the Canadians, that even minor league professionals could skate circles around the Soviet amateurs.

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<sup>27</sup> GARF: May 1969 Otchet: Ob Uchastii Nachal'nika Otdelo Khokkeya Starovoitsova A.V. V Soveshchani  
Predstaviteley Federatsii Khokkeya Sotialisticheskikh Stran, Varshava, 27-28 Maya 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 306 lista 60-62).

<sup>28</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 95-96.

Of course, as the world would discover in 1972, even the NHL professionals were far from unbeatable, and the Soviet players were vastly superior to farm league semi-pros. Although Canada's best professionals were able to rally to defeat the Soviet national team, victory was only attained in the last minutes of the final game. No one could deny that the Soviet players had proven themselves the equals of their professional counterparts.

### *Argument*

A thorough examination of the history of the Soviet ice-hockey program reveals a picture that is very different from the version that is usually accepted in the West. In its early years the sport was greeted by indifference and even hostility from the Communist Party and the Komsomol. Although ice-hockey was supposed to have been invented to win international glory for the USSR, the Communist Party did everything possible to prevent the team from competing internationally. Ideologists were eager to take credit for the victories the national team would win, but they had done very little to bring them about. Even in the midst of the national team's unprecedented winning streak, the Party still never really believed in its athletes.

This is one of the inconsistencies with the existing portrayal of Soviet ice-hockey that I noted when researching this thesis. When I began working on this project, I fully expected ice-hockey to conform with the impressions I outlined on the first page. Through the ruling triumvirate of the CPSU, Communist Ideology, and the strong man -- in this case, Anatoly Tarasov -- it would seem the Soviet authorities had actually been able to create a genuinely popular cultural entity *ex nihilo*,

for the sole purpose of winning glory for the state and its ideology. My inquiry into the available materials revealed a very different picture of the sport, one which was fundamentally chaotic and *ad hoc*. If summarized in a single sentence, the conclusion of this thesis is that Soviet ice-hockey succeeded not because it was an efficient totalitarian institution, but because it was so atypical of the Soviet system.

By focusing on first hand Soviet sources which have only recently become available, this thesis will aim to provide a 'self-portrait' of the Soviet ice-hockey system; that is, a description and an analysis of the system from the inside. Previous Cold War era studies have deliberately looked at the Soviet sports system from the outside. This study will examine the system, as much as possible, from an insider's perspective. Archival materials and post-Soviet biographical writing allow this thesis to shed new and unexpected light on the Soviet ice-hockey program.

The thesis will cover the period from 1946, when the Soviet ice-hockey program came into existence, until 1972, when it proved itself to be at least equal to professional ice-hockey. It would, perhaps, have been more satisfactory to carry the study through to the end of the Soviet period. But, having investigated the whole of the Soviet period, I reached the conclusion that, by 1972, the Soviet ice-hockey program had completed one distinct phase of its development. After 1972, major changes in personnel and structure took place which fundamentally altered the nature of the institutions which governed the sport in the USSR. To adequately cover the last two decades of the Soviet ice-hockey program would make a thesis that is already too long, much longer.

Structurally, the thesis will begin by examining the role of the State and Party authorities with respect to sport. The notion that sport was highly politicized will be challenged. Although

international victories were exploited for propaganda purposes, leading players and coaches paid no more than lip service to ideological notions. In fact, the Party authorities were willing to sanction serious violations of socialist law and morality, to provide players with material rewards for prestigious victories. In chapter two the role of All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport will be considered. We will see that the stereotype of centralized organization and control still does not hold true. The Sports Committee leadership was, in general, distant from the day to day operations of the national ice-hockey program, especially regarding finances. Moreover, rather than being strong, influential and prestigious, we will see that the Sports Committee was in general unable to effectively wield influence against other Soviet organizations. The work of the Hockey Section, the sub-division of the Sports Committee with day-to-day responsibility for running the ice-hockey program will be examined in chapter three. This organization was able to undertake some effective measures to improve elite play, and it put a surprisingly large effort into establishment of a national recreational hockey program. Chapter four will cover the controversial and crucial issue of player transfers, a system that was usually seen as giving the Soviets an edge in international competition. On closer examination we will see that the official structures that governed the sport were actually consistently opposed to this practice, which was initiated by powerful coaches, not the state. In chapter five the thesis will be concluded by an examination of the activities of the coaches who influenced the formation of the Soviet system, especially Anatoly Tarasov. While Tarasov was often popularly portrayed as wielding near absolute power in Soviet hockey, we will see that the truth was much more complex.

## **Chapter 1: State and Party Involvement in Hockey**

### *Football, Hockey and the Politburo*

Contrary to what is often suggested, as a general rule the leadership of the Soviet Union did not take a direct interest in ice-hockey. A great deal of ice-hockey's success can be explained by the fact that it escaped the fate suffered by other sports, such as football. In a rare act of bravado, probably inspired by the lingering afterglow of good relations that followed the second world war, the Soviet national football side was sent to Great Britain to play a series of matches against the best English professionals. As was the case in 1972, prior to the ice-hockey series with Canada, the Soviet team was universally expected to lose. But rather than being outclassed, the Soviet Army team managed to win a series of stunning victories against top English clubs. The Soviet team's shocking victory immediately attracted the attention of the nation's leadership. If the Soviet footballers were able to defeat the best Western athletes, perhaps athletes in other sports were also superior? The football victory must have been a catalyst for the CPSU resolution that the Soviet Union should come to dominate the world's major sports 'in the near future.' This goal was first made public in a published CPSU decree, on January of 1949 -- although it became known to bureaucrats responsible for sport immediately after the Soviet football team's successful tour through England in 1945.<sup>29</sup> In the post-war era, the Sports Committee, and all other interested parties were now required to:

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<sup>29</sup> Romanov, Voskhozhdenie, 38.



...Spread physical culture to every corner of the land, and to raise the level of skill, so that Soviet sportsmen might win world supremacy in the major sports in the immediate future.<sup>30</sup>

As the catalyst for the post-war athletic movement, football was the sport that stood to be the primary beneficiary of the state's involvement. However, any footballer who may have foreseen a boon to his sport in the personal attention it now received from Stalin and the Politburo was soon to be cruelly disappointed. Increased attention resulted in increased surveillance, and it was not long before the Stalinist state detected a threat. After winning glory for the state abroad, the Soviet Army Team's ranks were decimated when four of the nation's best players, the Starotsyn brothers, were convicted of 'telling their friends and family about life in the West' and sucked into the abyss of the Stalinist camps.<sup>31</sup> This loss weakened the team significantly, and its international performance suffered. The downward spiral culminated in disaster in 1948, when the Soviet national team was defeated by Yugoslavia. In an act of futile rage, MVD chief Lavrenti Beria had the Army team disbanded. From this point on Soviet football was bereft of the systemic centralization of talent, from which hockey was to benefit. In hockey the national team benefited from the fact that its best players were concentrated in two to three top Moscow teams. The Soviet national team players played together in five-man units year long and, given the fact they all resided in Moscow, the national team could be quickly assembled for practices, meetings and frequent trips abroad. The nation's best football players were more often than not scattered around the league making co-ordinated strategy and training as difficult as it was for non-socialist teams. In hockey, the link between the Army and the core of the national team provided enhanced disciplinary powers to the

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<sup>30</sup> *Kultura i zhizn'*, 11 January 1949, 3. Cited in Riordan, *Sport*, 165.

<sup>31</sup> Riordan, *Sport*, 166.

coaches, a near monopoly on the legal and illegal material perks that drew the best players to the capital, and motivated them to willingly abide by the more stringent disciplinary standards that prevailed there. In football such perquisites were provided from places a long way from Moscow, by shady operators, who were also careful not to be too demanding of the players in terms of fitness and conduct.

Ironically, much of the Soviet hockey program's success in later years was due to the degree to which the sport was neglected in its early years: its relative obscurity shielded it from the incompetent, harmful and malicious meddling of men like Beria. The success of the hockey program depended in large part on the success of its founders in striking a delicate balance between marking out independence in matters that were purely sporting in nature, and establishing strong patronage ties to the Army.

Success was not automatic, however. The skills used by the hockey leadership to manoeuvre itself into a position of relative independence was forged during one of the most difficult, and bizarre episodes in Soviet sport. Shortly after the establishment of Canadian style ice-hockey, Joseph Stalin's son Vasily became obsessed with the sport. In 1947, he established a team under his auspices, which represented the air force (VVS) within which Stalin held the rank of General.

Fortunately for the creators of the Soviet ice-hockey system, Vasily was not nearly as formidable a figure as Beria and the persecutors of Soviet football. The older Stalin despised his son, and Vasily had little if any influence on government policy. Thus Vasily was a figure more tolerated than feared. Nevertheless, when Stalin established his team in 1947, many players doubtlessly felt that playing for VVS was an offer 'they couldn't refuse.' But not everyone was

cowed by the family name. Anatoly Tarasov served as a player coach under Stalin for one year, an experience that proved to be a disaster. Tarasov treated Stalin's opinions with a disregard that bordered on contempt, while the inept Vasily insisted on having the final word on all matters of strategy and player selection.

After one season Tarasov returned to the Army team, which he would coach for the next thirty years. Stalin's air force team had access to players of an equal calibre to those on Tarasov's TsSKA, but the VVS team was crippled by the fact that Stalin foisted his ineptitude on the coaching staff in all manners of tactics and player selection.<sup>32</sup> Tarasov was at least competent in this regard, and that is all it took to win. But in 1950, the fortunes of the air force team turned around. Stalin initiated an aggressive recruiting strategy and enticed nearly all the league's best players to transfer to VVS by offering material incentives, chiefly private apartments for players and their families. At that time, Tarasov was not able to match such offers. Furthermore, Stalin was able to recruit the legendary Vsevolod Bobrov from TsSKA. Bobrov, who had gotten on badly with Tarasov, was able to solve the teams coaching problem by effectively establishing a barrier between Stalin, and the day to day operations of the team. Vasily deeply admired the new VVS player coach and Bobrov was able to parlay this into a degree of effective independence which Tarasov had not been able to achieve during his tenure with the Air Force team.<sup>33</sup> VVS would win three league championships from 1951-53, before being disbanded in 1953 after the death of J. Stalin, and the subsequent arrest

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<sup>32</sup> Tsentralniy Sportivniy Klub Armii (Central Army Sports Club)

<sup>33</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 39.

of his son.<sup>34</sup>

With Vasily Stalin disgraced, the leaders of the Soviet hockey program were anxious that no similar figure take his place, and they established arms length independence from leading political authorities. This was easily done while Nikita Khrushchev was head of the CPSU. He never showed a great interest in hockey or sport of any other kind. But it has often been suggested that this may have changed under after the leadership changed in 1964.

Leonid Brezhnev was an avid ice-hockey fan, and much has been made of his interest in hockey. No one would suggest that hockey was the main object of Brezhnev's attention, but it is certainly true that it would not take a gargantuan effort by the Soviet leader to cause a major shake-up in the national sports system. Brezhnev was surrounded by cronies who had build their careers by anticipating and fulfilling his wishes *without* specific instruction, so by merely implying displeasure, the General Secretary could have fundamentally altered the structure of Soviet sport. Any direct suggestions he did make would almost certainly be observed.

There is some anecdotal and circumstantial evidence to suggest that Brezhnev occasionally weighed in on hockey matters. For example, in 1964, Soviet hockey enjoyed a marked and sudden increase in television coverage, and a sharp upsurge in available resources.<sup>35</sup> And, of course, Brezhnev's formal approval was sought for major changes or initiatives in sport, such as the 1972 Canada-USSR series. But there is little evidence that Brezhnev or any other member of the senior leadership ever attempted to 'micro-manage' hockey directly or indirectly.

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<sup>34</sup> V. Stalin was arrested and charged with a number of crimes, including misappropriation of government funds -- much of which was used on his sports projects.

<sup>35</sup> Edelman, Robert.  Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR. (Oxford: 1993), 169.

After the end of Vasily Stalin's involvement in hockey, the Soviet system was able to remain independent in all likelihood because it kept winning. It is true that in the 1950's the Soviets won only two World Championships, but hockey at this time was not nearly as popular as football. By the time hockey had equalled football in popularity, Soviet victories at the World Championships could almost be taken for granted. Defeats did occasionally occur, but the nation's leading authorities were willing to look the other way, as long as failure was not repeated.

Hockey men in the USSR always jokingly referred to Brezhnev as "Болезельщик № 1" - "Fan #1". But, to the benefit of the Soviet program, and ice-hockey world-wide, Brezhnev and company were content to remain exactly that: fans of the game, and nothing more.

### *The Party and Hockey: A Priority Sport*

It is clear that, with the exception of Vasily Stalin, ice-hockey enjoyed a sort of benign neglect from the national leadership and the Politburo. But could the same be said for the CPSU *apparatus*? The Party organ with the most direct ties to ice-hockey was the ubiquitous Komsomol. Most players were too young to join the Party itself, so they were expected to join the Communist youth wing. Furthermore, as an unspoken rule, almost all high level sports bureaucrats had come from the Komsomol. So theoretically, the Communist Party, through the Komsomol, guided the development of hockey -- as it did all other cultural aspects of Soviet life. Our study of the Party's involvement in hockey will seek to identify the general goals the Party had for the sport, and its ability to infiltrate and impact on sport in a meaningful way.

In examining the propaganda that surrounded sport in general, two principal goals of the Communist Party with regard to sport can be clearly deduced. First, the Party was to ensure that Soviet athletes win impressive international victories and, secondly, these triumphs were to be presented to domestic and foreign audiences as proof of the superiority of the Socialist mode of life. Ice-hockey differed from this general rule only in that hockey victories came to be *more* important than victory in other sports. The Party propaganda machine openly affirmed this on countless occasions. In 1969, for example, Viktor Sych', a leading sports administrator, delivered the following remarks when reminiscing on the special importance of ice-hockey:

Therefore it is hard to overestimate the meaning of victories by Soviet hockey players at the World Championships...

The high authority of hockey with the Soviet People *and abroad* obliges all of us, as well as athletes, coaches and organizers to take greater responsibility, efforts, party-like principles and passion upon ourselves for the further development of this remarkable game, *as a means of bring up our youth in the best popular (народных) traditions.* [Italics added.]<sup>36</sup>

In this and countless other instances, the popularity of hockey at home and abroad is cited as the grounds for the sport's increased potential, and the enhanced responsibility of those who played it. Ice-hockey was popular in a number of non-Socialist countries, attaining the status of 'national sport' in Canada, Sweden, and later Finland. I doubt anyone was so naïve as to expect that a Soviet victory at the World Championships might wrench Canada out of NATO. But hockey victories would be much more noticeable in these countries than gold medals in shot putting or the biathlon, and in this matter ice-hockey could make a small but meaningful contribution to Soviet foreign policy goals, by enhancing the international status of the USSR. As a famous Soviet hockey

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<sup>36</sup> GARF: Stenogramma: Seminar Soveshchaniya po Khokkeyu Nachil'nikov, Trenerov Kommand, Kapitanov i Komsorgov, 8 September 1969, (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 286).

journalist put it, in the context of eroding Soviet prestige, “Tarasov and Chernyshev made the national [ice-hockey] team one of the most ‘solid currencies’ in the world. Like the space program and the ballet, it enhanced Soviet prestige in the international arena.”<sup>37</sup>

Astute ideologues realized that the domestic propaganda value of the ice hockey was even higher. Sport in general, and ice-hockey in particular, was eclipsed only by vodka as a form of popular entertainment among males: it was one of very few officially endorsed cultural institutions that enjoyed genuine popularity. Although the Party made great efforts to link the successes of its hockey teams to the country’s Socialist system, the degree to which this was accepted by the general population is dubious. However, there can be no doubt that Soviet fans felt an enormous sense of vicarious achievement through their team’s international victories, and these triumphs were always followed by a commensurate upsurge of patriotic sentiment.

With so much riding on the success of the Soviet ice hockey team, the Party and its organs did pay the sport a great deal of attention. To ensure that sport served as a way to enhance Soviet prestige abroad, and conveyed the correct message to fans at home, the Communist Party developed a number of goals with regard to the sport, which will be outlined below.

### *Political Education*

One of the principal goals of the Party was to control the education [*vospitaniye*], especially the ‘political-moral education’ of the players who would represent the nation at home and abroad.

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<sup>37</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 60.

The Party and Komsomol made their most visible contribution to this goal by doing what they did best: holding meetings. If the influence of the Party on the development of hockey can be doubted, its visibility certainly cannot. From the earliest possible age players were inundated, time and again, with the official characterization of sport at the international level -- that of a battlefield. The following citation, also from Sych's speech, could not have been more typical.

Yes, we are glad at the victories of our remarkable athletes. But they are not happy in the countries of our enemies, our ideological opponents. Attacks of fury and madness arise with every success of an athlete in a crimson shirt. Speculating on the huge interest in sport by millions of people, imperialist circles are more actively using this means to influence the consciousness of the masses, especially the young... Counting on the popularity of sport, the enemies of socialism use it for unbridled slander against our system and our activities. Bourgeois ideology neither spares dollars, nor shuns any means, to present Soviet athletes in a negative light, to blacken them, at times composing stupid fables.<sup>38</sup>

All athletes were described as being soldiers on an ideological front in an overarching ideological war, in which the adversary would shun no means in its quest to destroy the USSR. Party figures saw themselves -- or pretended to see themselves -- in the role of war-time commissars, ensuring that the 'troops' understood what is at stake.

A number of measures were taken to ensure that all players understood their duties. Before playing an international match, all players were forced to sign 'victory oaths', whereby they acknowledged their duty to win for the glory of the Soviet state -- a practice that they understandably found to be quite demeaning.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The Soviet predisposition to conspiracy theories was such that, as the speaker later clarified, the basis of his claim that "bourgeois ideology" was trying to "blacken" Soviet athletes lay in a rather innocent article published about the Soviet hockey team in *Sports Illustrated*. The magazine mentioned at one point that the Soviet players had a ferocious appetite; the speaker interpreted this as an attempt to disgrace the players by implying that they had bad table manners, and therefore part of a conspiratorial plot to defame Socialism.

GARF: Stenogramma: Seminar Soveshchaniya po Khokkeyu Nachil'nikov, Trenerov Kommand, Kapitanov i Komsorgov, 8 September 1969, (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 286).

<sup>39</sup> Martin, The Red Machine, 70.



In addition to informing players of their duty to win, Party speakers would dwell upon the need for superior moral conduct. In reality Soviet professional<sup>40</sup> players were no further behind their NHL colleagues in womanizing and debauchery, than they were in stick-handling and skating. As Komsomol speakers preferred not to recognize that such behaviour was possible in the USSR -- certainly not among the athletes they were responsible for -- they were fairly squeamish on the topic of player conduct. To keep the tone positive, most speakers preferred to adopt a formula whereby players were constantly reminded of the exciting role that they were expected to play in the formation of the Communist superman. On every major Communist holiday, and before every departure to the West, they had to endure monologues that fit the following pattern:

Comrades, the Soviet people and all of progressive humanity are preparing for that notable date - the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the founder of our Party, the creator of the Socialist Revolution, the greatest of all thinkers, V.I. Lenin.

Huge successes are attached to the name of the great leader of the Soviet people, achieved by our Motherland after Great October. Connected to the name of Vladimir Ilych, is the most important achievement of Socialism - the creation of the Soviet man...

We are proud of the fact that one of the most important factors in the all around development of the Soviet people is sport...<sup>41</sup>

...The wide recognition of hockey by the Soviet people, and its high authority for the Soviet people and abroad, oblige us - athletes, coaches and organizers - to take even greater responsibility, efforts, and party-like principle and passion upon ourselves, in ensuring the further development of this remarkable game, *and its ideological purity as an important means for the instruction, influence and upbringing of our youth in the spirit of Communist morality.*<sup>42</sup>

Of course, Party agitators could not be with the nation's athletes at all times, a fact for which more than one player was eternally grateful. So, in addition to holding pep-rallies at every

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<sup>40</sup> All Soviet athletes, of course, were officially amateurs. However throughout this thesis the term professional shall be used to refer to athletes who were paid exclusively to practice, train and compete in a given sport, regardless of their official designation as army officers, students or factory workers. Amateur, in the internal Soviet sense, will refer to athletes who were genuinely students, or who held down some sort of full time employment, and practiced sport only in their spare time.

<sup>41</sup> GARF: Stenogramma: Seminar Soveshchaniya po Khokkeyu Nachil'nikov, Trenerov Kommand, Kapitanov i Komsorgov, 8 September 1969, (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 286).

<sup>42</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX-go otchetno-perevybornogo plenuma soveta federatsii khokkeya SSSR: Otchetniy Doklad, Alekhin, V.D. (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 287, lista 59-97).

conceivable pretext, to guarantee its omnipresence, an extensive drive was made to guarantee that Komsomol and Party cells could be found on every team. Communist Party agitators spoke of Komsomol cells the way that a born-again athlete might speak of a team bible study. At times one gets the impression that they felt an accurate understanding of Leninism to be more important than accurate passing:

If we speak of the main thing that secured our successes at the World and European Championships over the past years, it is first and foremost the high level of the moral-political environment on the national team, and the high development of our players and coaches, and their feeling of responsibility. Therefore, we should in the future even more jealously concern ourselves with the ideological purity of the ranks of Soviet hockey players, and with genuine party-like conditions. *In this, first and foremost in this - is the key to the new successes of Soviet hockey...*  
The first helper for the coach in the realization of the ideological-political development [of his players] is the Party-Komsomol cell in the team.<sup>43</sup>

Political socialization was taken seriously enough that travelling coaches were careful to record the measures that they had taken to encourage political development in all their formal reports. For example, after an ideologically important tour through America in 1964, it was duly noted that:

I want to emphasize the political importance of the trip to play in America. The team was in several parts of America, where they had never seen Soviet people before... [and therefore] before the trip an active Komsomol group was formed in the team.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, in their reports to the Party, coaches were expected to tie such ideological measures to any victory won. The Soviet Olympic victory in 1964 was similarly credited to Komsomol activities:

Before the last crucial game with Canada, a special Komsomol meeting was conducted in which the team

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<sup>43</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX-go otchetno-perevybornogo plenuma soveta federatsii khokkeya SSSR: Otchetniy Doklad, Alekhin, V.D. (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 287, lista 59-97).

<sup>44</sup> GARF: Protokol No 10: Komitet Sbornoy SSSR Informatisiya o vyezdakh Kommandy sbornoy SSSR v Shvedtsyu i SShA, 7 January 1964. (Fond 7576 opis' 2, delo 2381).

took an oath to accept the responsibility to take every effort to win the match.<sup>45</sup>

### *Effect on players*

The contemporary reader cannot help but chuckle at the content of the speeches cited above. In the post cold-war era, the tone seems over the top, even hysterical. But to the Soviet audience of the time, there was nothing unusual about speeches like this. The rhetoric used in remarks by sports authorities -- and by athletes and coaches in official interviews -- is responsible for the prevailing view that sport was one of the most politicized aspects of Soviet life. But before drawing such a conclusion it would be appropriate to consider what effect these presentations had.

Materials made available recently reveal that, in general, players and coaches involved in ice-hockey did not internalize or believe strongly in the propaganda that was associated with their sport. According to the recollections of players, journalists and officials who were active at the time, most of them merely tolerated presentations like this as an unfortunate necessity, a useless activity that took still more precious leisure time away from family and friends. Anatoly Firsov, a legendary centre who is generally thought to be the best Soviet player of the 1960's and perhaps of all time, probably spoke for most of his fellow players in characterizing the hockey's political overseers as a gaggle of useless windbags:

The propaganda just passed through our ears. They would tell us: 'We are Communists, the Soviet Union, Unbreakable!' But for us, nothing mattered except playing hockey. Communists, no communists - we just had a game. We didn't care about anything else.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> GARF: Protokol No 11: 25 February, 1964 "Soobshchenie o vystuplenie sbornoy komandy SSSR na igrakh IX Olympiad v Innsburge". (Fond 7576 opis' 2, delo 2381).

<sup>46</sup> PBS Homepage: Red Files: Soviet Sports Wars: Soviet Hockey, January 21 2002.

If Firsov's criticisms of the Soviet system made after its collapse are all too typical, it is worth noting that he barely concealed his contempt for official ideology even during his playing days. Although Firsov was always a conscientious player, who never caused any disciplinary issues for his coach and mentor Anatoly Tarasov, he was too practical a man to waste time with Communist rhetoric and ideology. Thus in 1969 when he, as the Captain of TsSKA and the national team, was supposed to compose a speech in honour of forthcoming the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Lenin, Firsov instead gave a rather rambling presentation wherein he discussed nothing remotely political. The incoherence of his presentation as recorded in the stenograph clearly indicates that Firsov was simply making up his remarks on the spot. Worse still, the central point of his speech was a blunt criticism of the authorities for not paying retired players pensions.<sup>47</sup> As Firsov colourfully put it before the assembled crowd of leading players and Komsomol luminaries, at 35 with his playing days over, the retired athlete was hard put to find a decent job and was "practically left with [expletive deleted in original text]."<sup>48</sup>

The drive to boost political consciousness by recruiting players into the Komsomol proved equally fruitless. Upon realizing that all players on their team were henceforth required to be

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<<http://www.pbs.org/redfiles/sports/stry/medals.htm>>

<sup>47</sup> This issue was raised again and again by players, throughout the Soviet period. Most bureaucrats privately agreed that pensions were necessary. But, paying pensions to 'amateurs' who were, theoretically, winning gold medals in their spare time away from the factory, would be tantamount to admitting that elite Soviet athletes were in fact professionals. The typical practice was to secure training or administrative positions within sport, or some sort of sinecure, for the retired player. Nevertheless, many individuals -- especially those who had gotten on poorly with their coaches -- were abandoned once they were no longer useful, and they slipped into utter destitution. An alarming number of leading Soviet hockey players committed suicide after they playing days were over. *The Eagle's Nest*, 21 February 2004. <[www.russianhockey.net](http://www.russianhockey.net)>.

<sup>48</sup> GARF: *Stenogramma: Seminar Soveshchaniya po Khokkeyu Nachil'nikov, Trenerov Kommand, Kapitanov i Komsorgov*, 8 September 1969, (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 286).

members of the Komsomol, teams simply enrolled otherwise unfit candidates into the ranks of the Komsomol. Vyacheslav Fetisov, for example, would under ordinary circumstances never have been accepted into a Party institution. He was nearly excluded from the Young Pioneers as a child for minor disciplinary problems, and shortly after his first trip to Canada as a junior hockey player, he came close to be expelled from his High School on charges of “propagating bourgeois habits.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless Fetisov, who was plainly indifferent to the idea of Communism, was automatically enrolled in the ranks of the progressive youth on the same day as he joined the TsSKA men’s team. Existing players on the team were simply handed Komsomol cards, and would later slide with ease into the Communist Party. Ironically, the Party’s influence over the teams would have been stronger if membership was restricted to those who were really interested.

At first glance it would seem that the Party’s extensive efforts to influence the political and moral character of hockey players came to nothing. The players were simply too savvy, too well travelled to believe in what they were being told. They had been to shopping centres, and they knew first hand that the vast majority of Western workers were not oppressed, and that they enjoyed a level of material prosperity undreamt of in the USSR. They knew from first hand experience that people outside the USSR were more or less a friendly lot, and that they did not seem to be obsessed with destroying the land of socialism. The same crude propaganda that may have succeeded in producing fear and suspicion in Soviet citizens who would never so much as see a foreigner produced only cynicism in leading ice-hockey players whose life experience proved what they were

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<sup>49</sup> While in Canada for a junior tournament in 1976, Fetisov purchased a number of Western consumer goods. Upon returning to the USSR, he began distributing chewing-gum to his class-mates. Vyacheslav Fetisov. Overtaim, (Moscow, 1998).

being told was nothing more than half-truths and exaggerations. In fact, the memoirs of many leading players, coaches and journalists from the times revealed that even most of the speakers were embarrassed by the content of their speeches. Victor Sych', whose 1969 speech was cited above, is a prime example. Sych' was a pragmatic man and an efficient administrator who understood that the appearance of vigilance was the price his office held. He effortlessly shed his ideological convictions during perestroika and, like most men of his generation, he himself was probably not sure when he stopped believing in the ideals he preached. Sych' would emerge as one of the most powerful and influential men in post-Soviet Russian ice-hockey, until he was assassinated in 1997 for reasons that still remain unclear, but certainly involved money.

But having said all this, it would be an overstatement and anachronism error to say that the patriotic sentiment that the Party tried to imbue was rejected out of hand by all those involved from the outset. This was, after all, the Cold War.

It is first of all worth noting that the Soviets made more than a few true believers out of their hockey program: players who saw truly themselves as ambassadors of Communism and are, to this day, reluctant to criticize the Communist past. As one example, one can consider Vyacheslav Starshinov, a man who fulfilled his ideological duties with enthusiasm. In his speech in honour of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lenin's birth Starshinov recalls how, time and again, the Komsomol saw him through to victory. He concluded his speech by concurring that the fundamental task of hockey in the USSR is the moulding of the New Man, and issues a resounding condemnation of dirty play:

Knights of hockey, like Viktor Yakushev, Vitaly Davydov or Veniamin Aleksandrov never sunk so low as to play dirty... and not responding to dirty play, they continued to play at full strength, winning the sympathy of the spectators, the delight of their partners, and in the final account, the respect of their

opponents... we are Komsomolites and Communists.<sup>50</sup>

As a reward for his career of enthusiastic loyalty, Starshinov was given a prestigious posting abroad: from 1975 to 1978 he worked with the Japanese national team.

Nor was Starshinov an exceptional case. In his 1990 memoirs, Wayne Gretzky explains to the reader that Vladislav Tretiak had never and would never come to play or work in North America because of his dedication to what Gretzky interpreted as Communist principles.<sup>51</sup> Although Tretiak would surprise Gretzky by coming to the NHL to coach in 1992, the “Great One” was not mistaken about the authenticity of his principles: Tretiak long served as a “Komsorg” (Komsomol Cell Leader) for the Red Army team, and even his post-communist writings recall the Soviet experience in a generally positive light.

Even figures who are generally very critical about the Soviet system show a certain fondness for the purity of the bygone era. Semen Vaikhanskiy is a Leningrad journalist who has been writing about hockey for almost fifty years. Although generally critical about the Soviet sports system, even Vaikhanskiy saw a moral purity in the athletes of the Soviet generation which was absent in later players. In recalling how goaltender Nikolai Puchkov played through the 1960 Winter Olympics with a serious injury, he notes: “Think first of your country and then about yourself – that was the slogan that many of the time lived under...”<sup>52</sup> Another example would be Nikolai Epshtein, a man who had as much reason as any to feel bitter about the old regime. Epshtein’s obviously Jewish

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<sup>50</sup> GARF: Stenogramma: Seminar Soveshchaniya po Khokkeyu Nachil’nikov, Trenerov Kommand, Kapitanov i Komsorgov, 8 September 1969, (Fond 7576, opis’ 31 delo 286) However, as mentioned earlier, Starshinov’s sincerity can be called into question by the nature of the venue at which he spoke. Moreover, it is worth noting that in his book, Tarasov himself stated that Starshinov was one of the dirtiest players in the Soviet league.

<sup>51</sup> Wayne Gretzky and Rick Reilly, Gretzky: An Autobiography. (New York, 1990).

<sup>52</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotoya, 52-53.

heritage caused his playing career to be cut short in 1948 when Soviet post-war 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign began, and he was unceremoniously dumped from his team in his prime. And, although state sponsored anti-Semitism slackened after Stalin's death, Epshtein still never got the credit he deserved for being one of the finest builders of the Soviet hockey program, and one of the most brilliant innovators in the history of world hockey.<sup>53</sup> But even he saw much to be admired in the Soviet past. In a recent interview he recalled a trip to the United States in the 1960's thus:

We were superior to our [American] opponents in hockey. And consider me an idealist if you will, but I think that our athletes were spiritually richer, purer as well. And a feeling of patriotism – which everyone remembers with shame today – was native to them. One could wish that these virtues could return to us today from the past that we curse.<sup>54</sup>

The key to understanding the paradoxical feelings of Soviet hockey men in reflecting on the past is to note a distinction between a rejection of the Party imposed ideology, and a deep rooted love for the homeland, Russia, Родина.

This distinction is clearly illustrated in the personality of Viktor Tikhonov, a man who embodied the grey personality of the Soviet athlete for a generation of Canadians. In public, and in private Tikhonov was and still is a man who appears to be almost totally without humour. He seems incapable of thinking about anything outside or beyond hockey and his duty to the game. He prizes discipline, hard-work and integrity above all else. As a child he lived through the hardships of the second world war, and he and his mother very nearly starved to death after his father was killed at Stalingrad. As a player his talent level was mediocre at best, but he rose to become one of the nation's best players through his inhuman work ethic. As a coach he drove his players mercilessly,

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<sup>53</sup> Epshtein's career will be considered in greater detail during the second part of this thesis.

<sup>54</sup> L.V. Rossoshik, *Trenery Sedeyut Rano*. (Moscow, 2001), 117.



and took a certain perverse pleasure in seeing his charges suffer through a torturous training routine that involved a daily 10 km run -- which he completed himself every practice, until he was 59. His personal style of leadership, which ossified further with time, was and is distinctly dictatorial in nature, and his understanding of power relationships is without doubt the product of an authoritarian society.

Moreover, Tikhonov was and still is, without doubt, a great patriot. The players who left the Soviet Union just prior to its collapse bitterly recall Tikhonov's futile efforts to keep them in the USSR, and scoff at his claims to have done this for the good of Soviet Hockey. But it is not often recalled that Tikhonov too received generous offers from the NHL at the same time as his charges -- including a million dollar contract with the Quebec Nordiques. Tikhonov is perhaps the only man in all of sport who turned down a ten-fold increase in wealth, out of loyalty and a love for his country.

At the same time, it would be a great mistake to label Tikhonov a dyed in the wool Communist. In spite of his deep patriotism, he has never given any indication -- beyond observance of the necessary formalities during the Soviet period -- of being influenced or inspired by Communist ideology. As Evgeniy Rubin recalls:

Tikhonov was a deeply apolitical person. Although he was a member of the KPSS [Communist Party of the Soviet Union], and held a high officer's ranking, he does not cling to the past for ideological reasons. He was not building Communism. He was directing a team that must win. He knew how to do it, under previous conditions. Now he's come to a dead-end.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, one of the clearest signs of Tikhonov's ideological independence lay in the fact that he thumbed his nose at Party overlords when it was most dangerous to do so. This was obviously demonstrated by his ongoing friendship with the aforementioned Rubin:

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<sup>55</sup> Rossoshik, Trener, 186.

Not only was I an emigrant – a person with whom Soviet citizens were discouraged from associating with – but I also worked for a radio station [Radio Freedom] that was accused of working to undermine the USSR.<sup>56</sup>

Anyone with a commitment to Communist principle -- or with a healthy fear for the future of his family -- would have, and did, avoid Rubin like the plague. However, while most of his former acquaintances refused to even recognise Rubin when they met at international competitions, Tikhonov actually sought him out. Even at the Winter Olympics in 1984, Tikhonov was openly friendly with the disgraced journalist, an act that Party loyalists and stool-pigeons must have noticed.<sup>57</sup> On another occasion Tikhonov actually went so far as to praise Rubin publicly, at a meeting of the conservative Air Force Academy, where he had been invited to speak.<sup>58</sup> The fact of the matter was that Tikhonov's position was so secure that he had the luxury of being able to speak his mind on nearly anything. As for his duty as a Communist to shun an émigré Jew -- in all likelihood, it never occurred to him.

Ultimately, it would seem that the majority of players and coaches from the Soviet period held views similar to those of Tikhonov and Firsov. They were, by and large, cool to Communist ideology, although they may have joined the Party out of necessity, or simply because this is what orderly Soviet people in their position did. Ironically, the ideological fervour of the Stalin generation was actually beaten out of them by the clichés of careerist Party agitators:

Conversations about duty before the Socialist Motherland, which had made them the very happiest people on the planet, about the summons to heroic feats for her glory -- they heard these every day, all their lives. At lessons in school and at Pioneer meetings; at meetings with coaches; at meetings with the Komsomol; at concerts of Soviet composers; at performances and plays written by Soviet play-writes. All this had

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<sup>56</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 186.

<sup>57</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 187.

<sup>58</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 187.

worn [the athletes] out long ago, and the endless repetition had turned it all into meaningless clichés.<sup>59</sup>

But at the same time, they took the Socialist system for granted, and passively assumed it to be superior -- or more natural -- than that which existed in the West. And, distinct from ideology, a deep and genuine patriotism burned within them, and when they played abroad they genuinely played for the love of their country.

### *Rewards, Incentive and Блат*

As we have seen, the Party's efforts to infiltrate and motivate the nation's players through ideology came to naught. But through other means the Party ensured that the nation's players would show the appropriate dedication to the game. To put it simply, although Party ideologues were relentless in their talk about Communist principles, they were willing to turn a blind eye to a variety of practices whereby players and coaches on elite teams enriched themselves. Their hypocrisy in this regard proved crucial. By including Soviet hockey players into the group of elite citizens who were for all intents and purposes 'above the law', the Party made its greatest, and possibly only contribution to hockey. By simultaneously closing the door to the West, where rewards were immeasurably greater, and by allowing lavish perquisites for players to arise, the Party guaranteed a situation wherein all children and youths with any talent would endure almost any sacrifice to pursue the dream of playing for the Soviet national team.

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<sup>59</sup> Evgeniy Rubin, *Pan ili Propal?* (Moscow, 2000), 161.

The material starting point for all Soviet players was their salary, which was euphemistically referred to as a stipend. During the 1960's and 1970's a Soviet player on one of the nation's leading teams had an official salary that was two to three times the sum the average worker could expect to earn.<sup>60</sup> Players on lower level teams could expect to earn a decent worker's salary, in an environment where discipline and training were lax or altogether optional. In addition to their official stipend, players for the Soviet national team were paid substantial bonuses for important international victories. Winning an Olympic gold, for example, brought the players an official bonus of one-thousand rubles (one year's wages for many workers).<sup>61</sup> Winning league championships and a variety of minor championships also brought sizable cash bonuses: although this perk was reserved for the players on the Moscow teams which always won domestic competitions. Players were also rewarded -- or enticed -- with a variety of generous gifts, which were provided by the club team. For example, as a sort of signing bonus, junior prodigy Aleksandr Maltsev was given a car by Moscow Dynamo: "For the first time in my life I received a car. I didn't buy it -- I received it. It was done this way: players who distinguished themselves were given a personal car."<sup>62</sup>

In addition to official and semi-official forms of cash recompense, players were wealthy in the form of currency that truly mattered: Блат. Блат, or loosely translated 'pull', 'influence', or 'connections', was far more important in the USSR than rubles -- it was through influential friends and acquaintances that one got things done. At officially fixed prices, for example, even the most luxurious of apartments cost only a few rubles a month -- friends, position and prestige decided who

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<sup>60</sup> Brokhin, The Big Red Machine, 186; Oleg Spasskiy, Viktor Tikhonov, (Moscow, 2002), 37.

<sup>61</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 47-48.

<sup>62</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 17.

would obtain them. Hockey players were in an excellent position to take advantage of this 'market.' Vasilev, for example, recalls that after joining Dynamo, he was given a one-room apartment to himself, something totally inconceivable for average twenty year old bachelor. And, after he established himself as a international star, his position improved further: "Later on, I was presented with a luxury apartment by Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov. Naturally, I didn't get [this] for having pretty eyes."<sup>63</sup> And, in addition to expensive gifts, leading coaches and players had access to hard currency stores and, presumably, hard currency to spend there.<sup>64</sup>

In terms of career development, most leading players could expect to be rapidly promoted to an officer rank in the military or security services, while bypassing real service. And, if their behaviour was appropriate, they would be ensured a degree from an physical culture institute and upon retirement, would slide into a comfortable position in coaching or journalism, perhaps even retaining the all-important right to travel abroad, as a part of team delegations.

But the true riches were reserved for the players who were the elite of the elite: players good enough to play on the Moscow core teams, and make it onto either the first or second Soviet national team. This group of players and coaches were given free reign -- within the limits of reason -- to engage in lucrative black market trade. The players were richly compensated for the much more stringent training schedule and disciplinary standards that was demanded of international players. There was of course, one important caveat that applied to hockey players and all other athletes: to guarantee that no undue attention was paid to your baggage by customs authorities, you must win.

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<sup>63</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 76.

In the event of defeat, the authorities would at times become much more rigid in their understanding of Soviet law. For example, prior to the 1960 Olympics, Tarasov and Egorov -- then coaches of the Soviet national team -- were given permission to play three exhibition games prior to the beginning of the Olympic tournament. However, Tarasov independently agreed to two additional matches with an American team "on a commercial basis". The money from the game was used to purchase hockey equipment, and Sports Chairman Romanov would almost certainly have looked the other way were it not for the fact that the Soviet team finished third. Tarasov and Egorov were fired, ostensibly because the extra matches unduly fatigued the Soviet team, and contributed to the disastrous Olympic defeat.<sup>65</sup>

In later years the Soviet international ice hockey team, however, was in the happy position of being a perpetual winner, which meant that a trip abroad was almost always a chance to enhance one's material situation. The principle was simple: using souvenirs, caviar, vodka, and other Soviet goods which were desirable in the West, the players would obtain consumer goods for resale in the USSR, or hard currency. Money from black-market smuggling made up the majority of the leading athlete's income.<sup>66</sup> In fact, some have gone so far as to suggest that without this income, no one would have been willing to make the sacrifices demanded of a Soviet hockey player:

Tell any Merited Master of Sport that he will not be able to buy and resell foreign junk [in the USSR], and he would simply quit sport: one doesn't sacrifice the best years of his life for a three-hundred rouble stipend.

And I'm not exaggerating. In those years -- the fifties, sixties and seventies -- athletes had an unofficial, but precise evaluation of trips abroad. A trip on which you could earn 3,000 rubles was considered decent. Everyone knew where there was a demand for domestic products -- vodka, caviar and Zenith

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<sup>65</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 267.

<sup>66</sup> Television Series: *Bolshe Chem Khokkey*, Sem TV (Russia), January 3, 2003, Episode 3 -- 6:55pm

Cameras -- and what one should buy beyond the cordon, to maximize his profits back home.<sup>67</sup>

In the 1960's and 70's, 3,000 rubles was equal to about two to three years wages. Two 'three-thousanders' was enough to buy a Volga car. Moreover, famous hockey players were able to purchase their automobiles immediately, while most Soviet citizens who had enough money would have to wait as much as ten years. But profits could be raised even further. As a famous athlete could buy a car without waiting, there was nothing to stop him from periodically purchasing a Volga, driving it to a deficit city, such as Tashkent or Tbilisi, and selling it for nearly 20,000 rubles. At the time, this sum represented fifteen to twenty years of labour for a well-paid worker, with a specialization, from a couple of two-week tournaments.<sup>68</sup> The income from these trips was so enormous that some would suggest that the profit from trips abroad, rather than the opportunity for training or enhancing state prestige, was the true rationale behind the Soviet penchant for international friendlies.<sup>69</sup>

The system was so openly acknowledged that even in instances when players and coaches were caught red handed smuggling goods in or out of the country, leading Party authorities still chose to ignore such indiscretions. For example, in 1969 a minor scandal surfaced when Finnish customs agents found several litres of vodka in Viktor Vasilev's suitcase, hidden amid his underwear. As the Soviet players were only planning to be in Finland for four days, the Finnish officials did not believe that it was all for Vasilev's personal use: five of his six litres was confiscated as being over-limit. It is interesting to note that in the official report to the sports

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<sup>67</sup> Rubin, *Pan*, 309-310.

<sup>68</sup> Rubin, *Pan*, 310.

<sup>69</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 61.

authorities, the coaches felt in necessary only to make the point clear that the vodka was not consumed by the players. With this point clarified, the incident went totally unpunished.<sup>70</sup>

Nor did anyone feel the need to be exceptionally discreet about the unofficial portion of his income. In 1961, Dmitry Boginov -- then coach of the USSR second national team -- played a rather daring joke on the Sports Committee Deputy Chairman, who was sent to accompany his delegation to Switzerland:

We [Evgeniy Rubin and Boginov] were taking a walk during a break between the matches when we bumped into the director of the Soviet delegation [Evgeniy Ivanovich] Valuev: formerly a major Komsomol bureaucrat, who had been transferred to the Sports Committee as Deputy Chairman. Instead of greeting him, Boginov asked: "Evgeniy Ivanovich, I have a request to make. I came here from Lausanne on the train. Could you pay for my ticket back?"

"What are you talking about, Dmitry Nikolaevich! That kind of expense is not included in the budget. We can't throw around hard-currency."

"Don't worry -- I was joking. I've got more than just chicken feed myself," Boginov said, waving a wad of bills in front of the delegation chief's nose, "I just wanted to check you."

Valuev was disconcerted. Either Boginov was playing with him, or he had been attached to the [national team] by some institution that had supplied him with hard currency. Boginov calmly offered Valuev his hand:

"Well, see you later -- and I wish you a pleasant time in beautiful Geneva. We're leaving..."<sup>71</sup>

Party ideologues were in all likelihood more than a bit squeamish about the system that existed for player motivation. But there was not much else they could do. International amateur status rules reduced the salaries that they could legitimately pay their professionals below the level necessary to attract qualified athletes. Fortunately for the history of Soviet hockey, the Party was pragmatic enough to bend the rules in this instance and made no effort to punish what would otherwise be considered very serious violations of Soviet law.

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<sup>70</sup> GARF: O poezdke sportivnoy delegatsii vtoroy sbornoy komandy SSSR po khokkeyu v Finlandiyu, s 24-go po 28-go Noyabrya, 1969, (Fond 7576 opis' 31, delo 319 lista 48).

<sup>71</sup> Rossoshik, Trenery, 94.



### *Conclusion*

Our first conclusion must be that, on the whole, the Party's influence in the development of ice-hockey was limited. Its most significant act was the promulgation of the 1949 decree on international sport, without which a Soviet ice-hockey program would be difficult to envision. But in terms of active institutional support the Communist Party did very little. On the whole, the sport was surprisingly independent of meddling from above. Its evolution was successful in large part because the sport quickly attracted the interest of a group of talented and dedicated individuals who were able to popularize it. In this sense the growth of hockey in the USSR was not all that different from its origins in Canada, or in the European countries that adopted it.

In terms of negative influence on the progress of hockey, there can be no doubt that the Party's absurd policy on international play -- that victory must be guaranteed in advance -- was a serious impediment to the growth of the sport. For too long the USSR wasted its time playing against overmatched opponents from Eastern Europe, when it should have been training against top amateur teams from the West. Moreover, the matches against Canadian professionals should have come years earlier than they did. Ironically, by conniving to exclude professionals -- even tier two professionals -- from international competition, the Party did much to *reduce* the prestige of Soviet ice hockey, by creating the impression that the USSR was afraid to play Canada's best.

When it did interact directly with hockey, the Party's primary efforts were limited to haranguing players about their duties to win, behave in a 'worthy fashion', and join the Komsomol and later, the Communist Party. By emphasizing the political importance of victory, Party agitators

probably succeeded in creating an atmosphere of tension, which may have contributed to overall discipline and determination. However, on the whole the Party had little impact on the players' consciousness. The Soviet hockey players seemed to have been significantly motivated by genuine and deep feelings of patriotism. For most players it had little to do with the ideology of Communism, and was rather rooted in the natural affection for one's homeland which is present in the citizens of almost all modern nation-states. The recollections of most players seem to indicate that the propaganda itself made little inroads.<sup>72</sup>

This brings us to a second important point. There were many issues in hockey which the Party could have influenced, but choose to totally ignore. Chief among them was the existence of a crippling shortage of basic equipment and resources, which throttled the sport in all parts of the country, save a few urban centres. Another factor was the persistent and predatory behaviour of central talent scouts, with regard to peripheral teams and programs. Both these issues will be discussed in greater detail later. For now it is important to note the fact that, in all my research with the archives and other sources, I never encountered any evidence of the Party or Komsomol taking any measures whatsoever to broaden the material base of hockey, or to prevent the hyper-centralization of resources and personnel in Moscow.

In practical terms, the Party's most significant contribution was by *not* enforcing certain socialist norms, which might have impeded the performance of its elite programs. Most crucially, the Party allowed a blatantly illegal system of rewards and material incentives to crop up in hockey, which ensured hockey a steady supply of qualified and dedicated athletes. And, thanks to the skill of

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<sup>72</sup> Television Series: Bolshe Chem Khokkey, Episode 2 – 6:55 pm.

the hockey authorities who administered them, these incentives remained tightly linked to the needs of the international program.

## Chapter 2: Sports Committee of the USSR

Aside from the CPSU, the body which theoretically had the most authority over the nation's hockey program, and all other sports, was the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport.<sup>73</sup> The Sports Committee<sup>74</sup> itself was very closely linked to the Komsomol, and most of its high functionaries came directly out of this Party body, rather than sport itself. Theoretically, the Committee administered hockey on a day to day basis through the Hockey Section and a variety of subordinate bodies. However, the Sports Committee itself directly influenced the fate of hockey in a number of ways that will be considered separately in this chapter. First, hockey had a high enough profile to attract almost constant direct attention of Sports overseers. Secondly, the Sports Committee directly controlled *Sovetskiy Sport*, and thereby controlled what would be printed about ice-hockey. Thirdly, the Sports Committee bore ultimate responsibility for securing resources for sport in the USSR. Sport did not receive very generous allotments from the state budget, so clout to resolve hockey's problems would have to come through the Sports Committee

### *Direct Interference in Affairs of Hockey Section*

From 1946 to 1961 the Sports Tsar was a former Komsomol bureaucrat who was named,

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<sup>73</sup> It is true that Sports Committee was directly subject to the Council of Ministers, not the Communist Party. However, there is no indication in any of the available materials that the Council of Ministers as such ever exerted any influence whatsoever on ice-hockey. The presence of the Communist Party, on the other hand, was ubiquitously felt.

<sup>74</sup> From 1959-1968, the Committee was renamed the "Union of Sports Societies"; however its duties, functions and structure remained, in all practical terms, unchanged: to avoid confusion, it will be referred to as the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport, or the "Sports Committee" for short, regardless of time period.

oddly enough, Nikolai Romanov. As we have already seen, Romanov took an unusually keen interest in ice hockey, and his personal intervention was required to prevent the sport from being wiped out after its first season. For a number of years, Romanov directly headed the Hockey Section, and personally oversaw the direction the sport took. However, after the USSR committed itself to the Olympic movement in 1953, his direct administration became impractical. As preparation for the Olympic games was clearly the highest political priority, Romanov could not supervise preparations for sport in general and still personally run hockey. For reasons of expediency, administrative sections for hockey and other sports were created.

The Hockey Section seemed to have come into its own as a body with an independent presidium after the Soviet victory at the World Championship in 1954.<sup>75</sup> Defeat in 1955 was a bit of a 'hiccup' in the sport's development, but victory where it counted, at the 1956 Olympics, made Romanov and his colleagues confident in the ability of the nation's best players. On this basis, Romanov took the daring and unprecedented step to invite the World Championships to Moscow. It must have been very difficult to convince the Party to authorize the move, and a guarantee of victory must have been part of the process. If the 1955 defeat to Canada had caused the Sports Committee little trouble, this was in large part because the competition took place in Germany. However, with the 1957 World Championships to take place in Moscow, victory was essential.

The international hockey festival planned for Moscow was diminished somewhat by the news that the United States and, more importantly, Canada would not be participating.<sup>76</sup> Although

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<sup>75</sup> The first entries in the Hockey Section archival collection began in 1955.

<sup>76</sup> Canada and the United States announced a boycott on the tournament in November 1956, to protest the Soviet

the absence of the Canadian team would diminish the value of a Soviet victory, Romanov probably breathed a sigh of relief. Soviet experts and coaches agreed that only the Canadian team was capable of causing serious problems for the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, in spite of the absence of the Canadian team, things did not go according to plan. At the time, there were no play-offs at the World Championships, and no overtime: if the round-robin portion of the tournament ended in a tie, the winner would be determined by goal differential. Sweden and the USSR went through the tournament without a single defeat, up until the final scheduled match between these two teams. Although the stage seemed set for a dramatic winner take all final, the game ended anticlimactically in a tie. The Soviet team discovered to their horror that the Swedes had a better goal differential. Although team USSR went through the tournament undefeated, they finished second, and the tournament ended in a debacle.

This defeat summoned a firestorm of criticism from the embattled Sports Committee chief. Soviet ice hockey was not yet the spectacle it would become. Its profile was low enough that World Championship defeats in 1955, 1958, 1959 and 1961 attracted little unwanted attention from higher authorities. But a defeat in Moscow could not help but be conspicuous. The Party would demand to know who was to blame, and to keep his job Romanov had to come up with a scapegoat and show that he had a plan for rectifying the problem.

Romanov initiated a period of active interference in hockey affairs that lasted for the

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invasion of Hungary.

remainder of his tenure with “Order № 144”, which laid out a plan for the further growth of Soviet hockey. The document in question is a typical example from Soviet officialdom. It begins with an attempt by Romanov to exculpate himself for the team’s defeat, by shifting the blame to the team’s coaches and players:

The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport of the Council of Ministers of the USSR notes that in the past winter season the national team of the Soviet Union, participating in the World Championship, preformed unsatisfactorily, losing the respected title of Champion of the World and Europe, which it had earlier won. *This occurred, most of all, as the result of mistakes which were allowed in the work of the national team.*<sup>77</sup>

Self justification through accusation comprised a large chunk of Romanov’s report.

Romanov singled out four players as being unfit for the national team, all of whom were left of the 1958 national team. Chernyshev and Egorov were held most directly responsible, and both were fired. Anatoly Tarasov was brought in as the head coach. Finally, the Hockey Section as a whole was reprimanded on the grounds that its officials were aware of all the aforementioned problems in advance, but had done nothing to remedy them.<sup>78</sup>

After assigning blame, the later portion of Romanov’s decree was surprisingly realistic. First, he clearly spelled out a mandate for the Hockey Section. As with all other sections of the Sports Committee, the Hockey Section was simultaneously to enhance the aspects of the Sport: мастерство and массовость.

Мастерство, a term which is best translated in this context as ‘skill-level’, referred to the overall ability of the nation’s best players. The fundamental task of the Hockey Section was to

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<sup>77</sup> GARF: Prikaz ot Predsedatallya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kulture i Sportu: 6 June 1957, No 144. O Merakh Dalneyshego Razvitiya Khokkeya v SSSR. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 140).

<sup>78</sup> GARF: Prikaz ot Predsedatallya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kulture i Sportu: 6 June 1957, No 144. O Merakh Dalneyshego Razvitiya Khokkeya v SSSR. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 140-47).

ensure that at present, and at any point in the foreseeable future, the USSR would be able to assemble a team of an appropriate calibre for international competition. The Romanov report criticized the hockey section for the low level of play outside Moscow, and for neglecting the development of young players who would take the place of the aging professional core.

Массовость, which literally means ‘mass-ness’, refers to popular participation. As Romanov noted, ice-hockey was at the time still played by very few people. The registered figure of 78,000 recreational players was very small for a population of almost 200,000,000. Even if one considers only the young, male, Russian portion of the population, only about .3% of the eligible population had played a single registered game in 1957. Romanov was also very critical of the dominance of the Moscow teams over their provincial adversaries in elite league play, and he took this to be indicative of the relative development of ice-hockey throughout the country.

Simply put, the new mandate of the Hockey Section was to popularize the sport in all areas of the country with appropriate climates, and to ensure that the skill level of the Soviet Union’s international players was high and continued to grow.<sup>79</sup>

To achieve this the Romanov order laid out a number of specific targets for the Section. To ensure progress in skill development, skill standards were set up for the nation’s elite players, and a national curriculum was set up for coach training. To increase mass participation, he named the regional Sports Committees that had not done enough to popularize the sport, thereby putting a great deal of pressure on them to take hockey seriously. A regional breakdown was supplied, with all

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<sup>79</sup> GARF: Prikaz ot Predsedatelya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kulture i Sportu: 6 June 1957, No 144. O Merakh Dalneyshego Razvitiya Khokkeya v SSSR. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 140-47).



major cities being assigned a quota of players which it was required to 'produce.' All in all, within a two year period of time, the Hockey Section was to double the number of players in the USSR, bringing the figure to 150,000.

Of course, obtaining a full set of hockey equipment, along with full sized arenas for 150,000 people was totally unrealistic. The Romanov report recognizes this, and actually offered some creative solutions for increasing participation on limited resources. First, a nation-wide system of tournaments was established, modelled after the national Spartakiads.<sup>80</sup> At the lowest levels, teams would self-organize around sponsor organizations and compete for regional and city championships. And, to limit problems associated with restricted resources, the report put forward a system of simplified rules. Games were played on smaller rinks which were to be constructed on any ice surface with 'boards' demarked by snow-banks or crude barriers of any other sort, and self-made equipment was not ruled out. Nevertheless, the problem of acquiring resources was the most acute issue that the sport would face. The Romanov report suggested that the local sports committees appeal to the local authorities, through the Councils of Workers Deputies and the Sovnarkhoz organizations, to secure them needed sticks and other equipment.

Needless to say, Romano's 'recommendations' were adopted. The results of the Romanov report were on the whole mixed. The program for developing mass sport was probably the most successful aspect of the Romanov program. In response to Romanov's critique about the lack of

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<sup>80</sup> The Spartakiads were devised in the 1920's as a socialist alternative to the Olympics, which the USSR still rejected as bourgeois. The contest was organized as a multi-tiered event, with competitions at a local, city, republican and all-Union level. At each level the winners would be invited to proceed. Prior to World War II, foreign 'workers teams' would be invited to compete at the All-Union championships. After World War II the games became a strictly Soviet affair. They were held every four years, always one year prior to the coming Olympiad. They were used principally to identify candidates for the Soviet Olympic team of the following year.

youth development, the Soviet Union's professional teams quickly established a network of junior teams. While most Olympic sports relied upon 'special schools' to train future champions, ice-hockey was never taught at sports schools, probably because of the critical shortage in ice-rinks and equipment. Rather, children's programs were administered directly by the professional teams. This scheme was at a disadvantage to the sports school model in that fewer children could participate. However, those who were accepted benefited from a much better education, as training and development was run by active professional coaches and players. By the mid-1960's children as young as eight would be trained in schools directly affiliated to a leading elite team, providing the nation's elite program with a steady supply of new recruits.

Perhaps more important was the fact that Romanov placed a genuine emphasis on participatory sport. The tournaments according to simplified rules soon evolved into the national 'Golden Puck' tournament, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

However, the fundamental problem of Soviet hockey, the lack of equipment and resources, remained unsolved. The Sports Committee's best chance to get significant amounts of equipment produced would be to concentrate its strength and prestige and try to force large scale production agreements. Romanov's insistence that the local Hockey Sections bear responsibility for equipment procurement was a recipe for failure. The Sports bureaucracy in Moscow had enough ties to the Komsomol and Party to get things done: local committees had no real chance of persuading the captains of industry to produce needed supplies, for free. This initiative seemed more a cynical recognition that the equipment problems in the USSR were insoluble. By issuing such a decree, Romanov would be able to conveniently deflect all blame for future material shortages onto his

underlings in the provinces.

In spite of its faults the Sports Committee under Romanov was able set some useful guidelines for the development of ice-hockey, and to establish it as a priority sport. He established a clear mandate for the Hockey Section, and gave it realistic plan for action which it used to establish hockey in the USSR. Strangely enough, however, after Romanov's departure in 1961, there is little evidence that the Sports Committee played a direct role in the administration of hockey.

The one significant exception to appear in the archival record is the program produced at a 1969 joint Sports Committee and Party Conference, a report which was much less realistic than its predecessor. The material deficits that affected hockey were recognized, but no progress was made in resolving them. The participants concluded lamely that local committees were supposed to lean on "local heavy and light industry" to meet their needs, and that material shortcomings would not be tolerated as an excuse for poor hockey development.<sup>81</sup>

*Sports Committee: Clout vis-à-vis Other Organizations*

It may well be that the Sports Committee was reluctant to engage in the struggle for resources because it knew that this was a fight it could not win. Much of the political and economic life of the USSR depended on internal power struggles between competing ministries and entities, which received less direction from the centre than is commonly thought. It is interesting to note that

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<sup>81</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX-go otchetno-perevybornogo plenuma soveta federatsii khokkeya SSSR: Otchetniy Doklad, Alekhin, V.D. (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 287, lista 59-97).

in the USSR, even after innovations that expanded the scope of products covered by the nation's planning organs, no more than 1% of the nation's 25,000,000 different products were ever governed by specific quotas.<sup>82</sup> The overwhelming majority of all consumer goods were grouped into general categories: cosmetics, children's footwear, cutlery, and so on. The *specific* array of consumer goods and amenities was produced to a large degree, in line with the influence of the artificial price system. However, at a lower level, resource allocation was also guided by an informal system of personal connections and influence which was vital for overcoming shortages, and the general absurdities of Soviet life. Simply put, organizations and individuals with prestige and goods to offer could get what they wanted produced through barter arrangements, while those with little to offer in a *quid pro quo* would go away empty handed.

The problem that the USSR faced in sports development was that the Sports Committee's productive capacity was negligible. Sports goods were for the most part not included in the national planning system, and the Sports Committee had nothing to offer for them on the market. Thus, in order to get supplies produced, the Sports Committee had to go through the difficult process of finding a plant with the appropriate machinery, and convincing the manager to divert supplies and efforts away from his hard plan quotas, towards unplanned sports supplies for which -- at best -- he could expect some ruble profits. The reality of the situation doomed the Sports Committee to being the poor begging relative of Soviet industry.

This fact is supremely relevant to the history of hockey, because hockey supplies fell into

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<sup>82</sup> Vladimir Popov and Nikolai Shmelev *The Turning Point: Revitalizing the Soviet Economy*, (New York: Doubleday), 81.

exactly the general categories that were not specifically outlined by central planners: almost all hockey paraphernalia was simply categorized as ‘sporting-cultural supplies.’<sup>83</sup> Even the concerted efforts of the Sports Committee as a whole would probably not have been able to achieve much in terms of procuring resources. As we shall see, by leaving the matter largely in the hands of the Hockey Section, the results would be even less impressive.

The archives confirm this general assessment of the Sports Committee’s inability to successfully resolve interagency disputes over resources through direct confrontation. One of the earliest material conflicts revealed in the records concerns a dispute that arose in 1957 over use of the Luzhniki ice arena. In 1956 the Sokolniki indoor ice-facility was built, along with Moscow’s main rink, Luzhniki. While the larger facility, Luzhniki, was often reserved for major cultural events, Sokolniki was designated primarily for the use of Moscow’s elite ice-hockey teams.

As league games had, up until this point, been at the mercy of the weather, the indoor ice-rink was greeted as a long awaited boon. However, it quickly became apparent that the Sokolniki facilities were of a quality so poor as to render them nearly unusable. The problem sprung from the fact that the building long went unfinished. Although open for business in 1956, the facility suffered from chronic poor ice conditions which arose from unspecified defects in its structure. The situation continued to go unresolved because the contractor and the arena administration had become embroiled in an unnamed legal dispute, which had caused full project completion to be postponed

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<sup>83</sup> Interestingly skates, which were specifically planned from at least 1953, were also simultaneously the one hockey-equipment item with which shortages were not critical. Furthermore, the solution of the ‘stick problem’ with which the reader will be acquainted later, was only truly attained in the 1970’s after sticks became a separate planned item, and were governed by a series of national quotas.

Promyshlenost’ SSSR (Moscow: Statistika, 1964), 413; Narkhoz 1987 (Moscow: Statistika, 1988), 156.

indefinitely.

On June 27, 1957, a meeting of the Presidium of the Hockey Section was convened to deal with the problem, which had been dragging out for over a year. As the Sports Committee had no production capacity at its disposal, the Presidium decided to make two appeals for assistance in getting the necessary repairs made: one to a certain Comrade Samodurov, the head of Главтонельметрострой,<sup>84</sup> and the second to the Moscow City Council.<sup>85</sup> Evidently neither Samodurov nor the City Council could be persuaded to help, and a second meeting was dedicated to the same theme on September 13. The rhetoric from the frustrated members of the Hockey Section became even more heated. Tarasov claimed that his summer practices had been utterly spoiled by the “totally useless” quality of the ice at Sokolniki.<sup>86</sup> As a further aggravation, the season was about to start and Sokolniki would clearly not do as a primary facility for the Big Three in Moscow. Ultimately, the Presidium gave up hope of accelerating the pace of repairs. In light of the “catastrophic conditions” at Sokolniki, a change of tack was adopted, and it was decided to petition “the appropriate State and Party Organizations” for use of the Luzhniki arena at the Lenin Palace of Sport for the beginning of the upcoming season.<sup>87</sup>

However, more disappointment was on the way. As a result of the impending forty year anniversary of the Great October Revolution, the administration of the Lenin Palace of Sport

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<sup>84</sup> The State Agency responsible for excavating Moscow’s metro system.

<sup>85</sup> GARF: Protokol No 4: 27 June 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektsii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 92).

<sup>86</sup> GARF: Protokol No 6: September 13 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektsii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 80-82).

<sup>87</sup> GARF: Protokol No 6: September 13 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektsii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 80-82).

reported that it was unable to allow the Hockey Section to use its facilities: league and international matches prior to Nov. 9, 1957 will have to be played at Sokolniki.<sup>88</sup>

The problem was partially resolved when the Presidium appears to have persuaded the Luzhniki managerial staff to lend Sokolniki their ice-technicians, in an attempt to improve the conditions. However the debacle over the ice-rink was a clear sign of things to come, and an indication of where hockey, and sport in general, stood in the relative pecking order of Soviet officialdom.

The passing years did little to boost the authority of hockey organizations. It took ten years for ice-hockey to acquire its first indoor facilities and it would take almost another ten years to build the first ice-cleaner. Until 1964 the ice had to be maintained by hand, a process that was very time consuming and resulted in inferior game and practice conditions. The first Socialist Zamboni was finally built at the beginning of the 1964/65 season, after years of lobbying. By this time, ice hockey had acquired the status of being a national sport and thanks to the assistance of certain "Party and Soviet organizations in Moscow" a auto-repair factory was forced to build five machines for the national program.<sup>89</sup>

It is worth noting that in addition to its inability to obtain new deals in their favour, sports authorities were unable to even enforce existing contracts. At a 1969 national coaches meeting, a number of provincial figures raised this issue. The coach of the Leningrad SKA team noted that the

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<sup>88</sup> GARF: Protokol No 7: September 27 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektsii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 75-76).

<sup>89</sup> GARF: Spravka: O Rabote Kommissii po Sportivnym Sooruzheniyam Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR v 1964 i Osnovnykh Meropriyatiyakh na 1965. (Fond 9570, opis' 2, delo 2381 lista 92-94).

management of the team's home arena was arbitrarily taking more than the agreed portion of the total ticket sales for the team's matches, and his appeals had been totally ignored.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, he noted that Leningrad was only being provided with 10,000 sticks a year, although he had been promised many more. Though local Leningrad plants had been instructed by Главспортпром<sup>91</sup> to increase production out of their supplementary budgets, the factory administrators, he claimed, simply ignored the directives: "No matter how much we fight, how many letters we write, they not only don't raise the quota, but we don't even receive an answer."<sup>92</sup> Another representative, one Comrade Averbukh from Tyuman', brought up the stick issue again. His program had been guaranteed 6,000 sticks over the course of the year; yet only 3,000 were delivered.<sup>93</sup> The head of the Estonian department complained that the situation with supplies in his city was so bad that not a single hockey team could be iced. The city authorities were planning on converting Tallin's two ice-rinks into slaughterhouses, and the program was in immediate danger of shutting down all-together.<sup>94</sup> And, the long suffering Coach Levitan from Novokuzentsk complained that every time his players traveled to their matches by plane, Aeroflot charged them all five rubles, counting their equipment as "excess baggage", in flagrant violation with the agreement on free equipment transport that the

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<sup>90</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 16-17).

<sup>91</sup> Main administration of sports production.

<sup>92</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 26).

<sup>93</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 19-20).

<sup>94</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 35-42).



airline had signed with the Hockey Federation.<sup>95</sup>

The most perceptive suggestion to emerge from the conference was made by Averbukh: he stated that Sports Committee needed to have factories built, under its jurisdiction, which would be supplied with concrete annual plans. Relying on furniture plants to produce sticks with spare wood was simply not working.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, the stick problem would be more or less solved in this fashion. In 1963, an experimental sports factory was set up in Moscow: it was to produce 500,000 sticks of 'enhanced quality' a year: enough to secure mass hockey in Moscow.<sup>97</sup> Quietly, more such factories would be set up around the country, and in 1970, hockey stick production was included into the national plan.<sup>98</sup>

### *Sovetskiy Sport*

The newspaper *Sovetskiy Sport* was to the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport, as *Pravda* was to the Party: it was the official press organ of the national Sports movement. The newspaper was established in 1925, as *Krasniy Sport*. It ran under this name until 1946 when, just prior to the establishment of 'Canadian' hockey in the USSR, it was re-christened as *Sovetskiy Sport*. *Sovetskiy Sport* continues to exist to this day, and it remains one of Russia's most popular

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<sup>95</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 35).

<sup>96</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 19-20).

<sup>97</sup> GARF: Protokol 12 6 April, 1964 "O Merakh po Ulucheniyu Kachestva Sudey Igr Vse-Soyuznikh Pervenstv". (Fond 7576 opis' 2, delo 2381).

<sup>98</sup> Narkhoz 1987, (Statistika: Moscow, 1988) 156.

newspaper publications. At its peak, *Sovetskiy Sport* had the fifth largest circulation in the USSR. If one were to discount the millions of mandatory subscriptions to *Pravda*, *Izvestiia*, *Trud* and other 'political' dailies, in all likelihood *Sovetskiy Sport* was the most read news publication in the USSR. *Sovetskiy Sport* was then, at least potentially, the most influential wing of the Sports Committee. Keeping this in mind, we will briefly examine the history of this newspaper to determine what the character of the newspaper was, and what impact it had on the history of ice-hockey in the USSR.

*Sovetskiy Sport - propaganda or popular reading?*

One of the principal avowed tasks of *Sovetskiy Sport* was propaganda and agitation, designed to popularize sport among the masses as means of personal and political edification. Was *Sovetskiy Sport* just another part of the national propaganda machine, or was it a respected and interesting sports commentator?

*Sovetskiy Sport* was, of course, not like a typical Western sports daily. Like all Soviet newspapers, *Sovetskiy Sport* was not exempt from the various national propaganda campaigns: every year on May Day and Revolution Day the paper would be indistinguishable from *Pravda* or *Izvestiia*, running precisely the same speeches, articles and declarations. The same held true for any other occasion of national importance: a major speech by Khrushchev on the state of agriculture, the death of Gagarin, the brotherly aid rendered to fight the counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia, and so on.

During the Stalin period, the newspaper was so rife with propaganda that actual sports coverage was at times all but absent from its pages. The newspaper's special sports mandate was

often reduced to making some obscure link between the latest propaganda campaign and sport. For example, on November 30, 1946 front page articles in all major Soviet papers marked the twelfth anniversary of Comrade Kirov's murder at the hands of a monstrous Trotskyite-English-Japanese-Nazi plot. *Sovetskiy Sport's* contribution, "The Unforgettable Friend of Athletes" paid homage to the sporting Kirov: the hunter, the (second) best-friend of all athletes, the constructor of arenas, and so on.<sup>99</sup>

After the death of Stalin, the political content of the sports press was notably toned down -- but it did not disappear entirely. When prevailing conspiracy theories that circulated in the leading Party-State circles directly or indirectly involved sport, *Sovetskiy Sport* was under pressure to uncover evidence of these plots. For example, when relations between the USSR and the FRG were at a low ebb in the late 1960's a *Sovetskiy Sport* reporter 'discovered' evidence that West German neo-nazis had hijacked the country's sports movement as a part of their revanchist goals.<sup>100</sup> The editors subsequently publishing a long article detailing the contours of the emerging conspiracy:

In the zone of military actions, sports objectives occupy far from last place. Someone in Bonn has been studying them for use as an important beach-head for political diversion... A sporting celebration takes on a truly ominous note, if it is organized with provocation aims, and timed to coincide with the beginning of a new campaign against a neighbouring sovereign state. [Such is] the current "sporting celebration" in West Berlin, in which young athletes are called under the banner of 'Bundeswehr'...<sup>101</sup>

The conspiracy theory was grounded on the fact that the West German army had become involved in administering the national sports program, including athletes from West Berlin, and that

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<sup>99</sup> G. Zabelin, "Nezabyvayamiy Drug Fizkul'turistov," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 30 November 1946.

<sup>100</sup> GARF: Stenogramma: Seminar Soveshchaniya po Khokkeyu Nachil'nikov, Trenerov Kommand, Kapitanov i Komsorgov, 8 September 1969, (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 286).

<sup>101</sup> Anonymous, "Bonn na Trekh Frontakh," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 5 March 1969.

the new head of the amateur boxing association had “served in the Hitlerite Wehrmacht, up to the rank of Major”, and was therefore “an orthodox Nazi.”<sup>102</sup>

In the early 1970's as Western Jews began to campaign with increasing intensity for the right of their co-ethnics to leave the USSR, latent Russian anti-Semitism -- at the best of times thinly veiled -- came sharply into focus. Consequently the national press came under pressure to ‘uncover’ evidence of international Jewish conspiracies against the USSR.

*Sovetskiy Sport*, again, joined the campaign. In 1972 a seemingly minor incident at Kent State University was used as a pretext to write a long, venomous article about Judaism. Kent State was, of course, a household name among the more politically conscious of Soviet citizens: the Soviet press had relentlessly flogged the infamous shootings at the 1970 Kent State demonstrations, which had resulted in the death of four student protesters, as an object lesson in American Fascism. But, the author notes, recent actions by Jewish trouble-makers have sullied the school's progressive reputation:

In that same Kent where two years ago, students protesting the war in Vietnam were gunned down... I don't know where, and in what rows, the local Zionists were on that day. But, on the other hand, on the March evening when there was supposed to be a match between the USSR and USA wrestling teams, at the University Stadium, they were “on duty”.<sup>103</sup>

In actual fact the ominous incident being described consisted of a handful of noisy protesters, carrying signs and handing out leaflets: standard fare at any American university. But the author Vladimirov, allegedly drawing from remarks attributed to an unnamed American host, explained that rather than acting on the basis of conscience or simply blind enthusiasm, the protesters were in the

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<sup>102</sup> Anonymous, “Bonn na Trekh Frontakh,” *Sovetskiy Sport*, 5 March 1969.

<sup>103</sup> V. Vladimirov, “Za Provakatsii - po 5 Dollarov v Chas,” *Sovetskiy Sport*, April 30, 1972.

pay – literally – of some intensely ‘anti-Soviet element’:

They [i.e. the Zionists] pay the people who walk with the placards five dollars an hour, and maybe a little extra on account of the [bad] weather; in addition, they can earn even more if they succeed in creating a scandal, starting a scuffle, or spitting on a Soviet person.<sup>104</sup>

Hockey journalist Evgeniy Rubin is perhaps in the best position to comment on the inner workings of *Sovetskiy Sport*. He has written about hockey for forty-five years now, both before and after his 1978 emigration to the USA. Moreover, he worked at *Sovetskiy Sport* from 1958 until 1971 and for many years served as acting editor of the his department until he was fired without explanation in 1969 -- almost certainly as a result of mounting anti-Semitism in the USSR.

According to Rubin the political infiltration of the newspaper was such that the majority of *Sovetskiy Sport*'s staff was tied to activities not directly related to sport. There were departments for mass organization, social-political, teaching the youth, letters:

Even the foreign department demanded not information about foreign sporting events, but indications of the development of sport in socialist countries and the exposure of decadent bourgeois sport... An eternal battle was waged between the sports and non-sports departments for space in on the pages. The battle had its winners from both sides – but most often in favour of the non-sporting departments. Their director killed us with the accusation ‘They amuse themselves with accounts of elite sport, while we work on problems associated with the development of mass physical culture in the county.’<sup>105</sup>

The political situation was such that the editor in chief rarely showed up for work prior to noon. He spent the first half of any given day at Party or Komsomol meetings, with other Moscow editors, and he arrived at *Sovetskiy Sport*'s office full of commands and directives in line with the Party's campaign of the day. For example, if a general directive were issued about the rural situation, they would be given an order to do a column about collective farm sports. Every two

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<sup>104</sup> V. Vladimirov, “Za Provakatsii - po 5 Dollarov v Chas,” *Sovetskiy Sport*, April 30, 1972.

<sup>105</sup> Rubin, *Pan*, 124.

weeks, a new TsK directive results in a new policy.<sup>106</sup>

Keeping this in mind, it is difficult to understand why people read *Sovetskiy Sport* if, after all, it was merely 'more of the same.' The key, however, to understanding how *Sovetskiy Sport* was set apart is to recall that while much of the paper was politicized, some of it wasn't. There was in every issue a genuine component that covered sport and only sport. In every issue there was some coverage that was not political; that was objective and well written; that covered a theme that was without stereotyped notions of right and wrong, black and white; contests where the outcome was not known in advance. The sports section may have been 1 page of 6, or 4 pages out of 8, depending on the political climate of the day. But in *Pravda*, *Izvestiia* or virtually any other publication the apolitical portion stood at a steady zero.

In examining the history of hockey, I have personally been impressed by the unusually high level of intelligence, thoughtfulness and talent present among those who wrote about the game and, for that matter, among those who played it, studied it and coached it. Although we in the West have long lived with notion of Soviet sport as being highly politicized in reality it was a haven for people who were simply too intelligent, too honest and too talented to work in a more standard Soviet environment. Reflecting on the higher calibre of the Soviet sports journalist, Rubin concluded that:

[Soviet sports writers] were all united by a genuine intelligence, and a desire to express themselves with the written word. They knew and understood sport. But it seems to me that it was not this that brought them to our newspaper rather than to another.

In spite of the observation under which the State and Party held the sports press, [sports] writers were never required to display the same servitude that was required by from journalists who specialized in politics, industry, culture or agriculture. In writing articles about Lev Yashin or Mikhail Tal or Valery Brumel, one could get by without mentioning their Communist worldview, ideological convictions, and

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<sup>106</sup> Rubin, *Pan*, 124.

desire to thank the Party with their successes, for its motherly care for sport.<sup>107</sup>

Reflecting on the history of hockey reporting in the USSR reveals the truth of Rubin's words. Although there was as much stereotyping in hockey writing as on any other sport, there was also a wealth of objective and well-written material.

### *Sovetskiy Sport as Political tool*

In terms of influence in the broader context of Soviet officialdom, one of the most important roles played by *Sovetskiy Sport* was as a tool for advancing the sports agenda and, at times, a weapon against rival institutions.

As we have already discussed, the Sports Committee's options in settling disputes with other actors were very limited, especially when the issue concerned resources. When such conflicts arose, *Sovetskiy Sport* was the 'ace up the sleeve' of the Sports Committee: the Committee was in the happy position of controlling the nation's most read newspaper. Using the newspaper to settle scores was, of course, a risky business, which had to be approached delicately. The typical pattern was the same as in other Soviet newspapers, with regard to criticisms of other government actors. The article begins by citing some sort of rule or agreement, and the purpose behind it. If at all possible, a quote from a Party document or some obscure speech by Brezhnev was also inserted. Then an incident -- or pattern of incidents -- wherein some organization was flagrantly violating these precepts would be covered in depth. The newspaper was always very careful to never cover

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<sup>107</sup> Rubin, Pan, 141.

the issue in such a way as to beg the conclusion that the established rules or precepts endorsed by the Party were the root of the problem. Rather, in each case, the problem was presented as a case wherein the wise precepts of the Party were being ignored by some individual who is indifferent as to whether or not boys like Vanya can get a hockey stick, or who somehow thinks that the Party's revolutionary decision to double the amount of athletes in ten years does not apply to him.

As one example, we can consider another conflict between the Hockey Section and the Luzhniki arena management, which occurred in 1969. This was, moreover, the same organization that haughtily dismissed the Hockey Section's request to use the main ice rink for league competition ten years earlier. The author in this case is one V. Nikitin, a player from Nikolai Epshtein's Khimik, who entitled his article provocatively "How I wound up prison." Nikitin begins by noting that, in order to help weaker hockey players improve their game skills, the Hockey Section had wisely instituted a rule whereby six hundred seats were to be set aside at every Moscow game involving the country's leading teams, so that players from other teams could study the masters at work. The management of the Luzhniki arena, where TsSKA, Spartak and Dynamo played most of their games, had agreed to this system, and promised to issue passes to all players who wished to attend.

However, when Nikitin arrived, he found to his dismay that the reserved seats were all taken by people who were obviously not players.<sup>108</sup> To avoid a dispute, Nikitin first tried to stand at the boards and watch. However, he was quickly chased away by the ticket controllers, so he went to sit

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<sup>108</sup> In all likelihood members of the Luzhniki staff - with or without the knowledge of the arena's management - had decided to sell tickets for the seats that were officially blocked off, and put the money straight into their pockets.



on the concrete steps in the nosebleed section. Nikitin was not there long before the dispute escalated, and he was arrested and jailed.

Nikitin was understandably upset at his treatment, and the Hockey Section was enraged. This time, rather than trying to deal with the arena directly, the Presidium decided to immediately take more radical measures. With a little encouragement, the maligned player wrote a letter to *Sovetskiy Sport* which immediately took up his cause, publishing his piece in article format on October 3, 1969.<sup>109</sup> The results were very impressive and swift. Within a month, the arena administration apologized in another letter -- which was also published -- and promised that in the future, the seats would be reserved for registered players as was agreed, and that special seats would be set aside for members of the national team.<sup>110</sup>

*Sovetskiy Sport* often used reader complaint letters as the basis to settle scores with individuals and organizations that were ignoring sports issues. In some cases the Sports Committee tried to change popular behaviour by making an example of individuals who were not getting behind important sports initiatives. As one example, we might consider a 1972 letter from a group of boys who wanted to enter a team in the annual Golden Puck tournament. As we have already mentioned, the USSR lacked the resources to set up organized minor hockey. Its equivalent consisted of grass roots initiatives where boys build and maintained their own facilities, and organized their own games and practices. However in this case, the would-be team could not find a willing coach -- a requirement for entering the annual tournament. Although the building manager was required to

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<sup>109</sup> V. Nikitin, "Kak ya Popal v Militsiyu," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 3 October 1969.

<sup>110</sup> GARF: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Federatsii po Khokkeyu SSSR, October 27 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 288, lista 21).

assist the boys in this matter, he rudely dismissed their request, which prompted them to write to *Sovetskiy Sport*.

To the shock and dismay of the accused, the sports paper immediately took up their cause. When questioned about the incident the building manager denied that the boys had ever come to him, and accused them of lying. However, the manager's case got worse when the boys' Komsomol representative confirmed their version of the story. To make a long story short, because he was too lazy to help a group of boys find some retiree willing to supervise their games and practices, the delinquent manager had been disgraced in a paper read by almost every male in the USSR. Even worse, he was being investigated by the Komsomol for neglecting Party-endorsed decisions about recreational sport. His case sent a clear message to other men in his position about the dangers of ignoring recreational hockey. It would be naïve to suggest that every apartment complex had a team. But at the same time, during the 1960's and 1970's -- considering the resource restrictions that they faced -- the Soviet Union had a good recreational program, which was in no small part due to the vigilance of the sports authorities.

The most common point of conflict, however, concerned equipment production. This was an issue that was hammered away at in *Sovetskiy Sport*. In the final analysis, it is all but certain that the press campaign was the Sports Committee's most significant contribution to the gradual improvement of the material situation in hockey.

One of the most daring measures undertaken in the sports press was the decision to begin running stories that made unfavourable comparisons between the Soviet Union and its neighbours. D. Ryzhkov, one of the nation's better journalists, published a lengthy piece about the existence of a

‘hockey Mecca’ in the GDR, a town called Weiswasser. Ryzhkov begins his piece by recalling the complaints of the legendary Soviet children’s coach Igumnov, about the impossible material shortages that crippled his work with budding hockey prodigies -- and about how all these problems had been successfully resolved by East German authorities:

[Igumnov] works with children in one of our best hockey schools. He works excellently. But he can’t help but be amazed that new hockey stars keep appearing in our country: “We don’t have enough ice... the uniforms for children are poor... we don’t have time to properly teach them, we can only “cram”. I was reminded of this conversation because the Dynamo children’s school in Weiswasser is just the sort of school Igumnov dreamt about.

Yes, in Weiswasser there are no herds of kids roaming the streets with home-made sticks. From six years old, they can stand on skates. And not just stand: they are taught the techniques of skating. After the first year, they begin to play...<sup>111</sup>

Ryzhkov’s critique was made safer by the fact that the GDR was a Socialist country and it was ideologically possible that in some areas, the USSR might have something to learn from the Germans. However, that same month another article appeared, also on the topic of children’s uniforms, this time comparing the living standards of Soviet children to that of young Swedish players. The author wrote:

Last year, we hosted several games with Swedish school boys. After one of the matches, I stepped into their dressing room... Before me were kids of different height and build. But each of them had a light and comfortable set of equipment, of an exact fit. Why then are we not able to produce children’s equipment? This topic has already been written about. But, the Hockey Federation of the USSR and sports equipment enterprises, and trade organizations all stubbornly remain silent.<sup>112</sup>

Later in the winter of 1971/72, another Sports Committee sponsored press campaign heated up, this time covering the whole range of sports equipment. In December 1971, the newspaper was bold enough to publish a blistering attack against the Soviet Ministry of Trade for its constant failure

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<sup>111</sup> D. Ryzhkov, “Weiswasser - Eto Khokkey,” Sovetskiy Sport, 18 April 1968.

<sup>112</sup> M. Shlezinger, “Rytsary bez Dospekhov,” Sovetskiy Sport, 13 April 1968.

to realize its production and delivery plans for hockey supplies.<sup>113</sup> Surprisingly, in a letter published three weeks later by the Vice-Minister of Trade, the ministry acknowledged its guilt, apologized and promised to rectify its errors.<sup>114</sup>

The attacks continued into the new year, culminating in a series of articles published on the basis of sports supply 'raids' that the newspaper had sponsored. The first such investigation was conducted in Irkutsk, where the investigators found that the city's hockey program was being crippled by supply shortages, especially the total unavailability of hockey sticks. They travelled to six schools and found that in every instance the boys were playing with home-made sticks. The city had only one sports equipment store which was permanently sold out: all shipments were instantly purchased by 'stick speculators' who stood outside the doors selling sticks for many times the retail price. The local representative explained of РОСКУЛЬТОРГ (Russian cultural trade organ) while more than two hundred thousand sticks had been ordered, only about forty five thousand had arrived.

The most absurd part of the Irkutsk situation lay in the fact that while the city was surrounded by high quality timber, it did not produce a single hockey stick. Rather, the city's supply was shipped in from the semi-arid plains of Saratov. When asked why they weren't producing sticks for the hockey mad populace, the local furniture plant managers explained that without official permission such an operation would be technically illegal.<sup>115</sup>

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>113</sup> Anon, "Kogda Magaziny v Roli Pokupateley," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 22 December 1971.

<sup>114</sup> Anon, "Kogda Magaziny v Roli Pokupateley," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 14 January 1972.

<sup>115</sup> V. Trav'yanskaya, "Les Rubyat v Saratove, Klyushki Letyat v Irkutsk," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 14 January 1972.

In summarizing, it can be said that the Hockey Section, as a relatively independent entity, emerged from the Sports Committee gradually, over the late 1950's. Fortunately for the development of hockey, the first Sports Committee chairman, Romanov, was a reasonably competent figure. Thanks in large part to his commitment to hockey, the necessary institutions were well developed by the 1960's for a relatively broad based program, and an incredibly successful elite team. Strangely, the Sports Committee grew a great deal more distant in the 1960's. In part this may have been because Romanov's successors did not share his interest in ice hockey. But most of it is likely explained by the extraordinary success of the Sports elite team. The Sports Committee chiefs still had the final word on major decisions in the sport, such as the appointment or dismissal of national team coaches, or the formation of sports delegations. But, aside from major policy shifts, as long as the national team was winning, the Sports Committee took a decidedly *laissez faire* approach to ice hockey.

The Sports Committee's greatest failing, from a hockey standpoint, was its failure to address the issue of resource procurement head on. To say that the Committee did nothing would be overstating things. The equipment situation in the USSR did improve, especially after the construction of 'experimental factories' that produced only sports supplies, and answered to the Sports Committee for their production quotas: the Committee's lobbying efforts must have been behind this. Moreover, as we have seen, the sports bureaucracy had little leverage and less success when it collided with other state entities. And, to be fair, it has to be noted that if material shortages became an acceptable excuse for failure, local committees and sections would invariably use it to

evade their responsibilities. Nevertheless, the decision to openly abdicate all responsibility for procuring resources was ultimately irresponsible and it must have had a disastrous effect on the morale of provincial hockey men who knew their impotence before the local red barons all too well.

The one tool that the Sports Committee did possess for pressing state policy-makers was *Sovetskiy Sport*: a newspaper that was at once a propaganda rag, a colourful commentator, and a weapon for settling political scores. *Sovetskiy Sport* in its latter capacity was the most efficient -- and often only -- recourse for embattled players, coaches and children in the struggle to see the sport they loved flourish against the absurdities of Soviet life.

### Chapter 3: The Hockey Section

Theoretically the Hockey Section was the branch of the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport with the direct day-to-day responsibility for hockey. This organization and its Presidium formed an organizational nexus through which decisions were made, and policy enforced. So far, our investigation has revealed a far less centralized system of control in the world of Soviet hockey than one might have earlier suspected. Hence, a certain scepticism towards the actual powers of the Hockey Section is warranted. Nevertheless, even if the Section did not possess all of its theoretical powers, it does deserve serious consideration as *a* centre of influence in Soviet hockey.

The Hockey Section was governed by a Presidium, which met every few years for policy making plenums. In the interregnum, partial meetings were convened about once a month, wherein issues of day-to-day operations were discussed, and specific plans were formed and implemented. Hence, one of the most important roles of the Hockey Section was as a forum for discussion and decision-making. Most of the voluminous Soviet hockey archives are filled with documents on rather mundane organizational issues: in this regard the Hockey Section played a crucial role in homogenizing league training standards, schedules and tactics.

As we have seen the Hockey Section was charged with realizing the Sports Committee's two chief goals for sport, with regard to hockey: enhancing the skill level of Soviet players, and expanding mass participation.

*Enhancing elite teams*

To improve the general skill level in the nation, the Hockey Section executed a number of measures. One of the most basic measures was to create a system of national testing and training which, theoretically, should apply to all players. Every year, lengthy training and activity programs would be developed and approved, which were binding on a nation-wide scale. The first such reports appear in the archival record beginning in 1956.<sup>116</sup> In addition to setting - or at least approving - training approaches in general terms the Hockey Section passed concrete targets for individual players, to guide their off-season training. For example, in 1957/58 players were expected to be able sprint a distance of fifty meters in 5.8 seconds, and one-hundred meters in 11.9.<sup>117</sup> There is, from the Romanov period, a fairly substantial body of such materials and reports: one of the former sports chief's peculiarities was his tendency to micro-manage skill development. In 1993, when he wrote his memoirs, Romanov still bitterly recalled the inability of many of the team's players to raise the puck from a close range: one of the skill targets that had been developed for that year.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to target setting, the Hockey Section organized a seemingly endless succession of conferences and planning sessions, which focused on theoretical matters of training and tactics. A national education program for coaches of all levels was set-up, with the hours to be spent on each

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<sup>116</sup> GARF: Plan: Podgotovki Sbornoy Komandy Khokkeyu k Pervenstvu Mira 1957 goda. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 312, lista 124-127).

<sup>117</sup> GARF: Individual'noe Zdaniye Kanadskomu Khokkeyu Komandy "Spartak" Tov. Mal'tsev, Vl. Mikh. Na Period 10 Maya po Oktyabrya 1958 goda. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 312 lista 54-57).

<sup>118</sup> Romanov, Voskhozhdenie, 266.



subject carefully delineated, for the purpose of teaching correct approaches to training, technique and strategy.<sup>119</sup> In addition to these conferences, the Hockey Section oversaw the production and distribution of a wealth of technical and educational literature on the sport. From the earliest days of Soviet hockey, committees of coaches were periodically convened to collaborate on books: first studies about hockey in Canada and in other countries, and then, as the Soviet program advanced, more inward looking studies.<sup>120</sup> Finally, the Hockey Section maintained full academic programs dedicated to the study of ice-hockey at all the nation's leading physical culture institutions.

It is these training sessions that gave the Soviet Union's ice hockey program its famous 'scientific' approach to the sport, which struck Western journalists and players as being so odd. It took the 1972 Summit Series, before North American hockey coaches began to take Soviet innovations seriously. It was then that almost everyone admitted that the Soviets were ahead of North America in their methods of athlete training. In fact, since then their most crucial innovations have become commonplace throughout the world. It is ironic that the Father of Soviet Hockey's scientific school was none other than Lloyd Percival, a Canadian. While the Canadian hockey men of the 1950's by and large scoffed at Percival's studies, the Soviets took them very seriously and Percival's ideas served as the foundation for the development of the Soviet approach to training and tactics. A prophet has no honour in his hometown.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> GARF: Prilozhenie No 2 k Prikazu Predsedatelya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kul'turi i Sportu pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR ot 6 Iyunya 1957 No 144 Uproshchennye Pravila Igrы dlya Provedeniya Massovykh Sorevnovaniy po Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 153).

<sup>120</sup> GARF: Plan Raboty Vse-soyuznogo Trenerskogo Soveta po Khokkeyu s 1 Dekabrya 1958 goda po 1 Iyunya 1958 g. (Fond 7576 opis' 16, delo 312, lista 89-91).

<sup>121</sup> Percival began his athletic career as a Track and Field coach in the 1940's. In 1951, he published *The Hockey Handbook*, in which the game was broken down into component parts and studied in great detail. Not only were proper

### *Resources and Mass-Hockey*

As already discussed, the Hockey Section was tasked by the Sports Committee with resolving its own resources problems. The largest challenges in this regard were associated with mass hockey, and that will be discussed below. It is now universally accepted that the Soviet claim to the effect that Olympic athletes were merely the 'tip of the iceberg' in a nation of athletes, was patently false. In general the USSR lacked the resources to create a massive, hierarchically structured recreational sports program out of which elite athletes could be recruited. As a general rule, the Soviets compensated by identifying -- almost at random -- a much smaller group of children, recruiting them into special schools, and training them to become professionals from as early an age as possible.

In a sense this held true for hockey as well. The nation's future professionals were, by and large, identified at an early age and trained at special hockey schools which were affiliated to the nation's best elite teams. But this is not to say that hockey had little or no mass component. In considering the mass appeal of Soviet sport, one has to draw a line between popular sports such as ice hockey and football, and 'artificial sports' such as kayaking or the biathlon. The latter were truly

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techniques included, but also notions such as gymnastics targeted at developing specific muscle groups, and breathing techniques. Percival's notions were universally derided in the world of professional hockey, until after the Soviets proved their validity in 1972.

creatures of the state, sports with little history and almost no popular following in the USSR created as a convenient way to produce Olympic gold medals in areas where competition was less intense.

But hockey was a different matter. Popular enthusiasm -- and a desire to play the sport -- was very genuine. In this regard, the Hockey Section expended a considerable amount of time and resources in the attempt to create a mass program, which was primarily recreational in nature. Many members of the Hockey Section saw mass participation as a worthy goal in and of itself, for reasons of ideology or personal conviction. Others regarded mass sport as being primarily a means for indirectly improving the level of elite play, by discovering more talent.<sup>122</sup> But what is beyond dispute is the fact that a sincere attempt was made to develop ice-hockey into a mass sport.

The Hockey Section began making a serious centralized effort at improving mass participation after the debacle of 1957. From 1955 to 1957 the number of registered players rose from 40,000 to 78,000: a further target of 150,000 was set for the end of the 1958-1959 season.<sup>123</sup> However, this target proved woefully unrealistic: by 1960, there were precisely 82,869 registered players in the Soviet Union, which represented a very modest increase from 1956.<sup>124</sup> The problem in this case was not a lack of interest, but a lack of equipment, above all hockey sticks.

In 1957, hockey stick production went through its first reorganization. The core of the production capacity was based out of factories which answered to the Dynamo sports society, in Lvov, Riga and Tallinn, which were to cut production of bandy style sticks, in return for a slight

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<sup>122</sup> GARF: Plan: Podgotovki Sbornoy Komandy SSSR po Khokkeyu k Pervestvu Mira 1957 goda. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 312, lista 124).

<sup>123</sup> GARF: Postanovlenie Ob"edinennogo Plenuma Sektzii Khokkeya SSSR i Vsesoyuznoy Kolegii Sudey po Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 164).

<sup>124</sup> GARF: Spravka o Sostyanie Khokkeya v SSSR, s 1960 po 1961. (Fond 9570 opis' 2 Delo 2340).

increase in the production of Canadian style sticks, to about 100,000 annually. By tying in smaller factories, the Hockey Section was able to put together a plan whereby stick production was pushed up to 200-250 thousand a year beginning in 1957, while the price of sticks was simultaneously reduced by 30-50%.<sup>125</sup> Including the production of smaller plants, the expected total output of sticks in 1957 was set for 256,000 ball-hockey sticks, and 194,000 ice-hockey sticks.<sup>126</sup>

Another problem was the poor quality of the sticks that were produced. One author writes about Soviet sticks from the inaugural 1946-47 season thus:

The sticks were self-made. At this time there were neither specialists nor factories for producing hockey equipment, and the quality of sticks corresponded to this. The players changed sticks several times a game... After the game there was a pile of scrap wood beside the rink.<sup>127</sup>

Reports from 1957 reveal that little had changed. Upon inspecting the first portion of sticks produced, a quality control team found that the sticks broke “at the slightest strain.”

The ratio of sticks produced to registered players in 1957 was approximately 2.5:1. Given the frequency with which Soviet-made sticks broke, this was not nearly enough. While the elite league was reasonably well supplied, many B level teams were having to pass their sticks over when they went off on a line change.<sup>128</sup> Without a radical increase in the production of basic equipment, a truly mass hockey program was unthinkable.

A study conducted in 1960 concluded that, after the initial gains made by reorganizing

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<sup>125</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumе Sektsii 1957 goda. 21 May, 1957. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 174-209).

<sup>126</sup> GARF: Otchet: Kommissii po Sportsooruzheniyam i Sportinventariyu Prezidiuma VKhS o Rezul'tatakh Proverky Raboty Predpriyatiy po Proizvodstvu i Raspredeleniyu Klyushek dlya Khokkeya s Myachom i Khokkeya s Shayboy. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 97-104).

<sup>127</sup> Muradov, Bobrov, 122.

<sup>128</sup> GARF: Otchet: Kommissii po Sportsooruzheniyam i Sportinventariyu Prezidiuma VKhS o Rezul'tatakh Proverky Raboty Predpriyatiy po Proizvodstvu i Raspredeleniyu Klyushek dlya Khokkeya s Myachom i Khokkeya s Shayboy. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 97-104).

production in 1957, little had been achieved.<sup>129</sup> The Hockey Section had tried to rely on lobbying local industry to produce sticks, but this strategy had not proved particularly effective. Their requests were often flatly refused, and when sticks were produced, they were inevitably of poor quality, made from the worst quality wood and produced in minimal quantities.

As a result in the 1960's, the Hockey Section and the Sports Committee as a whole lobbied relevant government bodies for the creation of more factories dedicated to the production of sports equipment, including hockey sticks. Progress was slow, but finally in 1963, central planners agreed to create a new supply system featuring 'experimental factories'. In 1964, this resulted in an increase of core production to 500,000 sticks annually, in addition to what could be produced through makeshift local arrangements.<sup>130</sup> The capacity of the experimental supply system to produce sticks increased dramatically, especially after ice hockey sticks were included as a separate item in the 1966-70 five year plan. In 1970, 3,709,000 ice hockey sticks were produced in the USSR, and by 1980, the figure had risen to 10,576,000.<sup>131</sup>

Thanks to the efforts of the Hockey Section enough sticks were secured for a reasonably broad recreational program. Moreover, more sticks became available for sale to the public. During the lean 1950's, most sticks were sent directly to registered teams: stick sales had peaked at 40,000 in 1954 and actually dropped to 11,500 in 1956.<sup>132</sup> As a result, most of the participants in the relatively informal 'simplified' tournaments that had been concocted had to play with homemade

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<sup>129</sup> GARF: Spravka o Sostyanie Khokkeya v SSSR, s 1960 po 1961. (Fond 9570 opis' 2 Delo 2340).

<sup>130</sup> GARF: Protokol 12 6 April, 1964 O Merakh po Ulucheniyu Kachestva Sudey Igr Vse-Soyuznikh Pervenstv. (Fond 7576 opis' 2 Delo 2381).

<sup>131</sup> Narkhoz, 1987, (Moscow: Statistika, 1988), 156.

<sup>132</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumu Sektsii 1957 goda. 21 May, 1957. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 174-209).

sticks. By the late 1960's, manufactured sticks were available in most major cities. Nevertheless, chronic shortages persisted in many major urban centres, and equipment was all but unobtainable in more remote areas.<sup>133</sup> The stick quality problem was also never truly resolved. Although usable products were eventually developed, the careful observer will note that all photographs of elite league Soviet players from the 1960's on show them playing with foreign made Jofa, Koho and CCM sticks.<sup>134</sup>

Equipment issues aside, creating a mass program also required substantial human resources. To facilitate the expansion of mass, recreational hockey, the Hockey Section directly invested in training initiatives for coaches and referees. The thought that children could 'self-organize', and play without adult supervision and organized structure seemed at the very least strange to the typical Soviet sport bureaucrat. It might do in a pinch, but they intuitively sensed the need for a representative of some organizational structure to be on hand. Scientific and tightly controlled training courses for elite coaches and officials had been a fixture in the USSR from day one. However, beginning in 1957 a series of short courses for coaches and referees were designed, for those who would be working with primarily recreational and amateur level athletes.<sup>135</sup> A weekend course format, featuring 24 hours of instruction time was completed later that year. Only two hours were wasted on a mandatory introductory session on the political meaning of hockey. The remainder of the instruction period was reserved for teaching training and playing tactics and, most

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<sup>133</sup> V. Trav'yanskaya, "Les Rubyat v Saratove, Klyushki Letyat v Irkutsk," Sovetskiy Sport, 14 January 1972.

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, Gushchin, Goryachiy Lyod, 26.

<sup>135</sup> GARF: Plan: Raboty Vsesoyuznogo Trenerskogo Soveta po Khokkeyu na Period S 1 Maya po Oktyabrya 1957 g. (Fond 7576, delo 312, opis' 16, lista 116-118).

importantly, rules for the game.<sup>136</sup> In spite of the best efforts of the Hockey Section, the majority of recreational coaches probably never went through any formal instruction. Nevertheless, such exercises did ensure that across the country there was unified understanding of the rules of the game, and that in most regions there was at least a nucleus of individuals capable of organizing and officiating annual competitions according to a unified national standard.

In 1957, the Hockey Section adopted initiatives designed to expand hockey participation geographically. Up until this point in time, Canadian style ice hockey tended to be localized around Moscow with other regions of the country continuing with the bandy variant, or not playing at all. Officially, as of 1956, it was claimed that only 18% of the nation's registered ice hockey players resided in Moscow. However, this is hard to reconcile with the same official data, which located one half of the USSR's registered ice surfaces in the capital. Moreover, it is unclear as to whether or not these statistics distinguish between international ice hockey and bandy. It is likely that they did not, as both variants of the sport were administered by the Hockey Section at this time, and as available production figures show bandy sticks were still out producing hockey sticks at a 3:2 ratio as of 1957. It is likely that the bulk of the non-Moscow registered participants were in fact a mixture of 'dead souls' and adherents to the indigenous variant of ice hockey.

It is likely that on the whole Canadian style ice hockey was barely known outside the capital city, as of 1957. The Soviets realized that limiting their program to Moscow put them at a disadvantage internationally in terms of sheer numbers. While the USSR had a population more

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<sup>136</sup> GARF: Uchebnaya plana. Prilozhenie No 3: Po Ukazu Predsedatelya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kulture i Sportu, pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR No 144. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 153).

than ten times larger than that of Canada, Canada had three times more people than Moscow. In order to tap the full potential of the USSR, it was imperative that the game spread to other regions of the country. So, to expand the scope of the game's popularity a number of measures were taken. Elite teams and players from the A division were sent on trips to 'the provinces' to assist in developing the game. Circulation of current publications on the sport beyond Moscow was increased. Ten of forty spaces at the Elite Moscow Institute for Physical Culture Hockey coaching program were henceforth reserved for candidates from outside of Moscow.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, local chapters of the Sports Committee were ordered by Romanov to make developing Olympic-style ice-hockey a priority. The Sports chief singled out a number of local sports committees for criticism, as they had done little or nothing to popularize the sport. They were instructed to expand interest in the game on the basis of the simplified rules tournaments, and were assigned production quotas indicating the number of teams that were expected to compete.<sup>138</sup> Finally, efforts were made to ensure that the necessary equipment would be available for establishing the sport: 25-30% of the annual production of hockey sticks was earmarked for 'the localities'.<sup>139</sup>

Another crucial step in developing a truly broad-based ice hockey program was to construct facilities. Obtaining funds for closed arenas with artificial ice-surfaces was nearly impossible. The Hockey Section -- and the Sports Committee as a whole -- was never able to convince the relevant

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<sup>137</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumu Sektsii 1957 goda. 21 May 1957. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 174-209).

<sup>138</sup> GARF: Prikaz ot Predsedatelya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kulture i Sportu: 6 June 1957, No 144. O Merakh Dalneyshego Razvitiya Khokkeya v SSSR. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 140-47).

<sup>139</sup> It is unclear whether localities indicates the entire country, except Moscow, or excepting certain other major cities. GARF: Otchet: Kommissii po Sportsooruzheniyam i Sportinventariyu Prezidiuma VKhS o Rezul'tatakh Proverky Raboty Predpriyatiy po Proizvodstvu i Raspredeleniyu Klyushek dlya Khokkeya s Myachom i Khokkeya s Shayboy. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 97-104).



authorities that a country as cold as the Soviet Union required more ice. In its formal declarations, the Hockey Section repeatedly vowed to construct dozens of closed arenas in the immediate future, but in reality such a pipedream was universally recognized as wishful thinking.

Realizing it would never have the resources to create a Canadian style recreational league based on artificial ice-surfaces, the members of the Hockey Section quickly came to the conclusion that in the Soviet Union recreational sport would have to be based on much simpler, outdoor facilities. But obtaining appropriate funding even for the most basic of constructions proved a challenge. In 1957 only 560 ice-rinks of all types existed in the USSR.<sup>140</sup> By the end of the Soviet period, the USSR had approximately 50 closed artificial ice facilities: by comparison Canada had about 10,000.

The Hockey Section always preferred organized, recreational hockey as its main vehicle for the development of mass hockey. This program, based on teams organized by schools, factories, learning institutions and the armed forces, expanded as time went on. But this progress was slow, in large part due to the difficulty in obtaining funds for the construction of basic facilities. In his 1982 memoirs, referee Sergey Gushchin recalled the establishment of ice hockey in his hometown of Sverdlovsk. Interest in the sport was sparked early, in 1952, when the Dynamo sports society began using the city as a training base for several of its elite teams, probably because of the city's long winters. At that time the sport was totally unknown, but many of the Soviet Union's most famous football heroes played on the Moscow ice-hockey team, and this alone was enough to draw a crowd.

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<sup>140</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumu Sektsii 1957 goda, 21 May, 1957. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 191).

Hockey equipment was totally unobtainable in Sverdlovsk at this time.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, with the help of some of some retired players, the boys constructed their own rinks, sticks and jerseys, and a crude form of recreational hockey was established.

After a few years, reacting to the initiatives that were initiated by Romanov in 1957, members of the Dynamo regional council began efforts to establish a more formal recreational program. Some sticks and primitive equipment were distributed, and instructors were sent to meet with the directors of the city's schools, and to lecture physical education teachers on the new game, to prepare them to fill the role of coaches, instructors and referees.<sup>142</sup>

Still progress in the city proved painfully slow, for the usual reasons. Resources were impossible to obtain, and crucial support from higher city officials was evidently lacking. The city's first formal children's hockey club was established only in 1974, and only after a long battle with the housing directorate of the city's Kirov region for the office space that the Club was to use.<sup>143</sup> Even in 1982, when Gushchin penned his memoirs, the task that the Hockey Section had laid before itself was incomplete. Aside from the structures maintained by the city's Avtomobilist elite club, organized recreational hockey was practically non-existent in Sverdlovsk: "Now we talk a lot about the creation of special hockey schools in Sverdlovsk and the region. But when it gets down to realizing these important and necessary plans, 1,000 reasons are found for not bringing them to a successful conclusion: lack of good equipment, sticks, ice and coaches..."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Gushchin, Goryachiy Lyod, 10-12.

<sup>142</sup> Gushchin, Goryachiy Lyod, 25.

<sup>143</sup> Gushchin, Goryachiy Lyod, 15.

<sup>144</sup> Gushchin, Goryachiy Lyod, 26.

The experience in Sverdlovsk was symptomatic of the inability of the Hockey Section to establish a broad mass program through centralized efforts. For this reason, beginning in the mid-1950's, the Hockey Section began to change the focus of its efforts. Realizing that centralized efforts were proceeding too slowly, it began to encourage the development of a grass roots, self-organized program. Instead of relying entirely on centralized construction efforts, the Hockey Section began to emphasize the publication of books and articles, which provided instructions on how to build an amateur rink, and allowed popular enthusiasm to do the rest. The proper dimensions for a regulation sized recreational rink were specified, and instructions for building the rink on a river, lake or paved surface were supplied in detail.<sup>145</sup> The most basic rink design was so simple that it could be built simply by clearing the snow from a regulation size patch of ice, and using the snow banks as boards. Of course, hockey enthusiasts has already been doing this long before the Hockey Section instructed them to do so. However, by providing instructions on regulation sized surfaces, and by organizing large scale tournaments based on these rules, the Hockey Section was able to 'standardize' popular ice-hockey, and create a semi-organized national recreational hockey system, with very little investment.

Inspirational articles were also composed about success stories which occurred throughout the country, in establishing recreational hockey. One typical example, published in 1957, focused on a conscientious senior citizen who decided to attract the neighbourhood kids to sport, as a way to combat growing instances of hooliganism.<sup>146</sup> The person in question, Colonel Aleksandr

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<sup>145</sup> Anon., "Ledyanoy Katok," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 19 November 1959.

<sup>146</sup> K. Vladimirovna, "Ne skuchno v Etom Dvore," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 8 December 1957.

Feodorovich Mikhailovskiy (Ret.) decided on the construction of a hockey rink, to be constructed according to the instructions published by the Hockey Section, and flooded in the winter for hockey. At first Colonel Mikhailovskiy was only able to attract the younger children to the project, while older hooligans threatened to destroy the project. But, in the end, even the older and rougher characters signed on to the project.

The fact that all the kids in the photograph that accompanied the original article have factory produced sticks -- a rarity at the time -- suggests the possibility of a Potemkin rink. Whatever the case may be, however, the idea spread quickly and, by the 1960's crude ice hockey were a fixture at apartment complexes throughout the USSR's major cities. Based on this ingenious and inexpensive solution, recreational hockey spread like wildfire across the Soviet Union's Slavic heartland.

Resting on the loose institutionalized framework established by the Hockey Section, the city tournaments increased in popularity, and competitions began to be organized at regional levels. As the 1960's progressed, sticks became easier to obtain, and tournaments organized along more traditional lines became possible. At the initiative of Anatoly Tarasov, in 1964, the system of tournaments according to simplified rules evolved into a nation-wide children and youth tournament known as the Golden Puck. The organizational structure was based on the national Spartakiads which the USSR had been conducting since the 1920's for all Olympic sports: regional winners played for city championships; city champions competed for provincial/republican titles and republican champions proceeded to play at the national level.

The crucial difference, however, was that the post-war Spartakiads existed primarily for the purpose of selecting the Soviet Olympic team for the following Olympiad. The first stage of the

national competition, at the regional level, was largely symbolic. Genuine amateurs were competing against trained professionals, and had no real chance of advancing beyond this first stage. Once the competition reached the republican level, it took on a distinctly professional character. The Golden Puck, however, was an amateur competition right until the All-Union Championships, for the simple reason that boys who were registered with any organized team were strictly forbidden from playing.

There were two possible reasons for this. On one level it must be admitted that by excluding players who were already on club teams, the Golden Puck allowed elite league coaches to identify child prodigies who had somehow slipped through the national recruiting system. It is worth noting that one of the many titles held by the wily Anatoly Tarasov was President of the Golden Puck Society. In fact, when in attendance at the 1968 national championships, the Army coach indicated that recruiting was just what he had in mind. Expressing satisfaction that the skill level of the players had increased over the past four years, he noted: "Finally, the most important factor in my view, is that there are 5-7 players on every team that could play in any children's club team. Earlier, I could name only one, and rarely two..."<sup>147</sup> Tarasov no doubt made sure that his scouts were on the look-out for the five to seven Muscovite children who could be brought on to TsSKA. In smaller locales, where elite teams had less resources for youth development, the city leg of the Golden Puck tournament was no doubt crucial for identifying candidates for the children's program. It can safely be said that most future elite league players would compete in at least one Golden Puck tournament before joining a children's club team.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Anon, "Khokkey - Nasha Lyubov'," Sovetskiy Sport, 31 March 1968

<sup>148</sup> M. Shlezinger, "Rytsari bez Dospekhov," Sovetskiy Sport, 13 April 1968.

Nevertheless, the primary purpose of the Golden Puck was to encourage the grass roots development of mass recreational hockey. After all, the republican and national levels of play were totally unnecessary for recruiting purposes for the simple reason that elite team coaches had to recruit within their city. Not even Tarasov was conniving enough to have a ten year old transferred from Chelyabinsk to Moscow.

National reporting on the Golden Puck tournament also reflected the amateur character of the program. Rather than record the feats of the tournament's leading teams, news reports focused on displays of friendship and sportsmanship, and teams that overcame some sort of obstacles. This style of reporting that was more indicative of a cultural event than a sporting competition. For example, when a team from the obscure Zhuravlevskii village in the Kurganskii oblast' suffered thundering defeats at the national level, culminating in a 16:1 loss to one of the Moscow based teams,<sup>149</sup> *Sovetskiy Sport* focused its coverage on Kurganskii entrant, comprised of boys who had not only organized their team, but built and maintained the first arena in their region.<sup>150</sup> Not a word was said in praise of the victors.

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<sup>149</sup> Easing up on an overmatched opponent, for whatever reason, was never a part of the Soviet understanding of sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct, partly because the Soviets employed the IIHF standard of the day for domestic play, wherein ties in the standings at the end of the tournament were resolved by goal differential. This occasionally resulted in absurd scenarios. For example, when it was decreed that all republics were required to send an entry for every sport to both summer and winter Spartakiads, Soviet spectators were treated to the spectacle of hockey teams from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Most republics resolved this difficulty by persuading some third-rate players from Russia to officially transfer their residence to say Dushanbe, so as to put together an acceptable entry. However, because of conscience or indifference, Georgia and Azerbaijan both sent teams comprised exclusively of local 'athletes'. This resulted in absurd matches that pitted northern professionals against men who could not stand up on skates without using their sticks for support. Nevertheless, the professional players proceeded to register victories by margins of thirty to fifty goals against their hapless adversaries.

<sup>150</sup> G. Larchikov, "Kolosok' Na Khokkeynom Pole," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 28 March 1972.

### *Conclusion*

With regard to ice hockey, the ideological mandate to develop a mass program was not just empty propaganda. Furthermore, although mass hockey was sometimes conceived as a means for enhancing the elite program it was not merely that. The Hockey Section made a sincere and concerted effort to build a recreational program, distinct from the existing elite development programs.

Sincerity aside it is still difficult to say if the Soviet Union actually had a mass hockey program. The participation numbers are hard to evaluate because of a lack of clarity over the criteria for official statistics, and their accuracy. By 1972, 500,000 players were registered at participating in organized hockey, about four times less per capita than Canada.<sup>151</sup> And even this relatively small figure is hard to reconcile with the anecdotal evidence. There were certainly not this many players in the well maintained children and youth teams affiliated to the nation's elite league teams. The number may accurately reflect the amount of registered players if one includes teams organized by factories and educational institutions, but the nature of these teams varied greatly. In some cases, players would be provided with a full array of equipment and playing facilities, and wealthy sponsors were sometimes able to create teams good enough to compete at the elite level. In other instances, registered players were provided with nothing more than a crude box, not unlike the facilities that boys constructed around their apartment facilities, and may not have played or trained

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<sup>151</sup> I Pavlovskii, "Skol'ko zh Khodit v Dolzchnikakh? Slovo v Zashchitu Khokkeynoy Klyushki," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 15 April 1972.

with any regularity.

What is clear is that whatever the size of the registered program, it was dwarfed in size by the self-organized, grass roots hockey movement. Boys, under the sponsorship of an adult, usually a local retiree, organized themselves into teams, built and maintained their facilities, and organized their matches and training schedules. The only centrally organized feature of this level of organized hockey was the annual Golden Puck tournament, in which three to four million boys participated annually during the 1960's and 1970's. A few of the most talented boys would be drawn into elite club teams, to play at a higher level. But for the vast majority of boys, hockey was played simply for the love of the game, as it was on the lakes and ponds of Canada.

On the other hand, ice hockey never became a phenomenon that was accessible to all. Although some kind of sticks and skates could be obtained, until the end of the Soviet era most recreational players could only obtain the necessary equipment with a great deal of improvisation, and children's equipment remained virtually unobtainable. There was only one factory in the USSR that produced children's equipment, and even Dynamo and TsSKA received shipments only once every 2 or 3 years.<sup>152</sup> As for proper children's skates, they were never sold in stores and could only be obtained through elite hockey schools.<sup>153</sup>

The situation seemed to worsen outside of Moscow and a few other urban centres. According to Igor Larionov the material conditions were always "completely catastrophic" on most

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<sup>152</sup> Fetisov, Overtain, 129-133.

<sup>153</sup> Fetisov, Overtain, 129-133.



provincial teams, to say nothing of what was left for recreational hockey.<sup>154</sup> Ice hockey development in the localities -- even in those places which were singled out for improvement by the Sports Committee -- varied greatly, and equipment was always the central issue. At the 1969 coaches conference the Ukrainian delegate appraised the sport's development in his republic as being frankly poor, blaming shortages in equipment, first and foremost sticks. The Leningrad representative complained that the sports arena was not abiding by the revenue sharing agreement, and that the city was being provided with a quota of only 10,000 sticks, for three million people. Comrade Averbukh from Tyumen' complained that although he had been promised six-thousand sticks for the year, only three-thousand had been delivered.<sup>155</sup> And so on.

Whatever mass hockey there once was has now completely dissipated. This is generally attributed to the exodus of the nation's leading players that occurred in the 1990's, and the nation's financial collapse. This is only partly true. Although the process of decline accelerated after the collapse of the USSR, it had already begun with a decline in participatory hockey in the late 1970's and 1980's.<sup>156</sup> As Evgeniy Dushkin wrote in contemplating the decline of post-Soviet Russian hockey: "one of the fundamental reasons is that hockey never became a mass sport."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Larionov, Takoy zhe, 32.

<sup>155</sup> GARF: Stenograma IX-go Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287).

<sup>156</sup> Gushchin, Goryachiy Lyod, 13; Larionov, Takoy zhe, 29.

<sup>157</sup> Dushkin, Ictoki, 37.

#### **Chapter 4 Centralization of Hockey**

One of the main advantages the Soviets were always recognized as holding in international competition, is that their national team played together all year round. Under Viktor Tikhonov, of course, this was true in the most direct possible sense: the army team was, for all intents and purposes, the national team. During Soviet domestic competition the team called itself TsSKA, and when abroad they merely traded in the Red Star on their chests for the “CCCP” crest. However, contrary to what is popularly assumed, this was not always the case. Prior to 1977, when assembled the national team was comprised of the leading 3 or 5 man units from the nation’s two or three leading teams with, perhaps, a few additions from other clubs. It cannot be said that the three contributing teams were always equal. TsSKA was usually -- although not always -- significantly better than the other two teams in the nation’s leading Troika. The army team usually contributed two lines to the national team, whereas the others added only one each. Nevertheless, the principle remained the same. From 1946 to 1991, every time a man stepped out on the ice in a national team uniform, he was skating with the same men he played with, year round.

This system is generally credited with giving the Soviets a significant advantage over their rivals in international competition, by vastly improving the team’s “chemistry.” By ensuring that all the component parts of the national team were located in Moscow, Team USSR could be quickly assembled for training and tournaments many times over the course of the regular season. Leading players in other countries were, on the other hand, scattered throughout their respective leagues, and the national team could usually only be assembled for training on the eve of a major competition. In

the Soviet Union entire playing lines, rather than individual players, were used to comprise the national team, so the Soviet squad would effectively train and play together year round on their various club teams. Foreign national teams could at best hope to work out a basic game plan prior to a major competition. The Soviet teams could go beyond general strategies, and execute complex set plays and unorthodox manoeuvres which had been perfected over the course of months and even years of training together.

There were, of course drawbacks to this philosophy. The policy had a disastrous effect on the morale of provincial teams, which understood that they would never have a chance of challenging for a league title, and that all their best players would inevitably desert them for Moscow. Provincial fan interest was damaged for the same reasons. And the development of the sport was limited by the fact that first-rate facilities, equipment, players, coaches and specialists were all scarce outside Moscow.

The adoption of a scheme that was so clearly oriented towards international competition at the expense of participatory play in the USSR surprised no one. It was completely in line with the Soviet Union's known policies and priorities regarding sport. As the behaviour of the Soviet Union fit so well with its stated policies and with Western stereotypes of the Soviet system no one doubted that this system was a conscious creation of Soviet sports bureaucrats.

Surprisingly, a detailed examination of the formal Soviet ice-hockey structures reveals this assumption to be false. This is not to say that the evolution of a system that sacrificed broad participation and mass participation for international glory was co-incidental. There were forces in the USSR and Soviet hockey program, which deliberately crafted and maintained the order that did

in fact evolve. The distinction here is crucial for two reasons. First, the fact that the sport's official governing body was actively opposed to one of the sport's most salient features calls into question the degree to which ice-hockey was formally and centrally structured in the USSR. This will lead us to the conclusion that forms the basis for the second part of this thesis: that informal structures and relationships were more important than formal structures in shaping the Soviet ice-hockey program. Secondly, the sports authorities' opposition to the system that evolved in favour of decentralization indicates that it was far from inevitable that the Soviet ice-hockey program should evolve as it did.

Again, the history of Soviet football provides a valuable point of comparison. No informal centre was able to orient the national program towards international competition, and the Soviets fared poorly in this sport. Despite having twice the population base of any other footballing nation, the Soviet Union never advanced past the semi-finals in a World Cup. The history of Soviet ice-hockey, in comparison to other sports -- football in particular -- leads us to the interesting conclusion that rather than being an embodiment of the Communist system, ice-hockey was successful because it was in fact an exceptional case.

### *The roots of the transfer system*

The sort of centralization that ultimately evolved in the USSR under Tikhonov was initially precluded in principle by the founders of the Soviet ice-hockey program. Nevertheless, from 1946-50 a sort of ad hoc centralization evolved out of the fact that the Canadian style ice hockey barely existed outside the capital. The only teams well enough supplied with equipment to seriously pursue

the sport were located in Moscow, and affiliated with powerful patron organizations: the Army (TsSKA), the security services (Dynamo) and the Air Force (VVS). League play was balanced for its first four championships, with the Moscow teams doing better largely because of their access to the necessary equipment and facilities.

As mentioned in chapter one, this equilibrium was broken by the originator of conscious centralization, Vasily Stalin. By luring the nation's best players to his VVS team, the Air Force squad was, for all intents and purposes, the national team under a different name.<sup>158</sup> Significantly, after Joseph Stalin died, the hockey authorities did not decide to maintain the *status quo*, and replace the younger Stalin with a more competent figure. Rather, they moved quickly to abolish the centralization system entirely. The VVS team was immediately disbanded, its players sent back to their teams of origin. Krylia Sovetov, a team which represented the national trade-unions replaced VVS in the dominant triumvirate, and talent distribution evened out again.

For the remainder of the 1950's, the Soviet ice-hockey program remained based on three strong Moscow teams. Some documents in the Hockey Section archives from 1957 appear to endorse the approach of basing the national team on a steady triumvirate. Prior to the ill-fated 1957 World Championships, it was openly declared that in order to make the team ready: "it is necessary that the whole centre of gravity... be shifted to the strongest club teams in the country."<sup>159</sup> *Prima facie* such statements would appear to endorse the system that later developed, which saw the best

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<sup>158</sup> The significance of the national team at this point in time was very limited. The USSR did not join the IIHF until 1952, and its international competitions were usually limited to impromptu matches with weak European teams.

<sup>159</sup> GARF: Plan: Podgotovki Sbornoy Kommandy SSSR po Khokkeyu k Pervenstvu Mira 1957 goda. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 312, lista 119-123).

players in the USSR predictably transferred to one of the leading Moscow based teams. However, it is important to realize that at this time, Canadian style ice hockey hardly existed outside the capital: what is being asserted is the need to focus efforts on developing the players who will comprise the national team, rather than transferring national team players to Moscow.

The opposition of the Hockey Section to transfers, especially after the 1957 defeat, is well documented. The Hockey Section Presidium noted with approval that: “The general skill level in larger group of teams in the Class A league has significantly increased and grown noticeably closer to the level of the three leading teams.” They further resolved to: “Shift the main weight of preparation of players and candidates for the national team onto the collectives.”<sup>160</sup> At the end of the 1957 season, the Presidium lamented the fact that: “The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> national teams were made up only of players from the three strongest Moscow teams.”<sup>161</sup> And, when the time came to prepare for the 1958 World Championships, the Hockey Section assigned national team supervisors not only to TsSKA, Dynamo and Krylia, but also to Lokomotiv and Spartak, indicating that the Presidium believed that these teams were, or soon would be, ready to contribute to the national team.<sup>162</sup> The following season a long article was published by Novokreshchenov, one of the leading members of the Presidium, which decreed that *all* teams in the A league were expected to prepare a line of candidates for the national team, in the expectation that the era of Moscow dominance was coming

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<sup>160</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumе Sektsii 1957 goda. 21 May, 1957 (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 174-209).

<sup>161</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumе Sektsii 1957 goda. 21 May, 1957 (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 201).

<sup>162</sup> GARF: Protokol No 6: September 13 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektsii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 80-82).

to an end.<sup>163</sup>

*Sovetskiy Sport* articles from the time also indicate a clear expectation that the Soviet league would soon even out. When the fortunes of some of the nation's weaker teams began to improve, *Sovetskiy Sport* lauded their achievements with articles that clearly anticipate a more balanced league in the future. The following article is typical of the anti-centralizing tone that the Sports Committee controlled press would adopt and maintain, right until the end of the Soviet era:

The problem with our hockey, in past years lay in the fact that the three Moscow teams, [TsSKA], Krylia Sovetov and Dynamo were beyond competition, and all matches with other teams were, as they say, a joke. The schedule of league play, in such a situation, lost all interest. But suddenly this situation has changed. One gets the impression that our leading teams are so stunned by the assault of the youth that, up to the present moment, they are unable to take [the challenge] seriously, and consider it to be a temporary and passing phenomenon.<sup>164</sup>

In its early years, the Soviet Sports Committee itself was also deeply opposed to artificial centralization. Nikolai Romanov, upon founding the Soviet ice-hockey program, was determined to maintain a competitive league. On the principle that 'iron sharpens iron', Romanov and other sports authorities precluded the possibility of rolling all these players into one organization. Romanov felt that domestic competition would keep the national team sharp during league play and, as an added bonus, the three national team lines would play three different styles of hockey, which would confuse opponents.<sup>165</sup> In his long decree that followed the World Championship defeat in 1957, Romanov noted with dissatisfaction that: "unfortunately it is again necessary to note that the battle for the top three places was again contested between three Moscow teams: [TsSKA], Krylia Sovetov

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<sup>163</sup> A Novokreshchenov, "Zdravstvuy, Khokkey: God Olympiiskii," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 1 October 1959.

<sup>164</sup> H. Baru, "Stoikost' i nravy," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 19 October 1958.

<sup>165</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 44.

and Dynamo - although the class of play by many teams improved.”<sup>166</sup> This does not sound like a remark that Romanov would be likely to make if he expected these three to be the permanent base for the national team.

In examining the totality of the available data, it is clear that the early support for the concept of three leading teams by the Hockey Section was merely recognising the reality of the nation’s very shallow development pool. Their efforts at supporting three leading teams seemed aimed at preventing the league from imploding into the sort of one team system, which had existed under Stalin, and would develop again under Tikhonov.

It was clearly expected that, as player development in the provinces improved, the league would even out. But this did not occur. As talented players began to emerge outside of Moscow, they inevitably migrated to Moscow -- first as a trickle, and then as a steady stream. It was thus after the sport began gaining popularity throughout the USSR in the late 1950’s and into the 1960’s, that the Hockey Section entered into conflict with the leaders of the ‘Big Three.’

Centralization therefore, was never a policy of the Soviet sports bureaucracy. Rather, it was executed by leading Moscow coaches, on their own initiative. The principal means used by the Army team and, to a lesser extent, by Dynamo, was the military draft. Not only did the TsSKA and Dynamo teams represent their respective parent organizations, the players, coaches and staff were also enlisted members or officers in either the Armed Forces, the Ministry of the Interior, or the KGB. As the Soviet Union practiced universal military service the simplest way to acquire a

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<sup>166</sup> GARF: O Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul’turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetnyi Doklad Predidiuma VKhS Na Plenumu Sektsii 1957 goda. 21 May, 1957 (Fond 7576, opis’ 16, delo 311, lista 174-209).



talented teenager was to draft him -- literally. Once in the army, the youngster would serve out his two years not in Eastern Europe, or at a godforsaken outpost on the Chinese border, but rather on the ice. Once his two years were up, it was simple enough to sign him on to an officer's contract, and to keep him in the organization for the rest of his playing days. Recruiting players from other teams was also simple enough. Upon being discharged from the services, like all Soviet males, they were still enlisted in the reserves and could be recalled to active duty.

As long as the Army agreed to abide by this system, there was not much the less influential Sports Committee could do, let alone the individual teams that were victimized by Moscow recruiters. However fraudulent it might be, a service contract with the Red Army, Interior Ministry or KGB trumped everything. Nevertheless, the Hockey Section condemned this practice as being detrimental to the development of Hockey in the periphery, albeit meekly. As early as 1957, the Hockey Section resolved to petition the Army to defer the draft of talented young players, and leave them on their original clubs:

One of the factors, to which a number of coaches point, which disturbs the stabilization of the youth in various teams, and the strengthening of work with the youth, is the drafting of young players into the Army. The majority of representatives of DSO [House of Soviet Officers] and departments and many of the members of the presidium of VKhS [All Union Hockey Section] consider it necessary to defer the draft of many young players, in order to achieve a growth in skill and to fix the young players to the collectives in which they developed.<sup>167</sup>

Ultimately, there was little the Sports Committee could do to stop the Army from drafting whom it chose to. So were the Army and KGB the real architects of the centralization system that helped win the USSR glory abroad? The answer would appear to be no. Again, Soviet football

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<sup>167</sup> GARF: Na Rabote po Khokkeyu v Fizkul'turnykh Organizatsiyakh SSSR: Otchetniy Doklad ot Presidiuma VKhS na Plenii Sektsii 1957. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 196-97).

provides us with a useful point of comparison. If the Army itself was the instigator of such a program in hockey, why did it never implement a similar system to help the nation's struggling football program? The Moscow TsSKA football team was an annual disaster. Dynamo fared better, with its Kiev club enjoying dominating the Soviet league in the 1970's. But the centralizing system employed in hockey to such great effect was never implemented in football -- or any other sport for that matter.

Upon careful consideration we see that in building TsSKA and Dynamo dynasties in Moscow, the military was not the architect, but rather a tool. The true originators of this system were none other than the longstanding national team coaches, Colonels Anatoly Tarasov and Arkady Chernyshev. As we shall see in the next chapter, these men constructed a rival, informal power structure, which wielded a great deal of influence in building the Soviet hockey program.

The military draft aside, there were a significant number of non-military transfers, against which the sports bureaucrats did pass a number of decrees. The Hockey Section drafted a number of regulations, beginning in 1957, to restrict such transfers. The first of these was the institution of a 'summer only' policy for transfers.<sup>168</sup> Such caveats were simply ignored by Dynamo and TsSKA. However, they caused significant problems for Krylia Sovetov, the national trade union entry. The national trade union administration also controlled a number of teams in the Soviet elite league and engaged in the same sort of centralizing that the Army and Dynamo were using, to draw the best players available onto one Moscow entry. The sports authorities had a lot more theoretical leverage

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<sup>168</sup> GARF: Protokol No 4: 27 June 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektzii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 92).

over any transfers that might have been made with the connivance of the trade unions to group all their best players into one Moscow squad.

The Hockey Section did, in fact, take swift action to dismantle the Krylia dominated feeder system, and expand the national talent pool. The first blow was struck in 1957, shortly after the transfer regulations were introduced, by Coach Seglin from Moscow Spartak.<sup>169</sup> Seglin's young team had finished disappointingly, and was relegated to the second tier of the elite league. As a result many of his prospects were requesting transfers, undoubtedly to Krylia Sovetov. Seglin appealed to the Hockey Section, arguing that given time his team would develop a higher calibre of play. If the players were allowed to transfer out the team would simply disintegrate.

In its deliberations, the Hockey Section noted, curiously enough, that Spartak was very popular with Soviet fans, and that it would not do to have the team performing miserably. Other members, presumably those opposed to the upstart Spartak coach, argued that Seglin had neglected several aspects of his educational work -- most crucially, political education -- with the clear implication that the class consciousness of the young players would be better served on Krylia Sovetov.<sup>170</sup> The session ended ambiguously, with the Presidium resolving to reprimand Seglin for his negligence of political education on the team.<sup>171</sup> But, as Spartak's core players remained with the team over the following seasons, it is obvious that his petition was ultimately successful.

In 1960, the issue of trade union sponsored transfers came up again, as controversy arose

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<sup>169</sup> Spartak was also run by the national trade unions.

<sup>170</sup> GARF: Zayavka Trenera Seglin v Oktyabre 1957 goda, pered Sobraniem Presidiuma Vse-soyuznoy Khokkeynoy Sektsii. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 63-65).

<sup>171</sup> GARF: Zayavka Trenera Seglin v Oktyabre 1957 goda, pered Sobraniem Presidiuma Vse-soyuznoy Khokkeynoy Sektsii. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 63-65).

over the relationship between Krylia and Moscow Lokomotiv, another trade union entry. The Hockey Section Presidium was assembled to decide on disciplinary measures to be used against the trade union teams in question. Although the documents available in the archives do not clearly describe what took place, it is clear from the measures taken what was involved. The Hockey Section report on the activities of the Lokomotiv management begins by condemning the leadership of the team for building the team on “shameful principles of bribery and groundless promises to the players,” and the coach of Krylia Sovetov, Egorov was also to be “strictly reprimanded.”<sup>172</sup> In conclusion, it was resolved that the proposed transfer of the players Yakushev, Chumichkin and Spirkin from Lokomotiv to Krylia Sovetov was to be refused.

In 1957, Spartak had been severed from the Krylia feeder system, and now Lokomotiv had been granted a reluctant independence. The next season, with its roster still intact, Lokomotiv actually surpassed Krylia and finished third in the standings. Though Lokomotiv would not again crack the top three, neither would Krylia Sovetov.<sup>173</sup> Cut off from its feeder system, the team’s roster aged, and the 1957 champions quickly faded into obscurity, only to regain a piece of their past glory briefly in the mid-1970’s during the interregnum between Tarasov and Tikhonov, under Boris Kalugin.

The Hockey Section fared reasonably well during its 1957-1961 campaign to break up the

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<sup>172</sup> The condemnation of ‘bribery and groundless promises’ likely referred to the fact that the Lokomotiv coach had been motivating his players not by exhorting them, in line with Communist virtue, to play for the good of the collective, but rather by making it clear that the top players would be sent to Krylia as a reward for their individual feats.

GARF: O Politiko-Vospitatel’noy i Uchebno-Trenerovochnoy Raboty v Khokkeynoy Komande Masterov Moskovskogo “Lokomotif” (April 1960): Vyvody i Predlozheniye Komissii Chlenov Prezidiuma Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR. (Fond 9570, opis’ 2, delo 2320, lista 40-41).

<sup>173</sup> Nash Khokkey, homepage, 1 October 2002, <<http://hockey.ipc.ru>>.

Krylia franchise, and succeeded in evening out the general level of play among the trade union teams. The efforts made proved that the Section was sincere in its belief that the USSR would be best served by a more broadly rooted development system.

However, the success was short-lived. During the 1961-1962 season the same Seglin who pleaded with the Hockey Section to block the player transfers that would have destroyed his team began to use the same tool as ruthlessly as Egorov had. During the 1961 summer break, Seglin brought in eight new players, including one of the players who had not been allowed to transfer from Lokomotiv to Krylia. Suddenly, Spartak burst out of nowhere in 1962 to claim its first league title, defeating both TsSKA and Dynamo in the process.<sup>174</sup> Until Viktor Tikhonov destroyed the Soviet domestic league in 1977, Spartak would work its own feeder system, and would remain a worthy challenger to TsSKA, and would often defeat Dynamo. The Hockey Section either could not or chose not to oppose Spartak during the second wave of trade union centralizations.

### *1960's*

During the 1960's, the three team feeder system evolved into a permanent, if unofficial feature of the Soviet hockey program, with the Army, the security services and the trade unions -- through Spartak -- sending all their most talented players to a single Moscow entry. The Hockey Section was clearly aware of the many benefits that centralization conferred upon the national program, and yet they continued to oppose this system. The leading members of the Hockey Section

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<sup>174</sup> Nash Khokkey, homepage, 1 October 2002, <<http://hockey.ipc.ru>>.

certainly had a direct personal interest in the success of the Soviet national team. By the mid-1960's hockey was prominent enough that major defeat would undoubtedly attract attention from the nation's leadership, and heads would roll. Why then did they continue to oppose the status quo?

One of the simplest reasons is the fact that the Hockey Section was relatively democratic. The evolving system of centralized transfers produced more winners than losers, and the majority therefore opposed it. The national team coaches and players, and the club teams represented by the national selects typically got all the credit for international victories. Provincial functionaries and coaches -- who comprised a majority of the Hockey Sections membership -- got no share of the glory, because none of their players were on the team. What's more, they were routinely criticized by leading members of the Sports Committee for not closing the gap between themselves and the top Moscow teams. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the Hockey Section sought to balance league play in a matter that was more respectful to the interests of the majority of its membership.

Moreover, as we have seen, most members of the Hockey Section were genuinely concerned with the further development of mass hockey participation, and the improvement of elite hockey outside the capital. Many realized that although player concentration may have helped the Soviet national team in the short term, the national program suffered long term damage from this policy. With the most talented players, coaches and specialists constantly migrating towards Moscow, hockey development in all other areas of the country was severely retarded. The USSR was, by far, the most populous nation in the ice-hockey world, and thus had the potential to dominate the sport

internationally by numbers alone.<sup>175</sup> But with a first class program in Moscow only, the Soviet hockey program was based on 5 million Muscovites, rather than 200 million Soviet citizens.

Another reason the transfer system was opposed is because of the disastrous effect on morale that both vertical and horizontal transfers had. As we have already noted, high-level material compensation was reserved for national team players, who were able to win bonuses for domestic and international victories and -- most importantly -- engage in petty but lucrative smuggling during trips abroad. As a consequence the Soviet league became, on the whole, two tiered. The basic player's salary was usually between 100% and 200% of a skilled worker's salary, for all professionals across the Soviet A and B leagues with little differentiation -- save bonuses for domestic victories. This allowed a player a decent, but not extravagant living for the duration of his career.<sup>176</sup> Thus, once it became clear to a player that he would not be able to make one of the Moscow teams, a player had little incentive to better himself. Many members of the Hockey Section realized this problem all too well. They realized that unless a provincial team could offer a player a legitimate shot at the national team, they would have nothing to offer their players, and the best would inevitably leave for Moscow.

Another by-product of the transfer system was the destruction of provincial discipline through horizontal transfers. By weakening the affiliation of players with their home clubs, the Moscow teams inadvertently opened the door to a system not unlike that which existed in Soviet

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<sup>175</sup> The total population of the United States was, of course, comparable to that of the USSR. But, while ice-hockey was practiced in most republics of the USSR, the sport was totally unknown in all but a few states -- especially Minnesota. If one considers only the hockey playing regions of the USA, then its population was dwarfed by the USSR.

<sup>176</sup> However, for an alarming number of players poverty would loom after their playing days ended. Without an education or seniority, they would have to start all over again at the bottom of the Soviet social ladder.

football. Loose transfer regulations not only allowed Moscow teams to gobble up the nation's most talented players, it also allowed players throughout the league a good deal of lateral mobility. Those who were not good enough to make the Moscow teams would often drift from team to team in search of the highest pay, and lowest training standards. In his 1982 memoirs, Sergey Gushchin, one of the USSR's most famous referees, recalls this issue as being one of the most serious problems the professional club in his hometown of Sverdlovsk faced. Despite being one of the largest cities in the northern portion of the USSR, the local team Avtomobilist played miserably, and was for long periods of time relegated to the Soviet B league. Gushchin puts the blame for this squarely on the local players who were accustomed to a relaxed training and playing atmosphere, and who would leave for greener pastures as the first sign of trouble:

I think the players of Avtomobilist deserve to be reproached for not having more courage and the ability to criticize themselves. They do not know how, and do not want to play and train with a full effort, through the 'I can't'. As soon as small difficulties arise on the team, declarations of resignation appear on the coaches' table.<sup>177</sup>

Novokuznensk provided another prime example of the damage that was done to provincial hockey programs by the system of player transfers. The training program in the city was excellent, but the standard of living in the city was low, and the team lacked the resources to pay players competitively. According the head coach, the city's elite teams played *against* 48 Novokuznensk trained players in the 1968-69 season.<sup>178</sup>

Not only did the transfer system erode the authority of coaches, it also destroyed their motivation to build solid player development programs. Not only were they certain to lose any top

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<sup>177</sup> Gushchin, *Goryachiy Lyod*, 37.

<sup>178</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 35).



prospects, but it was equally doubtful that they would be able to retain even provincial calibre players, unless they were able to offer competitive salaries and perks, and a none-too-demanding training regimen.

Local coaches tried to solve disciplinary issues through other means. One big league coach called for pay grades based on performance, in the domestic league.<sup>179</sup> But the need to preserve the fiction of Soviet amateurism, among other concerns, made this suggestion impossible. It was also suggested that the league create a centralized black list to prevent problem players from migrating from one team to another.<sup>180</sup> However, a number teams -- most notably Spartak -- did much to improve their lot by recruiting less than model citizens, and the Hockey Section was too weak to force such a rule against strong opposition.

*Sovetskiy Sport* was unequivocally opposed to player transfers, and articles detailing the damages done by player transfers were common.<sup>181</sup> When asked why the skill level in tier two hockey hadn't been improving one provincial coach answered:

[The] second group is not all that rich in great players. And this entirely because many of them move up to the first league...

The gap in terms of class of play, especially as regards the tactical skill level, between the teams of the higher league and the second echelon is, as before, great. Moreover -- and this is most troubling -- the gap is not at all closing.<sup>182</sup>

Other coaches were not so diplomatic. The pillage of the provincial hockey clubs was made very clear by the fact that while the Moscow teams remained dominant in league play throughout the

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<sup>179</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 13).

<sup>180</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybornogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 23).

<sup>181</sup> E. Rubin, "Voprosy, Voprosy, Voprosy," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 12 March 1968.

<sup>182</sup> Anon., "'A' Bol'shoe i 'A' Malenkoe," *Sovetskiy Sport*, 7 May 1968.

Soviet period, they lost their dominance at the junior level by the mid 1960's. Vitaly Stein, the coach of the Siberian selects, was interviewed by a *Sovetskiy Sport* correspondent after a hard won victory at the USSR under 17 championship. When the correspondent informed Stein that Konstantine Loktev, the coach of the defeated TsSKA entrant had dismissed the victory arguing that the Siberia team had an unfair advantage insofar as it represented an entire region, Stein retorted that:

When we lose to TsSKA we don't excuse ourselves by saying that we lost to the national team... On our team, it is true, we have the best kids in the city. But we collected them before the beginning of the tournament *and not from other teams.*<sup>183</sup>

As Evgeniy Rubin recalled in his memoirs, the sports authorities were more true to their ideology than they are usually given credit for, insisting that ideological concerns, including the perpetual campaign for mass participation, was emphasized in the media, even over international competition.

The Sports Committee itself, as distinct from the Hockey Section, was more ambivalent. Leading members of the Sports Committee generally had begun their careers in the Komsomol. They were not athletes, and were a great deal more ideologically minded than then coaches and former players who made up the bulk of the rank and file. Hence they were more likely to place observation of Communist principles above getting results. On the other hand, they were held directly responsible for the Soviet Union's international victories by the nation's leadership, and were therefore reluctant to interfere in what had proven to be a formula for success.

Nevertheless, the issue of player transfers was pursued doggedly by a number of provincial

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<sup>183</sup> G. Larchikov, "Optimisticheskii Turnir", *Sovetskiy Sport*, 13 April 1968.

coaches, ideologues, and other figures over the years. From time to time, the Sports Committee was forced to act -- or at least seem to act -- as a matter of principle. One such occasion occurred at a series of meetings held at the beginning of the 1969/70 season, with the participation of not only the Hockey Section, but the Sports Committee and the Komsomol. Criticism of the status quo at the Hockey Federation meeting was unrelenting. One of the key speakers from Novokuznensk concluded his remarks with the following:

At this conference it has become a red letter question: that a group of leading sports clubs have torn [players] away from peripheral teams. And nobody in the [Hockey] Federation is interested in this, and nobody is interested in how hockey will develop in Siberia.<sup>184</sup>

Emboldened by the public criticism of the Moscow system before influential Party figures, the Hockey Section appears to have put its foot down. Yet another resolution was passed definitively putting an end to centralized player transfers:

... the possibility of forming the national team is practically limited to [players of] two or three club collectives, and the discovery of talented players is not conducted actively enough... The successful resolution of the tasks for forming and preparing the national teams, naturally, cannot be limited to only two or three teams...

The current instructions on player transfers are out-dated. In certain instances, the transfer of hockey players has taken a frankly hideous form. The Committee has ordered the establishment of a new order for supervising the transfer of players from one team to another.<sup>185</sup>

However, as was the case in the past, just what these regulations would be was not definitively spelt out. As an alternative to ending transfers altogether, the Hockey Section decreed that from 1970-72, the base teams for the national teams would be expanded to include Khimik, SKA [Leningrad], Avtomobilist [Sverdlovsk], and Torpedo [Gorky]. Nothing, however, changed.

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<sup>184</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX Otchetno-Perevybórnogo Plenuma Soveta Federatsii Khokkeya SSSR, 10 September 1969. (Fond 7576, opis' 31 delo 287, lista 35).

<sup>185</sup> GARF: Stenogramma IX-go otchetno-perevybornogo plenuma soveta federatsii khokkeya SSSR: Otchetniy Doklad, Alekhin, V.D. (Fond 7576, opis' 31, delo 287, lista 59-97).

The same teams continued to dominate league play until 1977 when Viktor Tikhonov was appointed head of the army team, and collapsed the national team into TsSKA.

## **Chapter 5: Tarasov and the History of Soviet Hockey**

Anatoly Vladimirovich Tarasov (1918-1996) is known to most international hockey enthusiasts as the founder of the Soviet ice-hockey program. He was famous for leading TsSKA for nearly three decades, winning more than two dozen league championships. He was credited with developing the foundational training methods and tactics for Soviet ice hockey, and was best known as the perennial head coach of the Soviet national team, and the chief architect of its success.<sup>186</sup>

Tarasov also became well known in the hockey world through his writings. He was a prolific author, who penned dozens of books and articles. He wrote and updated numerous technical manuals, with target audiences that ranged from children to Ph. D candidates. During the 1960's and 1970's he would, almost on an annual basis, publish new editions of his memoirs. Each new copy would update the coach's views on the state of the sport within and without the USSR, along with his opinions about ice hockey's leading players and personalities. Many of his books were translated into English, Swedish, Finnish, Czech, German and other languages. Later in his career, Tarasov would write books specifically for foreign audiences.

Given the breadth of Tarasov's activities, it is not surprising that he was built up to be a sort of 'hockey Lenin' -- a man who single-handedly brought the sport into being in the USSR, and guided its development with his iron will and genius. This interpretation of Tarasov's career presents a potential resolution of the problem set before us. Perhaps Soviet ice hockey really was

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<sup>186</sup> Although throughout the 1960's and 1970's Arkady Chernyshev, not Tarasov, was the head of the Soviet national team, Anatoly Vladimirovich's flamboyance created the universal impression that Tarasov was number two in theory only.

centralized. Perhaps we were only wrong about the focal point of the league's structure. If the Hockey Section was a hollow shell, perhaps Tarasov really ran the show? Was Tarasov the true centre of the Soviet ice-hockey program, or was he merely one important individual?

### *Short Biography*

One of the most salient features of Tarasov's adult life was his superhuman work ethic, a trait that had its roots in the hardships of his youth. Tarasov's father died when Anatoly was ten. He had to study and provide a significant amount of help for his mother around the house, but he still found time for his two passions: football in the summer and bandy in the winter. To support his mother and his younger brother Yuri, Tarasov took a factory job at 17, while simultaneously training to become one of the nation's elite athletes. At 19 he was accepted into the Coaching School of the Central Physical Culture Institute. To assist with the family finances, Tarasov took his first coaching job before graduation, when he was only 20, serving as a player-coach with a small town football team in Zagorsk.<sup>187</sup>

Later that year, he quit his factory job, joined Odessa Dynamo's football team and thus began his career as a professional athlete. It was also that winter, in 1939 that he began playing professional ice-hockey, joining Moscow Krylia Sovetov's bandy team.<sup>188</sup> Fittingly enough, Tarasov's time in Dynamo and Krylia Sovetov ended in the same fashion as so many other prospects

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<sup>187</sup> Tarasov, *Put'*, 48-54.

<sup>188</sup> Tarasov, *Put'*, 48-54.

in the 1960's and 70's: he was drafted into the army. In Tarasov's case, this did not appear to be directly related to sport -- but the result was the same. His sporting career from 1940 onwards would be forever tied to TsSKA.<sup>189</sup> Upon joining the army, Tarasov immediately was appointed player-coach of the football-hockey team for his unit's physical-preparedness college.<sup>190</sup> Again, his talent as a player was quickly recognised by his superiors and, in 1941, Tarasov was transferred to play for the TsSKA football team.<sup>191</sup>

Little is known about Tarasov's war time service -- he himself wrote little about it. It seems as though he did not serve at the front however, a proposition that would be consistent with other reports that state that the nation's best athletes were, in general, kept out of harm's way. Considering the terrible and near universal sacrifices made by other members of his generation, it is not surprising that Tarasov would choose not to dwell on this aspect of his biography.

After the conclusion of the war, Tarasov briefly left TsSKA for Vasily Stalin's VVS club. It was here that his stubbornness and his tendency to clash with superiors first manifested itself. In 1947, he was fired by Stalin as the coach of the VVS Football club, a move that signalled his return to TsSKA. Tarasov always explained his conflict with Stalin as being rooted in the General's attempts to meddle in the composition of his team.<sup>192</sup> However, the direct cause for his departure seems to have been a seven-minute brawl that his team was found guilty of initiating during a game in Stalingrad.<sup>193</sup> The Sports Committee declared Tarasov deposed but, as a testament to its

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<sup>189</sup> Tarasov, Put', 58.

<sup>190</sup> Tarasov, Put', 58.

<sup>191</sup> Tarasov, Put', 59.

<sup>192</sup> Tarasov, Put', 69.

<sup>193</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 40.

weakness, Tarasov simply ignored the order to leave and remained at his post until Vasily Stalin's intervened to dismiss him.

The true reason for Tarasov's dismissal is hard to determine. Semen Vaikhanskiy accuses Tarasov of lying about the terms of his departure. This is possible. Tarasov had a distinctly Soviet knack for 'interpreting' history in an advantageous light. But it is also worth noting that if Stalin had wanted to keep Tarasov, he would likely have been able to overturn the decision of the Sports Committee. In all probability, both factors played a role in Tarasov's dismissal. Stalin either used the incident as an excuse to rid himself of Tarasov, or took it as evidence of the man's instability. But what is absolutely clear is that Tarasov entered into a period of conflict with the younger Stalin that would last until the death of Joseph Stalin, and Vasily's arrest and disgrace.

Perhaps as a result of the football scandal in Stalingrad, upon returning to TsSKA Tarasov shifted his efforts into Canadian ice hockey, becoming one of the young sport's earliest enthusiasts. Moreover, as player-coach with TsSKA, Tarasov would become one of the league's best players. He also immediately began to influence the tactics and training involved in Soviet hockey from early on. He published his first technical book in 1948, and was the first to begin overseeing the translation and distribution of foreign books, beginning with the works of Lloyd Percival in 1957. With the Army's enormous talent pool at his disposal Tarasov's TsSKA became the league champion in 1948, 1949 and 1950. But Tarasov's most important manoeuvre at this time took place off-ice, as he was able to establish close and enduring ties with the Army and the Party. Upon rejoining TsSKA, Tarasov was elected the Partorg (Party Organizer) of the team, a somewhat



sinister role to be playing in the period of high Stalinism.<sup>194</sup>

Prior to the 1950/51 season, TsSKA's reign at the top came to an abrupt end, as most of its best players, including Tarasov's brother Yuri and Vsevolod Bobrov deserted for VVS. Although Stalin's compensation package played a key role in the decision of most players to leave TsSKA, it is also likely that Tarasov's abrasive and confrontational personality played a significant role. Bobrov left the team as something of an enemy. Subsequently, he would always make his participation on the Soviet national team contingent upon someone other than Tarasov being the coach. In 1958, when Tarasov took the helm of the national team, Bobrov made good on his threat and retired.

With Stalin as a personal enemy, Tarasov's career seems to have gone into decline during the early 1950's. In 1952 he was briefly appointed head coach of the Soviet national team, but in 1953, he was replaced by Chernyshev, prior to the team's first international competition at the student games in Vienna.

Although he had no official role with the national team, Tarasov was usually involved in its trips abroad, travelling in the capacity of 'specialist'. In 1954 he committed another blunder that greatly damaged his prestige and probably played a role in keeping him off the first national team for the next three years. Prior to the USSR's fateful match with the Canadian entry in 1954, Chernyshev called a team meeting with the coaches and leading players, to discuss the strategy for the next match. Tarasov argued vehemently that the team should take the next match as lost, and save their

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<sup>194</sup> Tarasov, *Put'*, 72-73.

strength for the final match against Sweden, so as to ensure the European championship.<sup>195</sup> He was overruled by team captain Vsevolod Bobrov and Coach Arkady Chernyshev, and the Soviet Union went on to defeat Canada 7-2, and claim the World Championships.

*Tarasov's rise to power*

A careful examination of the early history of Soviet hockey reveals that Tarasov's path to the national team was blocked by the general ill-will he created towards himself among his colleagues, especially on the part of Vsevolod Bobrov. Nevertheless, Tarasov's steadily built up his influence in hockey, probably relying on the support of his allies in the Party and, more importantly, the Red Army. In 1956 Tarasov succeeded in gaining control of the USSR second national team, while Chernyshev continued to coach the first national side.<sup>196</sup> Victory at the 1956 Winter Olympics had boosted Chernyshev's prestige, winning him albeit temporary forgiveness for the crushing 5-0 defeat Canada inflicted on the Soviet side in 1955. But when in 1957 the Soviet team was defeated in Moscow, Chernyshev was made the principal scapegoat for the team's defeat. Nothing was explained to him, nor was he thanked for his contributions to the sport. Rather, when the Soviet

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<sup>195</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 20. This account was first published in Bobrov's 1972 memoirs "Rytsary Sporta", a piece that I was unfortunately not able to obtain. It has since been repeated in several journalistic sources, and was confirmed by Nikolay Puchkov, the team's goalie at the time. Significantly, Tarasov never denied it, or attempted to refute it.

<sup>196</sup> The Soviets 'first team' was comprised of the nation's best players. The second team, also sometimes called the youth team, was comprised of not necessarily the second best players, but players who were being groomed for the first team. This team should not be confused with the junior team which was, in line with IIHF regulations, comprised of the best players under 20. Rather, players on the second team were usually, although not always, under twenty three, and they competed against international men's teams comprised of players of all ages. Upon reaching their mid-20's players on the second team would either graduate to the first national team, or be abandoned. GARF: Plan: Podgotovki Sbornoy Komandy SSSR po Khokkeyu k Perventsvu Mira 1957 goda. (Fond 7576, opis'16, delo 312, lista 124-127).

delegation was listed for the team's next trip abroad, Chernyshev's name was simply omitted. In his memoirs Tarasov criticized the sports bureaucrats for the cruel way in which Chernyshev was dismissed. Most commentators agree that Tarasov did everything possible to engineer Chernyshev's downfall, and exploited the defeat to the maximum possible extent. Whatever the case may be, Tarasov was confirmed as head coach of the Soviet national team in Romanov's famous "Order №144".<sup>197</sup>

During his brief tenure as head coach of the national team, Tarasov relentlessly manoeuvred to have his position and duties expanded. The archival records show Tarasov almost dominating the preparations associated with the national team, by getting the Hockey Section to confer key roles to him and his allies. He managed to appoint 'overseers' to all the nation's leading teams, who would report back to him on the progress of all players who were members or potential members of the national team. Tarasov himself would oversee Chernyshev's Moscow Dynamo which in addition to his own TsSKA, supplied the overwhelming majority of the national team players.<sup>198</sup> Furthermore, in a separate decree, Tarasov was given chief responsibility for the 'discovery of new talent,' a mandate he would interpret as giving his TsSKA team prerogatives over all the nation's most talented players.<sup>199</sup> Finally, in November of 1957, Tarasov was given full control over the final composition of the national team.<sup>200</sup> In 1959 Tarasov's powers were broadened even further, as he

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<sup>197</sup> GARF: Prikaz ot Predsedatelya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kulture i Sportu: 6 June 1957, No 144. O Merakh Dalneyshego Razvitiya Khokkeya v SSSR. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 140-47).

<sup>198</sup> GARF: Protokol No 6: September 13 1957: Zasedaniye Presidiuma Vse-Soyuznoy Sektzii po-Khokkeyu. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 80-82).

<sup>199</sup> GARF: Plan: Podgotovki Sbornoy Kommandy SSSR po Khokkeyu k Pervenstvu Mira 1957 goda. (Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 312, lista 119-123.)

<sup>200</sup> GARF: Prilozhenie No 2 k Prikazu Predsedatelya Komiteta po Fizicheskoy Kul'turi i Sportu pri Sovete Ministrov

was given control over: the systematic preparation of players for the national team; the 'elucidation' of all hockey matters in the press; the evaluation of the performance of players in international competitions.<sup>201</sup>

Tarasov likely would have gone on to acquire the total control that was later ascribed to him, were it not for one significant problem. He could not win. Under Tarasov the national team was defeated by the Canadians at the World Championships in 1958, and again in 1959. Going into the 1960 Winter Olympics, Tarasov realized that only gold could save his position:

After all, in the two previous seasons, he had only repeated the second place finish, for which Chernyshev was fired. Moreover, the team was about to play its first official matches in America.<sup>202</sup>

Nevertheless, he was unable to deliver. Not only was the team once again defeated by the Canadians, who claimed silver, they also lost to a team of students from the United States, which won the Olympic Gold.

Tarasov's actions after the defeat only managed to make his situation worse. In a desperate bid to save his reputation, he publicly blamed the team's goaltender Nikolai Puchkov for the defeat. This rather ignoble manoeuvre was made despicable by the fact that if Puchkov's play was substandard, this was explained by the fact that he had -- at Tarasov's insistence -- been playing with an injury all season long. Furthermore, he had received a second serious injury during an exhibition game, which occurred days prior to the tournament's opening game. The first injury was serious

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SSSR ot 6 Iyunya 1957 No 144 Uproshchennye Pravila Igry dlya Provedeniya Massovykh Sorevnovaniy po Khokkeyu.  
(Fond 7576, opis' 16, delo 311, lista 153).

<sup>201</sup> GARF: Plan: Raboty Trenirskogo Soveta po Khokkeyu s Shayboy na Period s 1-go Avgusta po Dekabrya 1959 goda.  
(Fond 7576 opis' 16, delo 312, lista 27-28).

<sup>202</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 52.

enough that it eventually required surgery, and the second injury saw Puchkov carried off the ice on a stretcher.<sup>203</sup> Tarasov's accusations caused serious indignation among his players. The three players that formed the Army team's top line went to far as to publish a letter in a leading sports journal denouncing Tarasov:

They [i.e. Tarasov] say that our goaltender Nikolay Puchkov was to blame for our defeat. But one has to remember that in Colorado Springs, he aggravated an old injury and that he had a bad elbow, which was in need of surgery. We think that Puchkov played heroically in Squaw Valley, and did everything that he could. One should ask the coaches why it is that the goal of the national team has been defended for seven years now by one man, and in all that time no worthy replacement or substitute has been found.<sup>204</sup>

1960's third place finish was the USSR's worst ever result in international hockey, to be repeated only once in 1976. All Tarasov's prevarications came to nought, and he was, as expected, dismissed.<sup>205</sup> Why Tarasov was unable to win is difficult to explain. It could be suggested that the Canadian team of the day was simply too good. Aside from Vsevolod Bobrov, the USSR had not yet produced any truly great players. Most of the members of Tarasov's Soviet national team were still of the generation that picked up Canadian style ice-hockey in their 20's. It was hard, if not impossible, to catch up to the citizens of a country where boys trade their diapers for ice-skates as soon as they are able to walk. Perhaps the next generation of Soviet players, which emerged in 1963, were an order of magnitude better than their predecessors because they had grown up playing Olympic hockey, not its Russian cousin.

But others explain the poor performance in terms of Tarasov's mediocrity as a tactician, and poor selection of the team. Tarasov's key innovations in the sport are usually recognized as his

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<sup>203</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 52.

<sup>204</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 53.

<sup>205</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya, 54.

physical training programs rather than his on ice innovations, which were often ill-conceived and impractical. It is certainly true that during his tenure and the coach of the national team, he showed no special genius. Nikolay Puchkov -- the same goaltender who was blamed by Tarasov for the Soviet defeat at the Olympics in 1960 -- would later become a great coach in his own right. He served as Tarasov's assistant coach during the 1960's, before becoming a head coach with the Leningrad army team. During his tenure Leningrad SKA<sup>206</sup> enjoyed a brief spell of respectability and from 1972-1974, Puchkov served as the assistant coach of the Soviet national team. He explains Tarasov's disappointing tenure as head coach as a result of the latter's stubborn adherence to his *idée fixe* of physical conditioning, and his inability to adjust to changing conditions.

By that time [1960] Tarasov's idea of excellence in physical conditioning had practically exhausted itself... Those who endured [Tarasov's training program] in the beginning enjoyed an indisputable advantage, at least in Europe. You have to give Tarasov credit for this... But our adversaries had learned from us. Czechoslovakian players, Swedes and even Canadians had visited our training sessions, and studied every exercise with great interest. Our "conditioning advantage" had, by 1959-1960 been reduced to practically nothing.<sup>207</sup>

Tarasov's inability to win when given the chance sullied his reputation as an oracle of hockey. Tarasov's obsession with collective play had made the team's passing excessive and predictable. Simply put, the Soviet team was too fancy and Tarasov refused to admit it. His innovations in physical training had been adopted by all his adversaries within and without the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Tarasov had enraged Romanov with his decision to play two extra exhibition games for money in the USA, against the will of the delegation's formal head.<sup>208</sup> Finally his prevarications after the 1960 defeat had cost him the respect of his team. When a player revolt

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<sup>206</sup> Sportivniy Klub Armii [Army Sports Club]

<sup>207</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 54-55.

<sup>208</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 267.

on TsSKA occurred in 1961, Tarasov had few friends left in Soviet hockey. Ultimately, not even Tarasov's army backing was enough to save him, and he was fired as coach of TsSKA.

Tarasov's career seemed to have come to an inglorious end in 1961. The world probably would have heard nothing more from Anatoly Vladimirovich were it not for two strokes of good fortune, which revived his career. The first concerned the national team. After Tarasov's defeat, the team was returned to his old rival, Arkady Chernyshev. To Tarasov's delight, Chernyshev failed to improve upon his performance at the Olympics. The USSR lost a narrow 6-4 match with Czechoslovakia, and suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Trail Smoke-Eaters, 5-1. Tarasov's 8-5 defeat in 1960 looked respectable by comparison, and Chernyshev's future became uncertain. The second stroke of fortune concerned Tarasov's army team. After putting their captain out to sea, the mutineers fared miserably -- perhaps as a result of deliberate sabotage that Tarasov is rumoured to have organized with the players who still supported him. The army officials rethought their decision, and Tarasov was brought back. Under his guidance, the team's performance improved dramatically.

Thanks in large part to the failures of his rivals, Tarasov was able to climb back into the centre of Soviet hockey. In 1962, the USSR boycotted the World Championships after the East German team was not issued visas to compete in the event which took place in the USA. The fate of the national team was in limbo for a while until finally a compromise was reached. As Tarasov recalls:

One fine day in 1963 we [Tarasov and Chernyshev] were called out to Leonid Khomenkov, head of the Central Council of the Union of Soviet Sports Societies and Organizations [i.e. the Sports Committee]... from now on we two were responsible for getting the national squad into shape... [Khomenkov:] 'And this is not a request or a bit of advice. That is the decision of the Central Council. And an order is an

order.<sup>209</sup>

Arkady Chernyshev would remain as the head coach of the national team, with Tarasov serving as his assistant. Sports authorities saw this union as the best solution from a hockey perspective: the stable, but perhaps overly conservative Chernyshev to keep the creative, but at times too unorthodox Tarasov in check. Perhaps more importantly, it also placed the head of the KGB hockey program on the same team with the Army program and helped to create hockey's first genuine power centre. The combined authority of the Army and Security Forces helped to create the engine at the core of the national program that the Hockey Section and Sport authorities alone could not provide.

### *The Golden Years*

Tarasov and Chernyshev would go on to win nine consecutive World Championships, and three Olympic Gold Medals, from 1963-1972. The exact breakdown of authority between the two is difficult to determine. It is generally thought that the Tarasov was second in name only -- we will consider this point a bit later. What is clear is that Tarasov's Army team retained the right to 'first night' when it came to recruiting players, and that Tarasov seems to have the lead in selecting and training the players for the national team during the lead up to major competitions.<sup>210</sup> Whatever the case may be, the string of victories more than restored Tarasov's damaged reputation and, what's

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<sup>209</sup> Tarasov, *The Road to Olympus*, 108.

<sup>210</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 58.



more, made criticism of the duo very risky. As Vaikhanskiy recalls:

For nine years in a row, Tarasov's and Chernyshev's national team brought home gold medals from the World Championships, and that made the team immune to criticism, not only from journalists, but more importantly, from specialists.<sup>211</sup>

To say that Tarasov and the team were completely off limits to criticism, in the way that Lenin and the Party were, is putting things rather strongly. Tarasov was criticized, although usually in a very roundabout, almost allegorical manner. For instance, in the 1960's a film called 'Hockey players' was produced in USSR. The plot of the film revolved around conflicts between the noble hero, the team Captain, and the villain, the team's coach. It was obvious to all insiders, and probably the majority of viewers, that the coach was modelled on Tarasov.<sup>212</sup>

The near immunity that Tarasov enjoyed did not, however, originate from any official source. Neither the members of the Sports Committee nor the Hockey Section had any great love for him. His victories had made it impossible to dismiss him, but most members held some sort of grudge against Tarasov for one reason or another, and they would dearly love to see him knocked down a peg in the press which the Sports Committee formally controlled. The factor that quelled most would-be critics, including the sports bureaucrats themselves, was fear of Tarasov himself.

In spite of the ubiquitously positive tone adopted in the press, Tarasov seems to have felt himself plagued with constant and ill-founded attacks by a hostile press corps.<sup>213</sup> He would respond to any criticism, however slight, with an onslaught of activity, and nothing would escape his notice. Vaikhanskiy once crossed Tarasov by publishing what he considered to be a rather discreet criticism

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<sup>211</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 60.

<sup>212</sup> Rubin, *Pan*, 299.

<sup>213</sup> Tarasov, *Road to Olympus*, 118.

of TsSKA's recruiting strategy in a game program that was released prior to one of Leningrad SKA's matches:

[Tarasov's assistants] Vladimir Vikulov and Viktor Polupanov dragged mere boys away from Dynamo. When I wrote about this, in the program for a SKA [Leningrad Army team] – TsSKA match in January 1967, Anatoly Vladimirovich began rushing about the corridors of the Lenin Stadium, threatening to sue me.<sup>214</sup>

Tarasov's aggressive defence of the national team had two aspects to it. On the one hand, it made Soviet hockey in the 1960's much less pluralistic than it once was, and much less likely to adapt and evolve. Any errors, unless noticed by Tarasov or Chernyshev, were certain to go unnoticed. On the other hand, Tarasov's authority gave the team some badly needed stability and independence. By playing their supporters in the Politburo, Armed Forces and KGB off against the sports authorities, Chernyshev and Tarasov managed to keep the Soviet elite program free from meddling by a host of bureaucrats. As for the Sports Committee itself and the Party, it would be impossible to say that Tarasov dominated them, but he did succeed in making even these organizations wary about crossing him. In the mid-1960's Tarasov was known to all members of the Politburo, including Brezhnev. Any attempt to remove Tarasov would certainly not go unnoticed, and it was not clear how an open conflict with the coach would end. This had the crucial effect of keeping decisions about the national team concentrated in the hands of Chernyshev and Tarasov. The genius of these men may be debatable, but no one would deny that they were competent, which is more than could be said for the officials who meddled in other sports.

Still, in spite of his enormous influence, not even Tarasov was omnipotent. Although his control of the national team program itself was nearly absolute, he did not wield the same degree of

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<sup>214</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 62.

influence in other aspects of hockey. The next section will deal briefly with the activities of three other leading coaches in Soviet hockey. This examination will show us two things. First, it will illustrate again the limits of Tarasov's influence. All three of these figures were at one time Tarasov's enemies, but he was not able to vanquish or fully restrain any of them. Secondly, the conflicts between these figures and the confused power structure at the centre will once again reinforce the point that the administration of the Soviet ice-hockey program was more chaos than centralized control.

### *Vsevolod Bobrov*

Of Tarasov's many rivals, Vsevolod Bobrov was certainly the most tenacious and dangerous. As Bobrov's biographer wrote: "Bobrov -- intentionally or unintentionally, but always! -- opposed Tarasov from the day Soviet hockey was created. At first as a player, then as a coach, he remained an immutable barrier on the path to absolute leadership in hockey, in spite of the titanic efforts of [Tarasov]."<sup>215</sup> There is little exaggeration in this statement. Ultimately, Bobrov was less tenacious and less dedicated than Tarasov. Over the course of his career, he would drift in and out of the hockey world, at times completely disappearing from view. But, from hockey's first season in 1946 until Bobrov ultimately replaced Tarasov at the helm of the national team in 1972, he was constantly a thorn in Tarasov's side.

The root of the conflict is hard to explain. From Tarasov's writings one can discern that his

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<sup>215</sup> Muradov, *Bobrov*, 200.

principal beef with Bobrov was the star player's alleged individualism on the ice, and his lack of discipline away from the rink. The former was a charge that Tarasov frequently levelled against his opponent publicly, in the press, and in his many books. In a sense these criticisms were justified. Bobrov was always less than fanatical about physical fitness and training, and he never observed the sort of 'sports regime' that Tarasov advocated. He often disappeared from his team for several days at a time, with little or no explanation.<sup>216</sup> Nevertheless, Bobrov was simultaneously one of the nation's best football and hockey players and therefore, a national hero with powerful friends. It enraged Tarasov that the coaches and sports authorities were willing to turn a blind eye to Bobrov's less than exemplary behaviour because of his on ice abilities.

But, in light of Bobrov's enormous contributions to international sport, Tarasov's harping criticisms seem at least overblown. He never let his team down in an important match-up, and he was able to keep himself in good enough shape to retire as the best player in Soviet hockey. As for his on ice play, Bobrov was so far beyond any other player of his era that it was only natural that he should dominate play when on the ice. At bottom the conflict was most likely initiated by Tarasov's envy. Anatoly Muradov's comparison of Tarasov and Bobrov to Salieri and Mozart is probably apt. Tarasov was the hardest working man in hockey, but he could never match Bobrov's effortless genius. For this reason he constantly sought to exert authority over Bobrov as a coach, and to undermine him in every possible way as a rival.

Bobrov's contributions to the early Soviet game gave Tarasov good reason to be jealous.

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<sup>216</sup> Ironically, this saved Bobrov's life in 1950, when he missed a morning flight to Chelyabinsk: the plane crashed killing all those aboard, including Anatoly Tarasov's younger brother, Yuri.

Bobrov's first important role in Canadian style ice hockey was as a popularizer. During the sport's inaugural season, which Bobrov missed due to injury, crowds were drawn by the novelty of the sport. In its earliest incarnation, it was a clownish spectacle. Players and officials were clearly unsure about the rules of the game, and players would frequently crash into piles along the boards, while the puck would wind up in a completely different area. Many fans viewed the sport primarily as a comic spectacle.

When Bobrov took up the sport, this changed completely. He was one of the first Russians to master the game, and by example he was able to show the other players how the game was played. Moreover, his participation ensured the sport lasting popularity, as Bobrov was already a famous footballer. It is worth noting that during the first season Anatoly Tarasov led the league in goals with 14. By comparison, when Bobrov returned from knee surgery in his first season he scored 58 goals.

Bobrov and Tarasov would play together on TsSKA from 1947-1950. Formally, Tarasov was in charge, as he served as a player coach. However, Bobrov's authority with the other team members was much higher, and he was clearly a better player. Moreover, Bobrov was used to special treatment. His previous football coach Arkadev had structured the strategy of the team around his superstar, and he had never paid much if any attention to Bobrov's personal life. Threatened by Bobrov's stature, the young Tarasov sought to exert his authority.<sup>217</sup> As a result, Bobrov led the exodus of players who left for Vasily Stalin's VVS in 1950. If other players were enticed by the prospect of new apartments and other amenities, Bobrov's decision was purely

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<sup>217</sup> Muradov, Bobrov, 194-195.

personal. He already had a luxury apartment -- he was just sick of Tarasov.

In tandem with Vasily Stalin, Bobrov would become one of the most significant builders in the early period of Soviet. In the lean period of post-war reconstruction sport was, understandably, not a priority section. In the late 1940's many of the Soviet Union's most famous athletes were training in the most primitive possible conditions, whilst living in communal apartments. Stalin's VVS was the first sports society in the post-war era to offer elite athletes decent material standards and a single family dwelling in return for their contributions. This was the centrepiece of his 1950 recruitment campaign in hockey. Stalin was also behind most of the large sports construction projects of the late 1940's and early 1950's, including Luzhniki and the TsSKA training base -- the bedrock of the Soviet ice-hockey program until the end of the USSR.<sup>218</sup> It could be suggested, in fact, that Stalin did more to establish ice-hockey in the USSR than the Sports Committee.

Though it was Stalin who was able to produce the funds, it was Bobrov who provided the vital links to the team. Through his influence, a good chunk of Stalin's largesse went into hockey, at the expense of other more established sports. Moreover, as player-coach of the VVS team, Bobrov was able to use his influence to prevent Stalin's foolish game strategies from being played out on the ice. Thanks to Bobrov's prowess as a player and as a coach, the team justified the investments made into it, putting together three straight league championships.

From 1950 to 1953, it would be safe to say that Stalin and Bobrov eclipsed Tarasov in terms of influence as well as on ice-performance. However, after the collapse of VVS, Bobrov returned to TsSKA, and the relationship between the coach and the star player would remain tense. Bobrov's

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<sup>218</sup> Muradov, Bobrov, 183-184.

dissatisfaction with his club coach would cost Tarasov dearly. Although Bobrov was willing to play for Tarasov's TsSKA team, he refused to play for any national team that was coached by Tarasov.<sup>219</sup> After Tarasov manoeuvred to use the 1957 defeat in Moscow to take over the national team, Bobrov started openly referred to him as Trotsky -- a moniker that could easily have meant death 5 years earlier.<sup>220</sup> Moreover, he made good on his promise and retired from professional hockey. For the next few years, he would make his living coaching Soviet football, disappearing almost entirely from sight.

Tarasov could not leave well enough alone. He often criticized Bobrov in his many books, repeating his charges of individualism, and devoted dozens of pages to pointless arguments in the attempt to prove that Bobrov in his prime would not have been good enough to play modern hockey.<sup>221</sup> So, when Bobrov returned to hockey in 1964 as a coach with Moscow Spartak, one has to wonder if it was not in some way an act of revenge against Tarasov.

Under Bobrov's guidance Spartak became even more successful. This situation was very threatening for Tarasov insofar as Bobrov was flatly opposed to most of Tarasov's key ideas. Tactically, he preferred individual flair and spontaneity to Tarasov's complex ideas on passing and highly restrictive principles of collective play. He put much less emphasis on physical fitness, and insisted that all training exercises on the team be tied to some sort of game situation.<sup>222</sup> He also refused to impose Tarasov's puritanical disciplinary standards on the team. The player was

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<sup>219</sup> This is probably explained by the fact that he was likely an officer in the armed forces and therefore could not transfer to another team not sponsored by the services.

<sup>220</sup> Vaikhanskiy, Zolotaya.

<sup>221</sup> Muradov, Bobrov, 196-197.

<sup>222</sup> Muradov, Bobrov, 192.

responsible for being ready for games and practices and, as long as this was the case, no questions were asked. Finally, through his considerable influence Bobrov was able to ensure his players a high standard of living and a very good shot at making one of the national teams, *without* having to endure the rigours of Tarasov's training program. This destroyed any incentive the players might have to transfer to TsSKA. Moreover, Bobrov's ties to the armed forces were still evidently strong, because he was able to prevent Tarasov from inducting any of his leading players into the army. When Spartak won the league championship in 1967 and 1969, Tarasov's prestige was seriously damaged. Spartak was less talented, and their victories could only suggest superior strategy and game philosophy.

For the first time a serious alternative to Tarasov and Chernyshev had emerged at the national level. Bobrov's main drawbacks had been seen as his lack of discipline and his unreliability. As sports chief Nikolay Romanov recalled:

After leaving big sport, Vsevelod Bobrov worked as a coach on different hockey and football teams. He was not asked to coach national teams in those years. There were reasons for this. He did not possess the pedagogical qualities, especially the self-sacrifice, which a coach needs when working with the best athletes in the country. His personal sports regime and discipline left a great deal to be desired. At the most unexpected times, he could leave the team for several days. He used the fact that he was needed as a talented and experienced player.<sup>223</sup>

However, with Spartak Bobrov proved that he could win. As Tarasov proceeded towards self-destruction in 1969, Bobrov would become a more and more obvious alternative.

*Arkady Chernyshev*

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<sup>223</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 67.



Another of Tarasov's prominent rivals in the early days of Soviet ice hockey and the man who would later become his closest colleague, was Arkady Chernyshev. Chernyshev is a difficult figure to write about, because there is little available material. Chernyshev joined the NKVD when he signed on with Dynamo's football team in 1936, and he seems to have acquired an intelligence officer's aversion to attention.<sup>224</sup> As a coach, most outside observers seem to have considered the reserved Chernyshev to be something of a non-entity throughout his coaching career. He himself wrote next to nothing, and rarely talked to the media. During the golden 1960's, he preferred to allow Tarasov to do all the talking for both of them, and this contributed greatly to the popular impression that Tarasov was really in charge.

Thus, it is often forgotten that it was Chernyshev, not Tarasov, who brought the Soviet national team into the international arena, serving as head coach from 1953 until 1957. During his first tenure, Chernyshev won the 1953 student games in Vienna, the 1954 World Championships and the 1956 Winter Olympics. The significance of these victories is hard to overstate. If we imagine the period of 1954 to 1961 without a single Soviet victory, it is entirely possible that the sports authorities could pull the plug on the whole project: the Soviets did not engage in sports competitions that they could not win. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Tarasov would have been able to duplicate Chernyshev's success. Had Tarasov been in charge, he would have gone through with his plan to accept defeat against the Canadians in 1954, thus costing the USSR its first valuable victory. As for 1956, it is almost certain that had Tarasov been in charge, Bobrov would not have played and, bereft of their most talented player, the Soviets would have been much less likely to win.

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<sup>224</sup> Tarasov, *Put'*, 104.

As Nikolai Romanov notes in his memoirs, it was Chernyshev who first succeeded in moulding the available players into a team, and it was Chernyshev who ensured the sport a future with his first crucial victories in 1954 and 1956.<sup>225</sup> After Vasily Stalin's downfall in 1953 in many ways it was Chernyshev, not Tarasov, who replaced him as hockey's most significant individual.

The second phase of Chernyshev's activities concern his partnership with his old rival from 1963 to 1972. Although he would receive little credit for the Soviet golden era, Chernyshev's contributions were invaluable. His presence served as a sort of restraint on the explosive Tarasov, as he was capable of directing his assistant's enormous energies into constructive channels. One of the most crucial ways in which this manifested itself was with regards to player relations. Tarasov's tenure as head coach had ended in player revolts and a corresponding vengeance from the returning coach. Chernyshev's presence prevented this from occurring again:

Chernyshev could keep his players calm in crucial situations. [Chernyshev] could direct the "stars", something that for Tarasov, with his boiling over the top emotions, was unattainable... One would prod them like the devil, while the other would humanely reap the rewards of their work.<sup>226</sup>

Chernyshev also managed to prevent a lot of Tarasov's more fanciful ideas from making their way onto the national team. Tarasov's restless inventiveness caused him to challenge some of the most fundamental rules of hockey. For example, in the mid 1960's, he sought to replace the three forward/two defender system with a 2-2-1 scheme he had imported from football. Innovations such as these appeared to 'work' when tested on the Army team because the team was so talented, it could win even with a half-baked game plan. Chernyshev was of a much more conservative disposition, and realized that at an international level such experimentation could only end in

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<sup>225</sup> Romanov, *Voskhozhdenie*, 68-69.

<sup>226</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 60.

disaster.<sup>227</sup> He was able to filter out Tarasov's wilder flights of fancy which would doubtlessly have cost the team at the World Championships.<sup>228</sup>

A final point worth noting is that while a majority of commentators seem to assign primacy to Tarasov, many insiders argue that Chernyshev was always in charge. Most players from the Dynamo team who also played for the national squad seem to adhere to this view, as does Viktor Tikhonov. Tikhonov, who began his coaching career as Chernyshev's assistant with Dynamo, recalls Tarasov's primary function lay in running the team training program and practices:

I do not at all want to minimize the contributions of Anatoly Vladimirovich Tarasov. First and foremost, he prepared the team, and did it splendidly. The national team had a strong body. But the head... the head was nevertheless Chernyshev, a generator of ideas, a matchless strategist, a tireless seeker of the new, the unknown.<sup>229</sup>

Whatever the true breakdown of authority between the two men may have been, it is clear that the notion that Tarasov alone was the inspiring force behind everything in Soviet hockey from its first days of existence must surely be discounted.

### *Nikolay Epshtein*

One final figure worth considering is Nikolay Epshtein, the founder of the Voskresensk school of hockey. Once he attained notoriety, Epshtein's relations with Tarasov also soured, for a number of reasons. Epshtein deeply resented Tarasov's predatory recruiting tactics. In 1962, as Tarasov sought replacements for the mutineers he had just dismissed, six recruits came in from

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<sup>227</sup> Video: [Velikoe Protivostoyanie](#), Telekompaniye NTV, 2000.

<sup>228</sup> Video: [Velikoe Protivostoyanie](#), Telekompaniye NTV, 2000.

<sup>229</sup> Rossoshik, [Trenery](#), 28.

Voskresensk, and he thereby stole the fruits of a decade's labour from Epshtein. Epshtein would continue to be victimized by Moscow recruiters, but he could never reconcile himself to this system as being a fact of Soviet life. To this day, Epshtein argues that this centralization did immeasurable damage to the Soviet hockey program, and that the sport would have been even more successful if its best players had been more evenly distributed.

For his part, Tarasov was probably threatened by the fact that Epshtein was too successful. In spite of losing their most talented players every year, Epshtein's Khimik almost always finished fourth -- the best team in the league without access to player transfers.<sup>230</sup> Of even more concern to Tarasov was the fact that Epshtein's success was based on a game strategy that Tarasov had staked his career opposing. In the 1960's the Czechoslovak team had developed a 1-4 system of fore-checking, a system that serves as an ancestor to today's neutral zone trap. The Czechs adopted the system for essentially the same reasons that expansion teams began using it thirty years later -- it was especially effective when used against a more talented opponent. Epshtein was never one to argue with success. He had the same problem as the Czechs when playing against the Big Three from Moscow, and he employed the strategy to great effect. Nikolai Puchkov was also impressed, and he began to use Epshtein's counter-attack system in Leningrad, to a similar effect. Together these two coaches began to actively campaign for the adoption of such a system in the USSR at the national level, which meant direct conflict with Tarasov.<sup>231</sup> By using variations of the counter-attacking system, the Czechs were able to defeat the Soviets twice in 1969, and their fortunes in general

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<sup>230</sup> Rossoshik, *Trenery*, 130.

<sup>231</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 94.

improved. Steadily it became more apparent to Soviet coaches that Epshtein was right and Tarasov was wrong.

Tarasov regarded Epshtein and his achievements with a mixture of grudging respect and hostility. On the one hand, he insisted that TsSKA play Khimik prior to the start of any international competition involving the Czechs or Swedes, to get the Army players prepared for the style they would soon face. On the other hand, he did everything possible to undermine Epshtein and force him to change his strategy. He constantly ridiculed Epshtein privately and publicly, often resorting to crude anti-Semitic slurs: at one point, he stooped so low as to invoke political dogma by claiming that Epshtein's defensive style was "alien to the communist social structure."<sup>232</sup> Again, Tarasov had interpreted opposition to his ideas as being an attack on hockey itself: "How did Khimik play? Anatoly Vladimirovich thought the team played from a defensive stance. So that meant that some retrograde named Epshtein was holding our hockey back."<sup>233</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of all his bluster, Tarasov was not able to seriously damage Epshtein's career. The coach continued with his bourgeois defensive scheme in Voskresensk and, his genius for identifying and developing young talent did not go unnoticed. Throughout the 1960's, he was paired with Dmitry Boginov in running the Soviet second national team, the youth team. Ironically, hockey's great retrograde was charged with developing the talent that would comprise the Soviet national team of the future, very much against the wishes of Anatoly Vladimirovich.

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<sup>232</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 94.

<sup>233</sup> Rossoshik, *Trenery*, 116.

### *Dismissal*

The fact that Tarasov was involuntarily dismissed from his position is probably the most convincing proof of his ultimate vulnerability. Officially, Chernyshev and Tarasov resigned because of old age. However, it is almost universally agreed that the duo's departure was less than voluntary. Though the reason for Tarasov's final downfall has never been definitively explained, most agree that it began with an incident that occurred towards the end of the 1968-1969 Soviet league championship. The championship that year was tight enough that it would be decided by the final scheduled match between TsSKA and Spartak. What made the affair even more tense was the fact that Spartak had been built by Tarasov's old rival Vsevolod Bobrov. Spartak had triumphed twice already, in 1962 and in 1967 over the Army team, without the use of the military draft as a recruiting tactic. Many thought that Bobrov might make an excellent replacement for the disagreeable Army coach, and Tarasov knew it. Going into the third period, Spartak was ahead by a goal. Near the ten minute mark, TsSKA appeared to score a game tying goal, but the officials ruled that the ten minute whistle had already been blown, and the goal was disallowed.<sup>234</sup> With Leonid Brezhnev and the Politburo in attendance, and 100 million Soviet viewers tuned in, Tarasov went berserk. When the officials refused to reverse their decision, Tarasov pulled his team off the ice and refused to continue playing. This charade went on for about half an hour, before the Minister of Defence descended

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<sup>234</sup> In the USSR, play would stop at the ten minute mark of the third period, and the teams would switch ends. This was important because into the 1970's, many teams played their home games on outdoor facilities, and the prevailing winds and the position of the sun would confer a real advantage to one team.

from the Politburo luxury box, and personally ordered Tarasov back on this ice.<sup>235</sup> From this point on, Tarasov's days were numbered.

In the end the Army players, of course, continued the game. However the system could never forgive the coach such an action, and they began furtively searching for a replacement.<sup>236</sup>

For his disgraceful conduct, Tarasov was officially stripped of the title "Merited Coach of the USSR," but no other measures were immediately taken. Given the magnitude of the incident, it is hard to explain why Tarasov was not dismissed outright. One possible explanation was the continued self-censorship that continued in the press, and the sports authorities. Because Tarasov's authority was not formal, it could not be formally removed. The incident had damaged Tarasov's prestige, and a concerted attack might have been enough to topple him. But nobody wanted to take their chances by being the first to attack him. Moreover, the ultimate arbiter of success in coach was, after all, victory. Tarasov had, at that time, brought home two Olympic gold medals and six consecutive World Championships. For all the talk about Socialist principles, the men who knew hockey the best realized that Tarasov was wounded, but not defeated. Evgeniy Rubin gives a vivid portrayal of the confusion that reigned in the sports press after the event.

Such an event had never occurred before in Soviet sport... The press was supposed to react to such extreme situations. But how? We knew that if you messed with Tarasov, it would cost you. In the morning it became clear that my colleagues from other papers considered in best to remain silent. I also decided against chiding that influential and vengeful person from my own name, so I chose a flanking manoeuvre.

In the wings of the palace of sport, I found Nikolay Sologubov. The famous hockey player had long left hockey and military service, and so he had stopped hiding his old hatred for his former teacher. I asked him to express his opinions about the on ice events, and received permission to publish his remarks under the [*Sovetskiy Sport*] "Retort" section. Sologubov spoke for a long time, but his published remarks turned out to be short: in those days obscenities were only written on fences...

A few days after that historic match, I arranged an interview with Arkady Ivanovich [Chernyshev], and

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<sup>235</sup> Video: *Velikoe Protivostoyanie*, Telekompaniye NTV, 2000.

<sup>236</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 93.

went to the Dynamo stadium. We had a chat, and he invited me for a bite to eat at the Dynamo restaurant. We ordered a flask of Vodka with our lunch. Drinking the first glass, Chernyshev said: 'What a cowardly public you journalists are. You're all prepared to forgive Tarasov.' 'What you don't read *Sovetskiy Sport*?' I objected 'Everything was laid out there.' 'You mean Sologubov's remarks? It's so small, nobody will even notice. You should have written a whole page about that bastard. And with a thick headline. My old journalistic temperament is still with me. Because of it, I allowed myself to use the epitaph 'bastard' instead of the juicier 'fence variety' expression, that the usually cold-blooded Arkady Ivanovich used.<sup>237</sup>

In actual fact, behind closed doors the chief of the Sports Committee Sergey Pavlov was searching for a replacement for Tarasov. But even he chose to be discreet about this, and to the public Tarasov appeared to have survived the incident intact.

Much to his enemies' chagrin, Tarasov went on to win yet another World Championship in 1970, and Tarasov's title of "Merited Coach of the USSR" was returned. But, for whatever reason, after the victory, he became uneasy about his position and sensed that he was in imminent danger of being removed. So, he concocted another ploy. Tarasov formally resigned his position as coach of TsSKA, ostensibly to write his dissertation. Colonel Tarasov had his eyes set on becoming a General and he believed that a doctorate would enable him to receive this promotion. In the meantime, the team was left in the hands of his faithful assistant Boris Kalugin and the team immediately went into the tank. Rumours immediately began to circulate that Tarasov had once again arranged to have his supporters on the team deliberately lose, reasoning that if the team performed poorly, TsSKA would call him back to the helm. If this was Tarasov's plan, it worked brilliantly. In January, the Army sports committee appealed to Tarasov to return, and speculation about removing him from the national team subsided.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Rossoshik, *Trenery*, 34.

<sup>238</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 98.



Although Tarasov defended his thesis in 1971 as planned, the anticipated promotion to General did not materialize. Tarasov was deeply grieved by this perceived insult, but many saw it as the abrasive coach getting his just desserts. Tarasov had made too many enemies in the world of Soviet ice hockey. He was still the coach of the national team because he was still winning. But his behaviour in 1969 had not been forgotten, and no extra honours would be conferred upon him. Even Nikolay Puchkov, who has mixed feelings about his own coach, was shocked by the lack of gratitude on the part of the authorities:

If it meant so much to Tarasov, who had done so much for the worldwide fame of Soviet -- and army -- hockey, his wish absolutely should have been fulfilled. If it had been, he would have done even more for hockey. But, unfortunately, the system which Tarasov selflessly served and praised all his life, did not take care of its people. I think that Anatoly Vladimirovich understood that fact, but unfortunately he used it as a "blank cheque" in his relations with hockey's leading personalities, which found themselves dependent upon him. And in that, if you please, was his tragedy.<sup>239</sup>

After failing to get his promotion, Tarasov's behaviour deteriorated. During a friendly match in Sweden Tarasov threw a vicious tantrum, and all but physically attacked the local referees before millions of viewers in Scandinavia and the USSR.<sup>240</sup> The Swedes were very indignant, and they made it clear that as long as Tarasov was behind the bench, team USSR would not be invited back.

By 1972 it was obvious that Tarasov's days were numbered. But the Sports Committee was still nervous about dismissing the old coach. To fire Tarasov after nine consecutive wins and have the team lose would put the Committee an awkward predicament. It was decided that the 'dual championship' in 1972 would provide an ideal opportunity to test the team under new leadership. In 1972, the IIHF World Championships and the Olympic tournament were held as two distinct events.

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<sup>239</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 99.

<sup>240</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 102.

Thus the Hockey Federation decreed that Bobrov and Puchkov should coach the Olympic team, while Tarasov and Chernyshev would get the World Championship. Tarasov protested vehemently and the arrangement was cancelled. However, once again, Tarasov would prove unable to control himself on the international stage. This time his outburst would come in the worst possible context, immediately prior to the 1972 World Championships, which were to take place in Prague.

Matches with Czechoslovakia had, since the 1969 World Championships, been extremely sensitive in a political sense. That year at the World Championships, the Czechoslovak players had openly denounced the Soviet Union as 'occupiers' in press interviews, and vowed to defeat them in Stockholm as an act of revenge. The Czechs did in fact defeat the USSR twice and riots erupted in Prague. Aleksandr Dubcek and the remnants of his liberal government were swept away by this calamity, and replaced by one of Eastern Europe's more reactionary regimes. In subsequent championships, although the players had toned down their hostility to the USSR, they continued to antagonize Soviet players by spitting and cursing at them during games. For a humiliated nation, ice hockey had become the only means for political expression, for exacting a small revenge upon a hated empire. For the USSR, the invasion of Czechoslovakia had proven to be a foreign relations disaster. To re-establish Soviet prestige it was crucial that the illusion of Soviet-Czech friendship be re-crafted, and the World Championship was to be a major part of this campaign. It was crucial that there be no "incidents".

The need to project an image of sensitivity was totally lost on Tarasov. During the Olympic match with Czechoslovakia, just two months prior to the World Championships, Tarasov proved again that he was unable to restrain himself. During the match, he started shouting at the Czech

players, unleashing a torrent of the foulest and most offensive terms in the Russian language on the Czech's star forward, Vlastislav Nedomanski. To make matters worse the remarks were made during a match when the USSR was beating the Czech team handily, and Tarasov's boorish behaviour amounted to crass gloating. If Tarasov were to repeat such a scene in Prague the results could have been catastrophic. Visions of enraged Czech fans descending from arena seating to bludgeon Tarasov and his team to death must have flashed before the eyes of sports officials. The Czech authorities wrote a formal diplomatic protest to the USSR, and asked that Tarasov not be sent to any matches in Czechoslovakia.<sup>241</sup>

It was clear that Tarasov had to go, but still he was not dismissed outright. Rather, the chief of the Sports Committee Sergey Pavlov conceived of a clever way to rid himself of this tiresome coach -- a solution which allowed the authorities to claim that Tarasov had resigned. Every hockey player who won an Olympic or World Championship was paid a bonus of 1,000 rubles, about one year's wages at the time for an average worker. However, for whatever reason, the coaches were given only 800 rubles.<sup>242</sup> Every year, in an act of protest, Tarasov and Chernyshev would tender a request to be relieved of their positions with the national team in protest of this injustice. Every year their request would be refused, and the sports committee would compensate them in some other way. Having successfully executed this manoeuvre twice after Tarasov's 1969 disgrace, the coaches saw no reason not to go to the well once again in 1972. This time, their ploy would not work out as planned:

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<sup>241</sup> Vaikhanskiy, *Zolotaya*, 103-4.

<sup>242</sup> Rossoshik, *Trenery*, 47-48.

When Chernyshev and Tarasov entered the room, [Chairman of the Sports Committee] Pavlov rose from behind his table, and firmly shook hands with each, warmly thanking them for their service. As soon as he heard the usual “we’re tired...”, he interrupted the pair with a new handshake and said that he understood them, and as bitter as it would be to see them go, he agreed: they had deserved their rest.<sup>243</sup>

Tarasov still seems to have believed that he would be able to make a quick return to the national team. Journalist Boris Levin was present when Tarasov formally submitted his resignation. Levin recalls that Tarasov handed him a declaration addressed to Pavlov stating: “At the present time, as we earlier agreed, I ask you to relieve me of the duty of coach of the national team.” But, Tarasov told Levin that the document would be in effect “only for a short while.” When Levin asked for clarification, Tarasov answered: “The World Championships are in two months. And where? In Prague. Pavlov needs victory and these ‘great ones’, of course, will lose. And then Pavlov will call me back.”<sup>244</sup>

In this instance, Tarasov proved to be only half right. Under Bobrov’ and Puchkov’s guidance, the team did lose. But Tarasov was not summoned back.

### *Tarasov’s achievements*

Although much of this chapter has been dedicated to criticizing Tarasov, it would be improper to come to the conclusion that his contributions were insignificant. Tarasov was certainly an innovator as a trainer. He developed -- and constantly reworked -- a program of intense physical training based on scientific concepts of nutrition and exercise. His hockey players were the first in

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<sup>243</sup> Rossoshik, *Trenery*, 35.

<sup>244</sup> Rossoshik, *Trenery*, 51-52.

the world to concentrate as much attention, if not more, on practices as well as games. He developed a wide variety of new one-ice drills which revolutionized ice-hockey training. Many of his innovations formed the core of the Soviet training program, and these Soviet principles were quickly adopted by the USSR's chief rivals in international hockey. In this sense, Tarasov can certainly be seen as a founder of modern ice hockey.

Politically, one of his greatest achievements was to elevate the team beyond politics. One of the most crucial aspects of the success of the Soviet program was the fact that it was controlled by men who understood the sport, and that a stable concept was enforced throughout the 1960's and 1970's. Whether or not this concept was optimal is less important: what would be far more damaging was a system akin to football, where the position of the coach was in perpetual jeopardy, and the team's composition and concept were changed annually.

As proof of the value of stability, one need look no further than ice hockey after Tarasov's departure. At this point the Sports Committee and Hockey Section succeeded in firmly placing the national team program under their control. For the mid-1970's, Tarasov and Chernyshev lingered on with their club teams, which continued to form the core of the team, but the national team itself would be coached by a different figure. Bobrov did well as the team's coach from 1972-1974, but after his departure, the program leadership broke-down. With the leadership of the Army team, Dynamo and the national team all separate, the team's philosophy and coaching staff starting shifting with the winds of political intrigue and the team suffered two consecutive defeats in 1975 and 1976.

Without clear, stable and universally accepted rules and divisions of authority, the sort of

democracy the Hockey Section hoped to introduce in Soviet hockey was doomed to fail. The choice was not between dictatorship and democracy, but dictatorship and chaos. Soviet ice hockey may well have gone the way of football, were it not for the timely intervention of the Politburo. Viktor Tikhonov was personally appointed by Yuri Andropov to take TsSKA and the national team under his control, and to recreate the dual power system that existed under Tarasov, with Tikhonov doing as he saw fit with elite hockey, while the weak and fragmented Hockey Section devoted its energies largely to organizational work.

### *Conclusion*

An examination of the career of Anatoly Tarasov confirms that he was a very influential figure in the history of Soviet ice hockey -- perhaps the most influential single figure. But he never became the unquestioned leader of Soviet hockey, as he was later made out to be. For the first 15 years of Soviet hockey Tarasov was hardly dominant. The influence of other figures, such as Chernyshev, Romanov, Stalin and Bobrov eclipsed Tarasov's authority for long periods of time. Although he was a major figure, his influence was definitely held in check by his rivals and colleagues, and his career was very nearly ended by a player revolt.

The administration of the national team was hindered by the ongoing power struggles, for control of the Soviet ice-hockey program. Chernyshev's and Tarasov's status as the representatives of the security service and military hockey program seemed to ensure that they were the only acceptable candidates for the national team helm. But the two men had fundamentally different

visions of the game, and the frequent changes in strategy and composition hurt the national team. The problem was solved in 1963, when Chernyshev and Tarasov were jointly assigned control of the national team. This united their personal influence, and the KGB-Military structures they represented, were fused to make a coherent and stable leadership for the national team.

During the golden 1960's the national team and its coaches were seemingly above criticism. But, while Tarasov's control over the national team was restrained only by Chernyshev, his influence in other aspects of Soviet ice hockey was more limited. The Hockey Section was weak and fragmented while the Sports Committee was remote: but the influence of both bodies was far from nil. The sports bureaucrats were wary of Tarasov's influence, and offended by his audaciousness. They sought a way to get rid of him, and eventually found it. But more significant was the opposition of several other figures who stepped into the power vacuum that was theoretically occupied by the formal structures of the Hockey Section. Even at the peak of his influence, men like Bobrov and Epshtein were able to pursue their own visions of the game and, at times, show Tarasov up. Furthermore, they were able to occupy important positions: Bobrov succeeded Tarasov as the head coach of the national team, and Epshtein served as the coach of the nation's youth team when Tarasov was at the apex of his power.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis, I have re-examined some of the key assumptions that have been made about the Soviet ice-hockey program -- and in some cases, about the Soviet political system as a whole. The standard view of Soviet ice hockey cannot, after all, be divorced from the general analysis of Soviet society and political life that existed at the time. When an institution was successful in the USSR, this was assumed to be a result of the high priority the state placed on it. If an institution worked badly it was either because it was a low priority, or because the rules that governed it were irrational. In any case, the model for Soviet society was always one of centralization, red tape and bureaucracy. At times this system worked well, and at times it was self-defeating, but the bureaucrats always called the shots.

This fundamental assumption formed the basis for thinking about ice hockey. And this sport was fabulously successful. International sport is generally thought to be one of the most successful endeavours undertaken by the Soviet Union. But the Soviet dominance in the Olympics overshadowed the fact that their athletes did not, on the whole, fare well when pitted against the best the West had to offer, their professionals. The only other sport wherein the Soviets regularly played against professionals was football. While respectable, their performance was always disappointing. The Soviet national team only advanced to the semi-finals twice, and it never finished better than fourth.

Of all other professional sports, only basketball, tennis and boxing were widely practiced in the USSR. In world competition, Soviet tennis players were obscure at best when competing against



professionals. As for boxing and basketball, the Soviet Union could not regularly defeat Western amateurs. There is no evidence that the Soviets even contemplated pitting their Olympians against the likes of Muhammad Ali or the LA Lakers.

Ice hockey was a different story. Against amateurs the Soviets were not merely successful, they were dominant. From 1963 to 1990, the Soviets were defeated in only 5 of 28 World Championship tournaments. But most importantly, they were able to regularly defeat the world's best professionals. Even when defeated by professionals, the Soviets always acquitted themselves well. Before the 1972 Super Series against the NHL all-star team, experts in the USSR and the West debated only as to whether or not the Soviets would be able to acquit themselves well in defeat, and win a single game. As it turned out, Team Canada barely won the series, four victories, three defeats and one tie.<sup>245</sup> In 1974 team USSR defeated a WHA professional all-star team in an eight game series with four wins, three ties and only one defeat. When Soviet club teams played against their professional counterparts, they also fared well, achieving an aggregate total of 56 wins, 10 ties and 43 defeats against NHL and WHA teams. Although defeated in 1976, 1984, 1987 and 1991 the USSR also won the 1981 Canada Cup, and the often forgotten 1979 Challenge Cup against the professionals, even though all these tournaments were played in North America, according to NHL rules.

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<sup>245</sup> In the event of a tie in the final game, the Soviets were planning to claim victory on the basis of goal differential. In spite of the Canadian victory, some still tried to claim victory on this basis: but, in spite of what is often believed, this never became the general line. The overwhelming majority of press articles which were published after the series conceded that the Canadian team won, but argued that this victory was only attained through despicable tactics and that the Soviets were, therefore, the moral victors. Considering the general conduct of the Canadian team on and off the ice, their refusal to shake hands with the Soviet team after game one, the celebratory finger gestures that followed their victory in game eight, and above all Bobby Clarke's shameful attack on Valery Kharlamov in game six, it has to be admitted that there is at least some justification to this claim.

When faced with such a remarkable success, most commentators seem to have assumed that ice hockey was an instance wherein the authoritarian Soviet state had worked well. Evidence was seized upon to prove that the sport was a high priority for the state; that it was thoroughly infiltrated with political concerns and ideology; and that system was under the tight control of a hockey dictator, Anatoly Tarasov. Soviet authorities did not dispute this conclusion, since it fit well with their self-image: disciplined and politically conscious individuals voluntarily commit themselves to a collective endeavour, guided by a wise leader who takes his inspiration from the principles of Leninism. All that was disputed and discussed was whether this system was fundamentally good or bad.

The conclusion that we have come to is quite different. By weighing the archival sources against the recollections of the individuals who created and governed the USSR, it would appear that the fundamental assumption used in analyzing the Soviet ice-hockey program was exaggerated, if not mistaken. It has been our conclusion that the Soviet ice-hockey program succeeded precisely because it was not at all monolithic. In examining the role of the Soviet leadership, the Communist Party and its ideology, we have seen that the nation's leadership was largely indifferent to the ice-hockey, at least until the national team began its string of victories in the 1960's. Surprisingly, ice hockey was one of the least politicized aspects of Soviet life. Hockey men were remarkably pragmatic and at times openly dismissive of ideological concerns. The Communist Party itself was willing to allow gross violations of Socialist morality -- and law -- to motivate the nation's elite players. Although nearly all of the men involved in the nation's ice-hockey program were patriotic, very few had more than a minimal, formal respect for Communism, and some not even that.

In examining the leading sports authorities we have seen that instead of a planned bureaucratic approach, there was more indifference and a *laissez faire* approach to the sport. Ice hockey was dependably successful and the bureaucrats, conscious of their own ineptitude, were reluctant to meddle with the national team. Even when a coach, Anatoly Tarasov, began to commit unthinkable political *faux pas* at home and abroad, the sports authorities took years to remove him. Furthermore we have seen that, far from being a prestigious organization, the Sports Committee was relatively weak. On crucial issues of material support, the Sports Committee preferred to abdicate responsibility, rather than lose face. The Sports Committee was unable to effectively wield influence against other Soviet organizations, except through the influential newspaper, *Sovetskiy Sport*, which it controlled.

The Hockey Section itself, as the sub-division of the Sports Committee with day-to-day responsibility for running the ice-hockey program, was also far from a being a well-oiled, bureaucratic machine. This organization was able to undertake some effective measures to improve elite play, and it put a surprisingly large effort into the establishment of a national recreational hockey program. However, on crucial questions, the Hockey Section always proved itself to be weak and divided. The opinion of the majority was generally ignored, and the rules it made were flagrantly broken, especially by Chernyshev and Tarasov.

Nowhere was this fact seen more clearly than in the controversial and crucial issue of player transfers. Although the system of player centralization was seen as giving the Soviets an edge in international competition, we have noted that the official structures which ruled Soviet sport were deeply opposed. Nevertheless, backed by powerful patrons in the KGB and armed forces, Tarasov

and Chernyshev were able to ignore the instructions of their 'superiors' in the Hockey Section Presidium.

It would be a mistake to assume that Tarasov wielded absolute power. For years he was overshadowed by other, more powerful figures in the world of Soviet sport. And, although Tarasov was able to ignore the rulings of the Hockey Section, he could not necessarily *make* rulings that he would have liked to. Though Tarasov's superiors in the Sports Committee were not able to control him, Tarasov certainly did not dominate them. The ultimate proof of Tarasov's fallibility lay in the fact that the Chairman of the Sports Committee, Sergey Pavlov dismissed him.

In the end, we have found that the successful Soviet program was rooted in a delicate balance between order and chaos. When paired together, Chernyshev and Tarasov were able to use their ties to the Army and KGB to establish an effective organizational centre for the Soviet ice-hockey program. This allowed the sport to be governed by a stable, uniform vision, independent of the intrigues and power-struggles that swept through the formal sports structures. The Party and Sports Committee were content to demand victory from Tarasov and Chernyshev and, when they got it, they were intelligent enough to leave well enough alone. The Hockey Section was able to effectively administrate the sport, and facilitate the development of the infrastructure that facilitated the scientific study of ice hockey. It succeeded in creating a relatively broad, mass program that fed the nation's elite teams with a steady, if narrow stream of young talent. And, together with the Sports Committee leadership, the Section was able to put a check on the powers of the nation's leading duo preventing, for example, Anatoly Tarasov from snuffing out Nikolay Epshtein's innovations in style and training. On the whole, Soviet ice hockey was governed by a rather

confusing, but effective system of checks and balances whereby a variety of actors with relations to the army, security services, and Communist Party competed for influence over the sport. With no clearly dominant party, a meritocracy evolved in ice hockey. The people who ran the sport were, by and large, the people best qualified to do so. This was a rarity in the USSR, and it was probably the key reason for ice hockey's unusual degree of success.

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