

The Tito-Stalin Football War*

After World War II socialist Yugoslavia became one of the most loyal USSR satellite states. The new government began to copy the Soviet Union in all aspects of society and government. An important element in the creation of a new socialist society was the attitude towards sport. In accordance with the Soviet model, the task of sport as part of physical education in Yugoslavia was to improve the working and defensive capabilities of citizens, where physical training was no longer the privilege of a minority but the obligation for everybody. However, despite the Soviet influence, different views on the recent events (i.e. the USSR's role in the liberation of Yugoslavia) and a different vision of the future bilateral relations have led to a cooling of relations between the Soviet Union (along with other European communist countries) and Yugoslavia. During 1948 even armed intervention was considered as an option. Deteriorating diplomatic, political and economic relations also began to show at sport events. Yugoslav clubs were prohibited from participating in sport competitions that were already scheduled across Eastern Europe, and the culmination of this “sport war” took place at the Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952. At these Olympics, the first for the USSR, Yugoslavia and the USSR played a match at the football tournament. Due to the situation at the time, it was not just a sport event, but a political event as well. The win of one or the other national team would mean the victory of the specific (Yugoslav or Soviet) concept of socialist development. Despite the global trends, Croatian historiography still lacks studies that contain research of interrelations between socio-political processes, sport events and sport in general. Collecting evidence from primary and secondary sources as well as the material based on oral history, the present paper provides a study of a specific sport event in the context of international political relations. Even though the research topic of Yugoslav-Soviet relations in the late 1940s and early 1950s is well-known and well-researched, this approach provides a new dimension to it. Accordingly, the present paper aims to fill a research gap in Croatian historiography and is intended to serve as an inducement for further research in the field.

Introduction

“On this day of the great victory of the united peoples against our common enemy the thoughts of all of our peoples of Yugoslavia are directed with gratitude to

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*the glorious and invincible liberator - the Red Army, and its ingenious leader Stalin. They are directed with gratitude to the heroic peoples of the Soviet Union... ”*¹

Although in his speech of 9 May 1945 Josip Broz Tito, the Marshal of Yugoslavia, also welcomed the Western allies, giving particular mention to communist brothers and the great leader gave an indication of the direction that the post-war Yugoslavia would take in both domestic and foreign policy. Soon the premonitions came true. In the following years two Slavic states in the North and South of Europe would become more than close despite the absence of a common border. Unlike the pre-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was among the last in Europe to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1940, the new communist Yugoslavia did not hesitate to reveal its foreign policy priorities. Even before the official end of World War II, on 11 April 1945 in Moscow a Treaty of Friendship, Mutual Assistance and Postwar Cooperation was signed by the governments of the Soviet Union and Democratic Federal Yugoslavia.² By copying the Soviet socio-political, economic and military models, in addition to the increasing antagonism towards the Western (“bourgeois”) countries, Yugoslavia started its transformation into the most faithful and most aggressive satellite of the USSR.³ The importance of Yugoslavia in the newly formed Soviet sphere of influence also came to the fore with the establishment of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform, Informbiro) - the international organisation of communist and workers’ parties. In 1947, at the founding meeting of Cominform it was decided that the seat of this organisation would be in Belgrade, specifically at the insistence of the Soviet delegation.

Yugoslav – Soviet Sport Relations

There were various manifestations of Yugoslav-Soviet cooperation. In addition to the political connections, military, cultural, scientific and other connections also began intensifying. One aspect of the cooperation attracting increased attention was sport. Modelling itself on the Soviet society, the Yugoslav society also saw physical activities of their citizens as an important basis of the socialist transformation. Unlike the “elitist” approach to sport activities during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in the new emerging society “*physical culture is no longer a luxury for the chosen and privileged few, but is now within the reach of all workers and youth under the general motto: be capable of working and defending the Democratic*

¹ *Fiskultura*, 24 May 1945.

² For information on the relationship between the USSR and the “first” and “second” Yugoslavia, see: PETRANOVIĆ 1981: 162-180, 452-506. On the relationship between politics and sport, see: COLLINS 2013; HILL 2002; SMITH AND DILWYN 2000.

³ BANAC 1990: 30-37.

Federal Yugoslavia!"⁴ Mass attendance, amateurism and politically controlled sport activities became the new guidelines.⁵ Partly due to a "faulty" approach and in part to cooperation with enemy regimes established in Yugoslavia during World War II, old sport associations were being dissolved while new ones were being established under the control of communist authorities. In sport, just like in other segments of society, a lack of experience was compensated by copying the Soviet model. "We can directly reap the fruits and successes of those wise teachers of mass and versatile physical culture. They discovered formulas for work, recipes which can lead any factory, local or military centre for physical culture to a successful completion of their tasks", stressed the newly adopted framework for the development of physical culture.⁶ In this context, the arrival of the Soviet delegation for physical culture to Yugoslavia was anxiously anticipated. A great honour was bestowed upon the Yugoslav sport; moreover, this was generally further emphasized in society by the fact that the delegation of Soviet sports managers, experts, teachers, coaches and athletes had specifically chosen Yugoslavia for their first study visit outside of the USSR.⁷ After arriving in Belgrade (1 September 1945), members of the Soviet delegation toured around Yugoslavia for a whole month socializing with athletes, soldiers and citizens, participating in numerous sport events, but also personally demonstrating their sport skills. Although there were no football players among the guests from the USSR, one of the most interesting lectures in a series of lectures on Soviet sport was the one about football. The three-hour lecture in front of football players and coaches from Belgrade was held by university professor and football manager Mikhail Tovarovski who introduced the participants to the organisation of football in the USSR, the number of clubs and football players, the role of the coach, referees, etc.⁸ This was neither the first

⁴ *Ilustrirane fizikturne novine*, 09 August 1945.

⁵ The relationship between sport, athletes and politics was considered a two-way process. After the first elections for the Constituent Assembly in November 1945 in the magazine *Fiskultura* (*Organ fiskulturno sportskog odbora Srbije*, "Organ of the Physical Culture and Sport Committee of Serbia"), among other things, the following was pointed out: "Whereas once reigned the slogan 'sport without politics' - the slogan that non-national regimes kept mentioning to distract athletes from current political issues, now our physical culture enthusiasts sense that participation in politics and resolution of social and economic problems presents an everyday need and the fight for a better and happier future," *Fiskultura*, 16 November 1945.

⁶ *Ilustrirane fizikturne novine*, 14 August 1945.

⁷ The Soviet delegation, among others, consisted of: Ivan Isaevich Nikiforov (vice-president of the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sport of the Soviet Union), Alexander Pugachevsky („outstanding master of sport"), Nina Dumbadze (record holder in discus throw), G. V. Vasilyev (assistant professor of Physical Culture and head of the department of the Leningrad Institute for Physical Culture), Vitaliy Ushakov (swimmer), Leonid Meshkov (swimmer), Yevgeniya Sechenova (athlete) and others. *Ibid.*; 18 September 1945, 27 November 1945; *Fiskultura*, 8 September 1945, 19 September 1945.

⁸ *Fiskultura*, 19 September 1945.

nor the last time that Soviet football “imposed” itself as a sort of patron and mentor of Yugoslav football. Shortly before the arrival of the guests from the USSR, a delegation of the Yugoslav youth organisation returned from their study trip to the Soviet Union.⁹ Among the numerous gifts received during their trip, young Yugoslavs particularly singled out the Soviet youth’s gift consisting of 50 footballs and one trophy, for which it was decided that it would be awarded each year to the best Yugoslav football team.¹⁰ A significantly more explicit demonstration of the Yugoslav-Soviet football friendship happened at the end of 1945. Two of the best Soviet teams decided to spend the autumn and winter of that year on international tours after the finals in the domestic championship and cup competitions. What would be unimaginable just a couple of months later, especially in the context of the intensification of the Cold War, happened - the Soviet champions, football players of Dynamo Moscow (with a couple of players from other clubs) chose as their destination a Western country, and on 4 November 1945 arrived in Great Britain. In the following months they played matches with Chelsea (3:3), Cardiff City (Dynamo won 10:1), Arsenal (Dynamo won 4:3) and the Glasgow Rangers (2:2).¹¹ Because of the still present euphoria from winning the war, and the fact that two allied countries continued their cooperation in peacetime, but even more because Soviet football was completely unknown to everyone outside of the USSR, these matches attracted great interest among the international public. The excellent performance of Soviet football players was also reported in Yugoslav newspapers with undisguised cheering and often very biased headlines such as: “*London audience carries Dynamo players on their shoulders after the match.*”¹² Unlike Dynamo’s tour of Great Britain, the 1945 tour of the Soviet runner-ups and winners of the cup – CDKA,¹³ did not get as much international media coverage. One of the reasons was probably because their destination was not a football giant, but, on the contrary, just another (football) mystery - Yugoslavia.¹⁴ For the Yugoslav public and home football players, probably still impressed by Dynamo’s

⁹ USAOJ - Unified League of Anti-Fascist Youth.

¹⁰ *Fiskultura*, 08 September 1945.

¹¹ About Dynamo’s British tour, see: EDELMAN 1993: 87-91.

¹² *Fiskultura*, 16 November 1945.

¹³ CDKA - Central House of the Red Army.

¹⁴ Yugoslav football was present on the international stage before World War II. *Inter alia*, the Yugoslav national football team was one of the four European national teams that participated at the first World Cup in Uruguay in 1930. After winning against Brazil and Bolivia and losing to Uruguay, Yugoslavia ended up fourth at this World Cup. <http://www.fifa.com/tournaments/archive/worldcup/uruguay1930/matches/index.html> (10 January 2015). Regardless of the pre-war successes, as well as numerous football players who continued their careers even after World War II, post-war political changes, and related ones in sport, would result in an almost new beginning for Yugoslav football.

successful tour in the cradle of football, this visit was a first-class sport and social event. Moscow's football players played four matches winning against the Belgrade teams Partizan¹⁵ (4:3) and Crvena zvezda (3:1), as well as Hajduk Split (2:0). The team from Zagreb put up the strongest resistance by playing a tie 2:2.¹⁶

Tito – Stalin Split (1948)

At the end of 1945, when an honest relationship even with ideological opponents seemed feasible, a scenario in which the closeness and cooperation between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia would be for whatever reason put into question, let alone terminated, seemed impossible. However, three years after signing the treaty on friendship and cooperation the two closest allies found themselves on the verge of war. Partly due to the increasingly independent foreign policy which started to openly oppose the solutions from Moscow, and partly due to Stalin's personal animosity towards Josip Broz Tito as a potential competitor for the leading position in the international communist movement, in the summer of 1948 Yugoslavia found itself in a very difficult situation. Just short of one year after the establishment of Cominform, the Yugoslav communists, whose homeland housed the seat of that organisation, were expelled from it.¹⁷ Already in (self-) isolation from Western capitalist countries, Yugoslavia was now also isolated from yesterday's brotherly communist countries. The expulsion from Cominform meant not only the termination of all political, economic, cultural and other connections, but also the possibility of a violent replacement of Tito's loyal political team with the one favouring and loyal to Stalin. Although the soldiers on both sides of the Yugoslav border were prepared for the worst, an armed conflict did not occur. Instead, different forms of pressure were exerted both by the USSR and all other European communist countries. Yugoslavia and "Tito's clique" were accused of treason, terrorism, fascism and Anglo-American imperialism.¹⁸

Given the absolute politicisation of communist societies, the projection of this political conflict to the sport arena was inevitable. Already scheduled competitions were cancelled, Eastern European clubs and athletes refused to compete in Yugoslavia, while Yugoslav clubs and athletes were not invited to sport events

¹⁵ Football club Partizan was founded only two month before the match with CDKA (4 October 1945), a Soviet Army club, precisely the one after which it was modelled. Just like CDKA (Central House of the Red Army), Partizan was founded on the initiative of the army within the Central House of the Yugoslav Army.

¹⁶ *Fiskultura*, 3 and 23 December 1945; *Narodni sport*, 10 December 1945.

¹⁷ For the 1948 conflict between the Soviet Union (and other Eastern European communist countries) and Yugoslavia, its causes and consequences, see: BANAC 1990.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; PETRANOVIĆ 1981: 467-506.

in Eastern Europe. Occasional meetings on “neutral” ground were characterised by antagonism, provocations and great political tension. All of the above will particularly come to the fore at the 1952 Olympic football tournament in Helsinki.

The conflict with ideological counterparts put Yugoslavs before an important decision. Which way to take? To continue with the communist transformation of society, but without political allies and economic partners, or turn to yesterday’s enemies from the capitalist West? With majority support of the Party members, but also of the entire Yugoslav society, Tito chose a manoeuvre which many analysts consider as one of the milestones of the Cold War. Yugoslavia remained true to Marx’s teachings, but not in the way that they were interpreted in Moscow. Yugoslav communists started looking for their own solutions for socio-political developments which will intrigue generations of communist, but also non-communist, politicians, intellectuals, businessmen and ordinary people all around the world. Alongside numerous socio-political changes in the country itself, there was a great turn at the international level. By turning to the West and especially to the USA, Yugoslavia managed to escape the difficult situation resulting from the political and economic blockade from the East. Acknowledging the Yugoslav decision to ideologically remain on the same path, but also the newly created situation within the Communist bloc, the US ambassador to Belgrade described the new paradigm of the relationship with Yugoslavia as a “cold-blooded calculation of mutual interests”.¹⁹

A different relationship with the West, especially compared to the Soviet one, quickly manifested in the world of sport. The first post-war Olympic Games were opened on 29 July 1948 in London. This happened exactly a month after the conflict within the Communist bloc had started, but also one month after the beginning of the Berlin blockade, the first actual Cold War conflict between the USSR and the West. Although at that moment still without a national Olympic committee, the Soviet Union was invited to participate in the Games; however, this did not happen.²⁰ Unlike the pre-war period when non-participation was explained by ideological reasons,²¹ during the Cold War sport became an important means of proving superiority over the rival bloc. Losing against the enemy, even on the track and field or in the swimming pool, was considered not only a sport defeat, but also a political one. The decision of Soviet authorities not to send athletes to those competitions from which they could not return as winners

¹⁹ PETRANOVIĆ 1981: 497.

²⁰ The newly created military and political situation around Berlin certainly affected participation (and lack thereof). Moreover, the International Olympic Committee was not satisfied with the explanation that Soviet athletes that were generously compensated by the state had in fact been amateurs. EDELMAN 1993: 80.

²¹ <http://blogs.bu.edu/ghm/files/2013/04/Keys-2003-Soviet-Sport-and-Transnational-Mass-Culture-in-the.pdf> (12 January 2015).

should be viewed in that context.²² Given that in 1948 there were no such guarantees, the decision was not to take such risk. On the other hand, Yugoslavia decided to send 90 athletes to London, in part precisely because of the situation in which it found itself.²³ Among them were also football players who won a silver medal after winning against the host in the semi-finals (3:1) and losing to Sweden in the finals (3:1).²⁴

Summer Olympics in Helsinki (1952)

Although the establishment of the Olympic Committee of the USSR in 1951 suggested the arrival of Soviet athletes to the next Olympic Games (1952 in Helsinki), in the spring of 1952 there was still no official confirmation of participation. There were speculations about several months' long preparations of Soviet "Olympians" in Crimea; however, the president of the Soviet Olympic Committee Adrianov stated that an official confirmation would be given only six weeks before the Games.²⁵ There were also speculations about the location of Soviet athletes' accommodation during the Games. "Mixing" with other athletes, particularly those from the West, was out of the question for political reasons. One of the possible scenarios was that Soviet athletes be accommodated in Leningrad and transported by plane to competitions in Helsinki every day. Another scenario predicted that they should be accommodated in Helsinki but on a Soviet ship in the city harbour.²⁶ Ultimately, a third scenario occurred. As written in *Time Magazine*, „*the Red athletes... were immured in a separate 'Little Iron Curtain' village, six miles from the Olympic Stadium*“.²⁷ The separate accommodation was accompanied by another thing unusual for the Olympic movement. For the first time in the history of the Olympic Games the flags of the participants were raised in two different places. Flags of the USSR and the Eastern European communist countries were raised in the Olympic Village in Käpylä, while the flags of all other countries were raised in the main Olympic Village in Otaniemi.²⁸

²² EDELMAN 1993: 80; RIORDAN 1980: 367.

²³ Other communist countries, besides Yugoslavia, that participated at the Olympic Games in London were Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland.

²⁴ In addition to a silver medal in football, Yugoslav athlete Ivan Gubijan won the silver medal in the hammer throw. <http://www.olympic.org/london-1948-summer-olympics> (12 January 2015).

²⁵ *Naš sport*, 14 February 1952.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; *Time Magazine*, 21 July 1952.

²⁷ *Time Magazine*, 21 July 1952.

²⁸ The Yugoslav newspapers commented on the event in an interesting way: “*However, not even this big international meeting will be spared from provocations of the aggressors from the East, the same ones whose cruelty the Finnish people have already experienced on their own skin.*” *Naš sport*, 15 July 1952.

In the meantime, the relationship between Yugoslavia and the USSR had not improved since the last Olympic Games. On the contrary, the blockade of Yugoslavia continued, while the KGB documents indicate the existence of exact plans to assassinate Josip Broz Tito.²⁹ It was in this atmosphere that the possible Olympic meeting of athletes from these two countries was anticipated with great interest. The opportunity arose with a sport in which both countries expected great success - football. The football tournament at the Helsinki Olympic Games was one of the most anticipated sport events for several reasons. Firstly, the sporting (in particular football) public anxiously awaited the first entrance of the Soviet national team onto the international stage. Alongside the USSR, national football teams of Eastern European communist countries also appeared at the Olympic tournament for the first time. Numerous experts took precisely that fact as an argument proving that this was the most competitive Olympic football tournament ever because the Eastern European countries were represented by "amateurs" who played for well-known professional clubs before the war.³⁰ If not the most competitive, the football tournament in Helsinki was certainly the biggest in Olympic Games history judging by the number of participants.³¹ Due to the over-abundant number of registered teams, an elimination round was held to get 16 teams in the final stage of the Olympic tournament. The Soviet Union drew a difficult opponent and managed to defeat the Bulgarian national team only after extra time with a score of 2:1. Yugoslavia's football players had a much easier task in front of them. They needed to defeat the national team of India in order to continue the competition. The match ended with a high score of 10:1 for the Yugoslavs; apart from the large number of goals, several Indian football players who chose to play barefoot made the match all the more memorable.³² Then came the first round matches. Although the match between Hungary and Italy guaranteed possibly the best football skills, by far the most attention was given to the pair Yugoslavia - USSR. It was obvious to all who at least casually followed the news in those years that the players in the match would not be exclusively following the Olympic idea that it is important to participate (and not to win).

The Football Match and Its Consequences

Great pressure, stemming from great expectations, was put on football players from both national teams. Soviet football was going through a renaissance after

²⁹ Preparations for the assassination of Tito were terminated three days after Stalin's death. ANDREW AND MITROKHIN 2000: 462-467.

³⁰ EDELMAN 1993: 103.

³¹ A total of 25 national teams participated in the tournament. The Saarland national team was also registered, but dropped from the competition. *Narodni sport*, 14 July 1952.

³² *Vjesnik*, 17 July 1952.

World War II. The spectators, who were increasingly visiting stadiums, could enjoy excellent matches of the domestic championship. An increased interest led to more serious investments in football infrastructure. An important moment in the popularisation of football was definitely Dynamo's tour of Great Britain. The success of the Moscow club was proof of formation of the strongest school of football in the world for athletes, coaches and sport journalists alike.³³ Soviet politicians saw it as proof of superiority of the Soviet approach to organisation of not only sport but society in general. Accordingly, and especially in the increasingly competitive atmosphere of the Cold War, football was seen as having great potential in foreign policy. Consequently, the first entrance of the Soviet national team onto the international football stage could not have been left to chance. First, a national team needed to be formed. In order to prevent any risk of failure due to possible lack of teamwork, it was decided that the backbone of the national team would be the team of CDKA, the Soviet post-war club with most trophies won. The "team of lieutenants", alluding to the military character of the club and referring to the football players of CDKA, was joined by the best individual players from other Soviet clubs.³⁴ Believing in the quality of their football players, the Soviet public sent them off to Helsinki expecting nothing but the gold Olympic medal. However, the match with Bulgaria already indicated that such a scenario would not be easily achieved. The true test of football skills, but also of mental strength, was the match with Yugoslavia.

The political pressure put on Yugoslav football players was significantly lower. Victory would certainly not be perceived solely as a sport success. However, unlike the Soviet politicians, Yugoslav politicians did not burden the football players with their expectations nor did they interfere in any way in the functioning of the national team. The composition of the national team was left to a team of experts who, taking into account the suggestions of coaches, sports journalist as well as the general public, chose the players believed to have the ability to repeat the success from London.³⁵ The national team lead by coach Aleksandar Tirnanić ultimately consisted of players from four best Yugoslav clubs.³⁶ Despite the problems enco-

³³ EDELMAN 1993: 91-95.

³⁴ Along with players of CDKA, the Soviet national team was comprised of players from VVS (Soviet Military Air Force), Spartak, Dynamo Moscow, Zenit from Leningrad and Dinamo Tbilisi. *Ibid.*, 102-104.

³⁵ *Narodni sport*, 14 May 1952.

³⁶ Aleksandar Tirnanić (1910-1992) was one of the best pre-war Yugoslav football players. As part of the national team he participated at the first World Cup in Uruguay in 1930.

The Yugoslav team at the Olympic Games in Helsinki consisted of: Beara and Vukas from Hajduk; Stanković, Ognjanov and Mitić from Crvena zvezda; Crnković and Horvat from Dinamo; Čajkovski, Bobek and Zebec from Partizan; and the only one who did not play for one of the "Great Four" was Boškov from Vojvodina.

untered during the two and a half days long journey from Yugoslavia to Finland, already the first training match in Helsinki ending in the victory against the Chile national team with a score of 5:0 raised confidence in Yugoslav ranks.³⁷ The good atmosphere continued after a high score victory against India; however, there was no time for euphoria. The first round draw brought the worst possible opponent before Yugoslav football players.

There was no information about the Soviet national team's mood just before the match. The self-isolation was further intensified after the draw was announced. Nobody from the Soviet team was in the mood to give statements.³⁸ Especially not to journalists from Yugoslavia. As the day of the match approached, anxiety and anticipation grew. Yugoslav newspapers wrote about numerous telegrams of support of businesses and individuals from the entire country.³⁹

The match between the USSR and Yugoslavia was played on Sunday, 20 July, in Tampere in front of roughly 16,000 spectators. After the first half-time, the favoured Soviet team left the field in shock with three goals in its net. At the very beginning of the second half-time, Yugoslavia scored again and led with 4:0. The shock on the field was somewhat alleviated by the best Soviet player Bobrov, but it was short-lived because only a few minutes later Yugoslavia was in the lead with 5:1. With only 15 minutes left before the end of the game, what followed was probably one of the biggest comebacks in the history of football competitions. In the last 15 minutes the Soviets managed to score 4 goals, meaning that the full-time match ended with the score of 5:5.⁴⁰ Since no goals were scored during the extra time, the decision on who continues to the next round was to be made at the match replay two days later. Although the Soviets began the match significantly better with the brilliant Bobrov scoring already in the 5th minute and taking the lead, the match ended with the score 3:1 for Yugoslavia.⁴¹

As expected, the match sparked numerous, but significantly different reactions not only in Yugoslavia and the USSR, but also around the world. What this match

³⁷ During the 55-hour journey from Yugoslavia to Finland the team members changed several means of transport, including bus, train, ferry and airplane. From today's perspective, it is almost impossible to imagine the scene at the Munich train station where Yugoslav football players were performing their physical conditioning training on the platform while waiting for the train for Hamburg to arrive. *Borba*, 13 July 1952; *Vjesnik*, 14 July 1952.

³⁸ *Vjesnik*, 19 July 1952.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 July 1952.

⁴¹ Vsevolod Bobrov (1922-1979) was one of the best Soviet athletes of all times. He played for both the football and ice hockey national teams of the USSR. Before the replay in Tampere, he broke the media silence by stating that he was surprised by the great progress of Yugoslav football. Interestingly, in 1946 Bobrov had a meniscus surgery in Yugoslavia. *Vjesnik u srijedu*, 23 July 1952.

really meant to Yugoslav football players, journalists, football enthusiasts and even those who did not know much about football could be clearly seen the moment that the referee signalled the end of the match. According to the statements of witnesses who remember the radio transmission, the first player who reached the commentator breathlessly exclaimed: *"We beat Stalin's Russia!"*⁴² The significance of this victory going beyond a mere sport success is further attested by the telegram of Yugoslav football players to Marshal Tito after the match. It contained a short message with military undertones: *"We fought and won with Your support and the support of our people."*⁴³ The political dimension of the victory could be derived from the reaction of Finnish fans who were chanting *"Tito-Tito"* as the Yugoslav athletes were leaving the stadium.⁴⁴ The excitement at and around the stadium could not compare to what was happening that night at home.⁴⁵ After the match, thousands of people crowded the streets of Yugoslav cities. Citizens in lines were walking around Belgrade with torches in their hands in celebration of the victory. The Split harbour greeted the winners with ship sirens, while in Zagreb traffic was stopped due to the massive number of people on the streets. Soon jokes started appearing at the expense of the losers. Alluding to the shame that the Soviet football players brought on the Soviet Union, comments could be heard about Stalin punishing them by exiling them to Siberia.⁴⁶ The winning euphoria continued the next day on the pages of Yugoslav newspapers. The practice of not putting sport content on the cover page was disregarded. Great attention was given not only to detailed analyses of the match, but also to "other" aspects of the victory. *"The victory against the USSR delighted all our people, even those who were not particularly interested in sport up to this match, and this because it was against the members of the national team of the country which has been leading an unprincipled and insolent defamatory campaign against our peoples*

⁴² According to the statement of Damir Jašarević from 10 January 2015.

⁴³ *Borba*, 23 July 1952; Interestingly, comparing it to today's situation when state officials routinely congratulate medal winners, I was not able to find in any of the Yugoslav newspapers the telegram in which Josip Broz Tito congratulated the Yugoslav football players on their success. Likewise, I was not able to find proof that Tito indeed did send a telegram to the players just before the match. On the other hand, two Soviet sport journalists Tokarev and Gorbunov mentioned an alleged telegram from Stalin to his national team in which he stressed the importance of victory against Yugoslav enemies. EDELMAN 1993: 106.

⁴⁴ *Vjesnik*, 24 July 1952.

⁴⁵ Ante Pavlović (1933), long-time renowned sport worker, to my question on what the atmosphere was like after the victory responded that not a single victory of the Croatian national team after 1991 was welcomed with such enthusiasm as this one of Yugoslavia against the USSR in 1952. (interview by H.K. with Ante Pavlović, 15 January 2015).

⁴⁶ In the suburbs of Belgrade the celebration lasted long into the night and citizens even came up with some celebratory verses: "Now Stalin's tears are flowing, to Siberia they all are going." *Borba*, 23 July 1952.

during the last few years,” wrote one newspaper from Zagreb.⁴⁷ This success was perceived as proof of the rightness of the Yugoslav road to socialism, now confirmed in the sport arena.⁴⁸ Moreover, the sport example should have served as a strong incentive for perseverance in all other fields of society organization. In that context, as a message to football players in Finland, but also as a message to the entire Yugoslav public, the telegram of the builders of the copper rolling mill in the town of Sevojno was published in the newspapers. In an overdramatized and slightly romantic tone they said: “*We all took part in the fight of our players. Tomorrow our builder’s muscles will put all our strength into our fight here with building a copper rolling mill. That will be the best salute to Tito’s heroes at the Olympics*”.⁴⁹ Apart from journalists, the Yugoslav victory, or better yet the Soviet defeat, was referenced by cartoonists in their inherently specific way. The blade of their feathers was mostly focused on the possible perception of the defeat in the USSR, future of the members of the national team and, of course, Stalin’s reaction to the defeat.



Borba, 23 July 1952

Cartoon title: “POLITICAL CAPITAL”

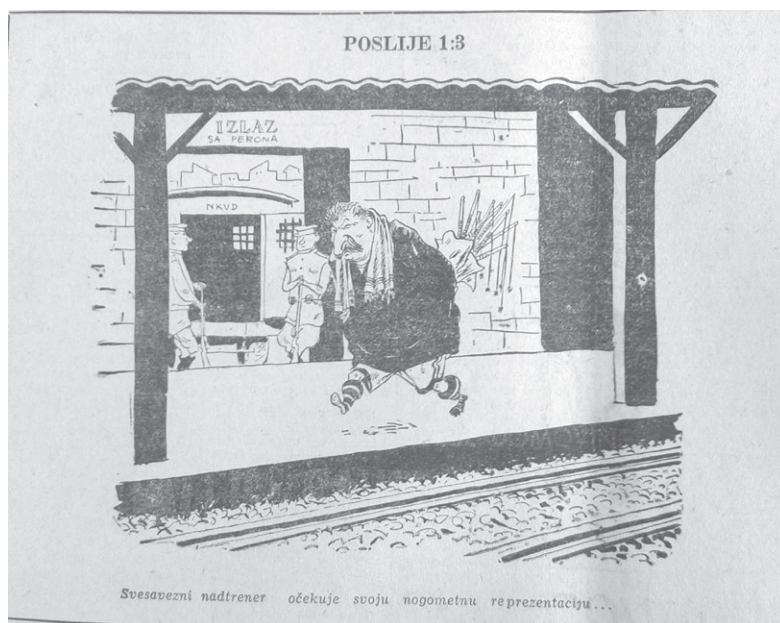
⁴⁷ *Vjesnik u srijedu*, 23 July 1952.

⁴⁸ “... our football players have achieved a great victory with dignity, defeated the opponent who came to the Olympics with hidden pretensions of winning the gold medal and thus they once again demonstrated the power of sport being developed in socialist Yugoslavia.” *Borba*, 23 July 1952.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Cartoon text: The sign says “Siberia” (left) and “Moscow” (right); Text at the bottom: “*It’s easy for Bashashkin with his good political training. He has managed to beat up three players.*”

The cartoonist alludes to the very rough play of the Soviet national team member Anatoli Bashashkin.⁵⁰



Vjesnik u srijedu, 23 July 1952

Cartoon title: “AFTER 1:3”

Cartoon text: “*The all-Union supreme coach waiting for his national football team...*”

Public Reactions to the Match

As in all other similar situations, Yugoslavs deemed very important the way in which foreigners viewed their story. Given the limited freedom of the media, only positive foreign opinions reached Yugoslavia. More than a confirmation of rightness, it was supposed to be encouraging for the citizens of Yugoslavia that they had allies in their resistance against the Soviets. Precisely because of this, great care was given to passing along, besides commentaries on the quality of

⁵⁰ Interestingly, exactly the opposite happened from what the cartoonist “expected.” After returning from the Olympic Games, Anatoli Bashashkin was stripped of his captaincy. After the team of CDKA was disbanded, he was transferred to Spartak Moscow.

Yugoslav football, only those commentaries with political implications.⁵¹ For example, the Finnish magazine *Suomi* called Yugoslavs both sport and moral victors, while *France Soir* wrote about Yugoslav football players who after the victory excitedly “with a hint of defiance” cheered “Long live Tito!”⁵² Possibly the most interesting commentary for the Yugoslav authorities was published in the London Daily Telegraph. Comparing Dynamo’s successful tour of Great Britain in 1945, the journalist recalls how the Soviets attributed their success to their ideology. “If the superior ideology could previously explain the triumph of Dynamo against the capitalist Arsenal, how does one now explain the triumph of Yugoslavia against the Soviets? This question certainly poses much concern for Moscow propagandists,” concludes the journalist of the Daily Telegraph.⁵³

Unlike the massive euphoria in Yugoslavia, the public reaction in the USSR was completely lacking. Although it is claimed in several instances that during Stalin’s life the Soviet public could not find out about the result of the match, this is not correct.⁵⁴ Admittedly, two of the most widely read newspapers in the Soviet Union *Pravda* and *Izvestia* mentioned the defeat against Yugoslavia only in a single sentence as opposed to other very extensive reports from the Olympic Games.⁵⁵ The censorship of information and the lack of a public discussion started an avalanche of speculations on the causes of the defeat and the influence of powerful politicians (primarily Stalin) on the fate of the national team and its players.⁵⁶ Due to the unavailability of sources from Russian archives, the majority of the information still amounts to memoirs and witness statements.⁵⁷ And yet, despite the still numerous unknowns, even the existing facts show

⁵¹ In terms of sport commentaries, articles from Brazilian, French, Finnish and other newspapers were communicated. Especially quoted were statements from British newspapers. So, for example, the Daily Telegraph stated that the defeat of Great Britain against Luxembourg (in the elimination round) could not even compare to the defeat of the USSR by Yugoslavia, while the News Chronicle emphasized that the atmosphere at the match had been two times more exciting than at any match of the FA Cup. *Vjesnik*, 24 July 1952, *Borba*, 24 July 1952.

⁵² *Borba*, 24 July 1952.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Even Robert Edelman, one of the greatest experts on history of sports in the Soviet Union, claims: “The defeat was so shocking and deemed so shameful that it was not even reported in the Soviet Press.” EDELMAN 1993: 105.

⁵⁵ *Pravda*, 23 July 1952; *Izvestia*, 23 July 1952.

⁵⁶ Robert Edelman dedicates a whole chapter of his book entitled “The ‘Secret’ of the Team of Lieutenants” to this topic. EDELMAN 1993: 102-110.

⁵⁷ In the summer of 2014 I visited the Russian State Archives of Modern Political History in an attempt to find information on the events during and after the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki. Unfortunately, I was informed that the material was unavailable partly because it has not been processed yet, and partly because it belongs to the same collection as the materials related to the Gulag.

that one sport event had its own political epilogue. Upon the return from the Olympic Games, CDKA was disbanded, its players transferred to other clubs, while some national team players were punished by being stripped of the title “master of sport”. Moreover, it is not difficult to conclude that Stalin himself was not satisfied with the defeat by Tito’s athletes. However, based on currently available sources it cannot be claimed with certainty whether or how he reacted to the entire situation.

The football match between the USSR and Yugoslavia caused various reactions even within other Eastern European countries. Officially, they all offered politically conditioned solidarity with Moscow. The Yugoslav victory was covered in the media just like any other result in a series of results from the Olympic Games. On the other hand, the reaction of those not belonging to the political establishment was largely conditioned by their personal attitude towards the communist dictatorship and Moscow as the imposed centre of power. In terms of this particular match, as well as in a series of similar examples from later years, supporting Yugoslavia was an inherently symbolic act of resistance against the Soviet Union. Certainly, in extremely controlled societies every expression of support for the “enemy” had to be thwarted and prevented for precautionary purposes. Yugoslav newspapers reported on one such case. After the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency listed on its building in the heart of Sofia, together with other results of the Olympic Games, the result of the football match between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the gathered masses began to comment on the result in a way which dissatisfied the authorities. In order to prevent any further escalation of pro-Yugoslav sentiments, Bulgarian national security agents simply removed the controversial result.⁵⁸

Conclusion

As was expected of them, Yugoslav football players repeated the success from the previous Olympic Games and qualified for the finals of the football tournament.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, they faced the Hungarian “light cavalry”, one of the best national football teams of all times. Led by the phenomenal Ferenc Puskás, the Hungarians won the match (2:0) as well as the gold medal.⁶⁰ Second place was hardly a disappointment for Yugoslav football players or the Yugoslav public. Apart from playing excellently in the tournament and winning the silver medal, the

⁵⁸ *Vjesnik*, 25 July 1952.

⁵⁹ On their way to the finals they also won against Denmark (5:3) and Germany (3:1).

⁶⁰ As in the Soviet case, a large number of Hungarian national team members were also military officers. After winning the gold medal, many were promoted; for example Ferenc Puskás, a Major, was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. *Sportska panorama*, 2 September 1952.

key reason for this may have been precisely the winning match against the Soviet Union. For a third time in a row, at the following Olympic Games in Melbourne (1956) Yugoslav football players once again won the silver medal. Curiously enough, this time they lost in the finals against the USSR. However, three years after Stalin's death and one year after the normalization of the relations between Belgrade and Moscow, nobody perceived that match as dramatic.

The actual war between Yugoslavia and the USSR never started although on several occasions it looked like a plausible scenario. For years, insults, threats, slanders and accusations were exchanged instead of gunfire. The Yugoslav dissidence within the previously monolithic Communist bloc opened up many questions and provided some new answers. Most often represented as ideological, this conflict within the communist family was largely a personal conflict between Tito and Stalin. In this war of vanities each victory and each defeat carried additional weight, regardless of whether it was an important diplomatic battle or just a simple football match.

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Nogometni rat između Tita i Staljina

Nakon Drugog svjetskog rata socijalistička je Jugoslavija bila jedan od najlojalnijih sovjetskih satelita. Nova vlada počela je kopirati Sovjetski Savez u svim aspektima funkcioniranja društva i države. Važan element u stvaranju novog socijalističkog društva bio je stav prema sportu. U skladu sa sovjetskim modelom zadaća je sporta kao dijela tjelesne kulture u Jugoslaviji bila poboljšati radne i obrambene sposobnosti građana, pri čemu tjelesna obuka nije više bila privilegij manjine nego obveza za sve. No unatoč sovjetskom utjecaju, drugačiji pogled na događaje iz nedavne prošlosti (uloga SSSR-a u oslobođenju Jugoslavije) i drugačije viđenje budućnosti bilateralnih odnosa uzrokovala je zahlađenje odnosa između Sovjetskog Saveza (i drugih europskih komunističkih zemalja) i Jugoslavije. Tijekom 1948. čak se kao opcija razmatrala oružana intervencija. Pogoršani odnosi na polju diplomacije, politike i ekonomije počeli su se osjećati i u sportskim događanjima. Jugoslavenskim je klubovima bilo zabranjeno sudjelovati u natjecanjima koja su već bila dogovorena širom Istočne Europe, a vrhunac toga, "sportski rat", dogodio se na Olimpijskim igrama u Helsinkiju 1952. godine. Na toj su Olimpijadi, prvoj za SSSR, Jugoslavija i Sovjetski Savez odigrali utakmicu u okviru nogometnog turnira. S obzirom na trenutačnu situaciju to nije bio samo sportski nego i politički događaj. Pobjeda jedne ili druge reprezentacije značila je pobjedu specifične (jugoslavenske ili sovjetske) koncepcije socijalističkog razvitka. Ova je studija zamišljena kao doprinos istraživanju teme koje, unatoč svjetskim trendovima, nije u hrvatskoj historiografiji dobila adekvatnu pozornost jer nedostaje radova koji bi se bavili međudnosom društveno-političkih procesa, sportskih događaja i sporta općenito. Konkretno se sportski događaj promatra i analizira u kontekstu međunarodnih političkih odnosa. Iako dobro obrađena i poznata tema jugoslavensko-sovjetskih političkih odnosa krajem 1940-ih i početkom 1950-ih, ovakvim pristupom dobiva novu dimenziju. Istraživanje je provedeno na temelju primarnih i sekundarnih izvora te oralne historije i treba poslužiti kao poticaj daljnjim istraživanjima na tom području.

Ključne riječi: sport, Hladni rat, Olimpijada u Helsinkiju 1952.

Key words: sport, Cold War, the 1952 Helsinki Olympics

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