

Sport postage stamps issued in the former Socialist camp in the 1950 -1980s as a mirror of ideological dependence and political coercion

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Introduction

The ideological and political coercion that the USSR applied in its relationship with former socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe took on many faces. One of them was the issue of postage stamps because stamps transmitted a strong social, political and cultural message in that period (Jones, 2004) and served as a means of ideological conflict against the Western world. The total number of stamps issued by the USSR, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland in the period between 1950 and 1989 was 15,385. 11.2% (1,728) of them were dedicated to sports and games, the Olympics, physical education, and leisure. The comparison of the average number (345.6 per a country) with the numbers of Western Europe countries is very impressive. For example, Great Britain issued only 50 sport stamps in a similar period (1948 –1988), Portugal – 48 (1952 –1992), and France – 61 (1945-1996). This is a clear illustration of the well known ideological attacks mounted by socialist propaganda during the Cold War period (Riordan, 1977, 1996).

The picture, however, takes on another shade of meaning and becomes the subject of a new historical study if one tries to analyze the intrinsic dynamics of sport stamp issue by taking the five countries from the Socialist camp mentioned above.

The main question of the study was: How were the ideological and political connections and conflicts among socialist countries controlled by the USSR expressed in their postage stamp issue and was it related to the countries' sport achievements?

The study had two main hypotheses: (1) Satellite socialist countries issued sport stamps in response to pressure exerted by Soviet ideological leaders; (2) The themes of the sport stamps issued by the countries under Soviet control were aimed at emphasizing local identity and a certain amount of national independence.

Methodology

The first problem that must be mentioned is the absence of strict considerations for determining what constitutes a sport stamp. The source of this problem is the lack of a strict definition of what constitutes a sport. The term “sport” is wide enough to cover almost all forms of leisure activity, active rest and many competitions. The philosophy of sport has dedicated much discussion to defining the boundaries of this concept. In general, there are two main directions for viewing the issue. The main stream (Morgan, 1976, 1977; Meier, 1985; Kretchmar, 1992) sees sport as physical recreation or a moving competitive activity (according to the English language tradition). They say “physicality” (Osterhoudt, 1996) is a very sign of sport. Representatives of the second approach (Paddik, 1975; Taumboer, 1992, 1993-94) question this postulate and ask whether competition isn't a more essential indication of sport than movement. Lebed (2003) suggests that an interpretation of the definition of sport is dependent on the cultural context of sport and physical culture. For example, a Russian

terminological tradition claims sport to be competition first and foremost (Matveev, 1984; Vizitey, 1985).

Thus, the study begins with uncertain theoretical referent starting points. The methodological task was to give a correct interpretation of the philosophical debates and to encompass the optimal bulk of stamps, which are considered by governmental issuers of the countries under review as being dedicated to sport. Practically speaking, it was necessary to decide about classifying stamps devoted to chess, draughts, Go, bridge, or ballooning, which do not include physical activity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the many stamps dedicated to dizzying array of non-competitive traditional physical activities and folk dances amalgamated into carnivals, festivals, and seasonal celebrations.

Based on the above, this study has taken the following definition as its guideline:

A sport stamp is: (1) an official government postage stamp, (2) with a picture and original text and/or later overprint dedicated to:

- Games and sport (traditional, national or international);
- Institutionalized board games that follow international laws of sport;
- Competition or any cultural event that includes playing/physical activity;
- Physical education events;
- Sport societies, memorable dates, signs, symbols, and emblems;
- Active rest and leisure including hunting, fishing, and tourism;
- Very important persons promoting sports, physical education or the Olympic movement;
- Sport facilities, inventories, and transport.

The definition excludes: artistic competitions, ballet, modern, and folk dances performed as a kind of art, or series of stamps dedicated to folk or national arts.

The study procedure included:

- (1) A review of postage stamp catalogues that concentrated on: (a) absolute and relative number of sport stamps issued in different periods; (b) classification of stamp themes by analyzing pictures, originally printed texts, and later overprints on the stamp surface;
- (2) A comparative analysis of Olympic achievements (number of medals won in Summer Games¹ only) of the specific socialist countries that issued the sport stamps;
- (3) An analysis of the politics of sport stamps issued by the countries chosen for the study.

The historical period under study encompasses 40 years, from 1950 to 1989. This was a time of real especially strong, powerful integration among members of the Socialist camp.

The politics of stamp issue in the USSR was one axis of the study. The choice of Czechoslovakia, GDR, Hungary, and Poland as representatives for examining the main hypotheses of the study was based on the logical negation of other countries in the Socialist camp. Bulgaria was too close to the USSR ideologically and culturally. It was really a sister country and did not experience ideological pressure and political coercion. Yugoslavia and Romania were too far from the USSR's ideological influence and during the entire study period demonstrated provocative independence. Such political behavior could be a serious distracter for the planned study. Socialist countries of the Far East were rejected because of

other considerations. China had undergone over a Cultural Revolution. North Korea and Mongolia did not have enough means for effective development of most games and sports. On the other hand, Czechoslovakia, GDR, Hungary, and Poland were close to the USSR in terms of cultural background, they suffered from the presence of Soviet troops and military bases, and each one was subjected to political coercion and even armed intervention.

Results of the study and discussion

I. “Together” and apart: Local national identity emerges from under the soldier’s helmet

The general statistical parameters of the study that were found (Table 1) clearly show strictly the mode of USSR leadership and supremacy in the 1950s to 1980s in the subject under discussion. The issue of all stamps in the USSR totaled 4525 in the 40 year period. This is almost twice the number of stamps issued by each of the socialist countries under study. Accordingly, the number of sport stamps issued by the USSR is largest, 460, distributed over 41 (of a total of 48) topics connected to the operant definition of “sport stamp” in this paper. The other countries touched on 34 topics (Table 1). Only Poland devoted its sport stamps to 38 topics. Nor does this parameter alone demonstrate a quantitative advantage of Poland’s stamp issue policies. The percentage of total stamps issued shows that Poland issued the highest relative number of sport stamps among all five countries: 15.9%. This is more than 50 percent above that of the USSR (10.2%).

The important aspect for discussion, from my point of view, is whether there was ideological unification because of Soviet pressure and the national (local) identity of each “protected” socialist country. As I have suggested, such an analysis is possible by studying the main topics of sport stamps issued in the countries under review. Here one can see that only Czechoslovakia strongly follows the ideological leader (see Table 1). Track and field, ice hockey, and football are the key sports in both countries as reflected in stamp issues. But, on the other hand, and against the proposed hypothesis, other “sister countries” showed a certain independence in their choice of themes. GDR demonstrated its national color and dedicated 13.7% of its sport stamps to cycling (first place). Hungary issued 8.5% of all of its sport stamps to equestrian sports (third place). Poland allocated the second level of importance to hunting (6.8%). Generally, the largest relative amount of stamps devoted to the favorite local sport is more than 16% (Hungary with a football theme and Poland with athletics).

The issue of stamps devoted to sport for all and physical education has to be analyzed separately. This theme was one of main ideological trumps of Soviet propaganda and it certainly affected the ideological principles of other members of the Socialist camp. The socialist system, by its own definition, has to worry about the holistic intellectual, spiritual, and physical development of a “new personality”. An important part of this long-term ideological campaign was propaganda for sport for all (physical culture) and physical education of the masses. As reflected in the in stamp issue policies of GDR and Hungary, these countries strongly followed the ideological direction given by the Soviet Union (Table 1). This theme holds a second place in both countries (GDR – 12.8%; Hungary – 11%).

Czechoslovakia follows with 5.6% of their total sport stamp issues. The USSR and Poland issued only one stamp each during the 40 years devoted clearly to mass physical culture, sport for all, and physical education² despite the largest absolute amount of sport stamps (USSR) and the largest percentage of them (Poland).

The issuance of Olympic stamps stands among other general parameters studied (Table 1). Nearly a third of all the sport stamps are devoted to the Olympic movement and the Olympic

Table 1. General data of sport stamps issue by the former Socialist camp: the 1950s-1980s

Country	Total stamps issued (1950-89)	Sport stamps (1950-89)		Leading topics of sport stamps (first three places)	% of total N of sport stamps	N of topics connected to sport ($\Sigma = 48$)	Olympic stamps 1950-89 (%)
		Total N	%				
USSR	4525	460	10.2	T&F Athletics	12.4	41	38.4
				Ice hockey	9.6		
				Football	8.1		
Czechoslovakia	2421	241	10.0	T&F Athletics	12.9	34	26.2
				Ice hockey	9.0		
				Football	8.2		
GDR	2986	245	8.2	Cycling	13.7	34	38.9
				Sport for all & PE	12.8		
				T&F Athletics	9.3		
Hungary	2848	369	13.0	Football	16.4	34	51.0
				Sport for all & PE	11.0		
				Equestrian	8.5		
Poland	2605	413	15.9	T&F Athletics	16.5	38	28.5
				Hunting	6.8		
				Football, Tourism	6.5		

Games. Hungary holds first place on this theme with 51% of all sport stamps this country devoted to the Olympics. GDR and USSR with percentages of 39-40 % follow Hungary. And the list is closed by Poland (28.5%) and Czechoslovakia (26.2%). If one analyses this as an indication of Olympic involvement and Olympic achievements by the different countries, one has justification. But the phenomenon of Hungary's Olympic identity stands outside this tendency and will be discussed later.

The issue of national sport identity is continued by the connection found between achievements and sport stamp topics. A relationship was found between the Olympic achievements of given countries in certain kinds of sports and the issue of stamps dedicated to these sports in these countries. For example, sportsmen from GDR won 28 Olympic medals (10 of them gold) in different types of cycling. Accordingly, GDR officials issued 31 stamps devoted to cycling (13.7%), constituting the largest percentage of all sport stamp issues in GDR (Tabl.1). Other statistics in cycling are as follow:

- Czechoslovakia: 8 medals (2 gold) and 17 stamps about cycling (7.3%);
- Poland: 7 medals and 24 stamps (5.8%);
- Hungary: 0 medals and 1 stamp (0.3%).

Hungary clearly demonstrates the correlation between achievements and sport stamp issues. It is shown from similar dynamics in fencing:

- Hungary: 66 medals (18 gold) and 20 stamps (5.7%);
- Poland: 18 medals (3 gold) and 20 stamps (4.8%);
- GDR: 11 medals (3 gold) and 1 stamp (0.4%);
- Czechoslovakia: 0 medals and 1 stamp (0.4%).

The same relation is found in football, track and field athletics, and ice hockey. But these facts do not give an absolute basis for the general conclusion. The two sport giants, the USSR and GDR, do not always demonstrate so strong a correlation between Olympic achievements and topics of sport stamps. The USSR shows a relationship only in football and ice hockey, which were the most important official kinds of sports encouraged and controlled directly by Communist Party leaders. Such a weak correlation can be explained in the following ways: (1) Soviet and German Democratic systems felt themselves to be the representatives of great sport cultures that were responsible for the multi-faceted development and promotion of many competitive sports in their countries. Such a point of view could influence policies of stamp issues; (2) these two countries did not need to demonstrate and prove their national identity. They set global standards in sports and were less worried about emphasizing the successful development of any specific sport discipline.

Another facet of sport achievement emphasis is the rare phenomenon of special issues dedicated to sport victories and overprints on a stamp devoted to a competition that was issued before the country won. Such stamps have different numbers in national and international stamp catalogs.

One has to emphasize that such a means of advertising sport achievements characterizes postage stamp policies of socialist countries only. And this is an instance of a politically colored integrative tendency that existed in the Socialist camp during that historical period.

II. Ideological pressure and the Cold War reflected in sport stamps

Another form of integrative and even unified policies can be revealed by studying the rise and fall of rates of sport stamp issues during different periods of the 40 years of the Socialist camp.

These facts were found: (1) In the 1960s the USSR increased its issue of sport stamps, and the four other countries mentioned above followed suit, except that their issues of sport stamps were essentially bigger. (2) In the 1970s the USSR cut down its issue of sport stamps; the socialist countries' issues of sport stamps became even smaller than that of the Soviets. In both cases one can recognize an "overreaction". This tendency appears in both in absolute numbers of issues and in relative percentages.

All five countries devoted 6-15% (on average 9.9%) of all issued stamps to sport topics in the 1950s. The percentage for the USSR was 8.3%, and the leader was Poland with 15.1%. During the 1960s all five countries increased their issue of sport stamps in the following order:

- USSR: from 8.3% in the 1950s to 11.9% in the 1960s; an increase of **3.6%**;
- Czechoslovakia: from 8.6% to 12.3%; an increase of 3.7%;

- Poland: from 15.1% to 22.8%; an increase of 7.6%
- GDR: from 6.3% to 14.3%; an increase of 8%;
- Hungary: from 11.3% to 21.3% an increase of **10%**.

The slowdown in sport stamp issues in the 1970s demonstrates a similar tendency. It is especially steep in Poland and Hungary:

- USSR: from 11.9% in the 1960s to 10.8% in the 1970s; a decrease of **1.1%**;
- Czechoslovakia: from 12.3% to 9.5%; a decrease of 2.8%;
- GDR: from 14.3% to 6.2%; a decrease of 7.1%;
- Poland: from 22.8% to 12.3%; a decrease of 10.5%
- Hungary: from 21.3% to 7.4% a decrease of **13.9%**.

If my proposed thesis about strong Soviet ideological control over all socialist political propaganda, and especially in postage stamp issue, is right, one can see a brilliant illustration of this thesis by analyzing the above data. The overreaction to the leader's change in main political course does not have, for me, a clearly historical or even daily political explanation. It is hidden inside the personal psychology of certain political officials and even more in their "collective unconscious" caused by political compulsion and although... fear. In such a context one can explain the process of stamp issue decline in the 1970s years and the absence of certain tendency in the 1980s. At first the ideological dictates were relaxed; later in the 1980s there was no clear socialist ideology because of the rapid turnover of Soviet leaders and later because of Gorbachev's "perestroika".

Another important historical question can be asked in connection to the political, ideological, or perhaps economic causes of so sharp an increase of sport stamps issued by the Socialist camp in the 1960s. As I suggest there were two main causes for this: the Cold War and following it competition between two global systems.

The Cold War situation became more intense during the 1960s. This was a decade saturated by tension and conflict situations, from the Cuba crisis to the building of the Berlin wall, from the return of orthodox communist leaders in the USSR to the Vietnam War and the suppression of the "Prague spring". Sport victories increasingly played the role of an alternative to military victories and continued to serve as mean of demonstrating the advantages of the socialist system (Riordan, 1977).

On the backdrop of the Cold War, the USSR began a powerful campaign to promote competitive and mass sports in 1959. It was a part of global competition and a field of fast and sure success. Reorganization of sport management apparatus and the strengthening of the sport academic system followed. The Union of Sport Societies and Organizations of the USSR was founded in this year. Three volumes of the encyclopedic guide *Physical Culture and Sport* (1963) were published in these years. A number of new academic institutes of physical culture were opened in Siberia and other far reaches of the Russian Federation.

At the same time intrinsic cooperation among members of the Socialist camp increased. Public Unions of Sport Societies were organized in satellite socialist countries. The International Conference of Communist and Labor Parties took place in 1960. They decided "to demonstrate the changed relation of powers" both by activity in international sport societies, and "in the sphere of sport cooperation" (Kun, 1982, p.314). Both of these quotations can be interpreted as creating unified sport stamp issue policies as well.

This kind of sport promotion hysteria continued throughout the 1970s. But the numbers of sport stamps issued declined during this period (Fig. 4). This suggests that the Cold War was a major factor influencing this processes, as is a well-known, the Cold War waned in intensity during the 1970s. For instance, President Nixon visited the USSR in 1972; a series of ice hockey matches was held between the Soviet national team and an American-Canadian NHL team (1973-1975); there was a collaborative space-project involving American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts called “Soyuz – Apollo” (1974-1975), and Leonid Brezhnev met with President Carter at the end of the 1970s in the USA. Soviet official propaganda pushed a new slogan: “Relaxation of international tension”. The ideological leaders of the socialist countries under study felt this warm wind. They translated this feeling by slowing down ideological attacks on the West. This included the issue of sport stamps too.

III. The connection between political and military coercion, sport achievements, and sport stamp issues

The third part of this article is devoted to situations of extreme conflicts in relationships and in ideological and political disagreements between the Soviet Union and other members of the Socialist camp.

The first of them was a violent military conflict in Hungary in 1956. During the three Olympic Games following the Soviet invasion of 1956, Hungarian Olympic achievements declined, but at the same time, there was an inversely proportion increase in the number of sport stamps issued.

From the first Olympic Games in 1896, Hungary was a strong sport power. The country was one of the 14 founders of modern Olympic movement. Hungarian representative F. Kemen was a member of the first IOC staff in 1896 (Gus’kov, 1994, p.87). The 12th session of the IOC took place in Budapest in 1911. Plans were made to hold the sixth Olympic Games in Budapest (Kun, 1982, p.235). Before the Second World War Hungary once held fifth place in total numbers of Olympic medals (1904) and three times held sixth place (1896, 1908, and 1936). Hungary won 81 Olympic medals before the War, and after 1945 it attained appreciable success as a young socialist country with 27 medals in London (1948) and 42 (!) medals in Helsinki (1952) and total third place after the USA and the USSR.

The Hungarian Olympic team took part in the Olympic Games at Melbourne 11 days after the tragic end of the “Hungarian events” (October 6 – November 11, 1956) – as the Soviet historians call the invasion (Shefov, 2002). Certainly the results of the Hungarian team declined. They won only 26 medals. The next eight years were no more successful: Rome Olympics – 21 medals; Tokyo – 22. Only in the Olympic Games in Mexico (32 medals) and later in Munich (35 medals) did Hungary’s Olympic achievements demonstrate a certain rehabilitation.

At the same time (from 1956 to 1968) Hungary sharply increased its issue of sport stamps. (8 sport stamps in 1956; 17 in 1959; 20 in 1960; 23 in 1964, 31 in 1965). It issued 204 sport stamps during 12 years³, representing 55.3% of the total number of sport stamps it issued during the 40 years under study.

It is possible to explain the relation between falling achievements and rising stamp issues by two related but not directly correlated political processes: (1) The political crisis in Hungary and the Soviet invasion of the territory controlled by a “sister country”; violent military

regulation of the crisis and the return of Hungary to the framework of the Socialist camp as USSR's ideologists understood them; (2) the process of ideological attack of the entire Socialist camp in this period, of which Hungary was a part.

As I see it, however, here one can identify an additional process with an exclusively local and national character that may serve to more fully explain the historical facts. As has already been emphasized, Hungary really was a strong Olympic power before the "Hungarian events". This probably became an element of national consciousness and an important part of Hungarian culture. The "events" humiliated the Hungarians' national spirit. This had a negative influence on athletes' abilities to compete proudly in real Olympic events, but not on national consciousness and ambitions. These ambitions were transformed into a more latent form and, I suggest, were expressed by an extreme increase in sport propaganda in general and sport stamp issues in particular. One can find indirect corroboration of this hypothesis in two additional facts: (1) Hungary devoted 51% of all the sport stamps it issued during the 40 year period under study to the Olympics, 11-12% more than the USSR and GDR who were next in quantity; (2) Hungary is the only one of the five countries under study that increased sport stamp issues during the ideologically uncertain period of the 1980s. This testifies to the independent character of Hungarian sport culture and strengthens the hypothesis about national sport and Olympic ambitions, which nobody could break.

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¹ The results of the Winter Olympic games are more dependent on constant climatic conditions and related sport traditions in each country. Thus it places them in unequal starting positions for comparison.

² I do not include sport parades in this category of stamps because parades are political actions and not a real mass sports activity.

³ That is more than Great Britain, Portugal, and France issued together during the 40 year period.