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“Physical Culture and Sport Will Become Part and Parcel of Everyday Life”: Khrushchev’s Communist Sports in Central Asia’s Uzbekistan, 1953 to 1964

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Makale Gönderim Tarihi

14.05.2023

Makale Kabul Tarihi

08.10.2023

Atıf Bilgisi/Reference Information

Chicago: Akyıldız, S., ““Physical Culture and Sport Will Become Part and Parcel of Everyday Life”: Khrushchev’s Communist Sports in Central Asia’s Uzbekistan, 1953 to 1964”, *Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8/ Özel Sayı: Dr. Recep Yaşa'ya Armağan: 2155-2173.

APA: Akyıldız, S. (2023). “Physical Culture and Sport Will Become Part and Parcel of Everyday Life”: Khrushchev’s Communist Sports in Central Asia’s Uzbekistan, 1953 to 1964. *Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8 (Özel Sayı: Dr. Recep Yaşa'ya Armağan), 2155-2173.

Abstract

Lenin commenced Soviet physical culture and sports during the mid-1920s, and Stalin organised it significantly during the 1930s and 1940s. It was part of Stalin’s Cultural Revolution and the implementation of Soviet modernity. This qualitative and quantitative research paper investigates physical culture and sports 33 years after its founding when Khrushchev was the communist leader (1953 to 1964). The geographic focus is on the Central Asian republic with the largest population and emerging urbanisation: Uzbekistan. The paper explores the extent of Khrushchev’s physical culture and sports development in that country. It is a topic with little published research in English. Using select English language secondary sources from the West and the former Soviet

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Union, the major research question asks (i) What were Khrushchev's output and impact on physical culture and sport in Uzbekistan? In support is the minor research question: (ii) What were the numbers of male and female sportspeople, and what type of urban sports sites opened? Overall, the paper highlights that an authoritarian communist regime was increasingly successful in developing modern physical culture and sports in the majority Muslim Turkic and Persian regions, primarily in the cities.

Keywords: Khrushchev, Physical Culture, Soviet, Sport, Uzbekistan

**“Beden Kültürü ve Spor Günlük Hayatın Parçası Olacak”: Orta Asya'nın
Özbekistan'ında Khruschev'in Komünist Sporları, 1953-1964**

Öz

Lenin, 1920'lerin ortalarında Sovyet fiziksel kültürü ve sporunu başlattı ve Stalin, 1930'lар ve 1940'larda bunu önemli ölçüde organize etti. Bu, Stalin'in Kültür Devrimi'nin ve Sovyet modernitesinin uygulanmasının bir parçasıydı. Bu niteliksel araştırma makalesi, Kruşçev'in komünist lider olduğu dönemde (1953'ten 1964'e) kuruluşundan 33 yıl sonra fiziksel kültür ve sporu araştırır. Coğrafi odak noktası, en büyük nüfusa ve belli bir kentleşme düzeyine sahip Sovyet dönemi Orta Asya cumhuriyeti olan Özbekistan'dır. Makale Kruşçev'in Özbekistan'daki fiziksel kültürünün ve spor gelişiminin boyutunu araştırıyor. İngilizce'de çok az yayınlanmış araştırma bulunan bir konudur. Batı'dan ve eski Sovyetler Birliği'nden seçilmiş İngilizce ikincil kaynaklar kullanılarak, temel araştırma sorusu şu soruyu sormaktadır: (i) Kruşçev'in Özbekistan'daki fiziksel kültür ve spor üzerindeki çıktıları ve etkisi neydi? Küçük araştırma sorusu da bunu destekliyor: (ii) Erkek ve kadın sporcuların sayısı neydi ve ne tür kentsel spor alanları açıldı? Genel olarak makale, otoriter bir komünist rejimin, çoğunluğu Müslüman olan Türk ve İran bölgelerinde, özellikle şehirlerde, modern fiziksel kültür ve sporu geliştirmede giderek daha başarılı olduğunu çiziyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kruşçev, Fiziksel Kültür, Sovyet, Spor, Özbekistan

Introduction

In many ways, Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1953 and 1964, continued with Lenin's and Stalin's physical culture and sports programme, designed to create healthier and happier workers, soldiers and youth. A fitter citizenry would be more productive at work and play. The notion was to use physical culture to help advance universal values

and a shared identity for all citizens regardless of background. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Soviet athletes increasingly won medals at international sporting events abroad, Moscow used the victories to showcase the Soviet Union as a progressive society. Additionally, observing the sporting spectacles entertained the Soviet citizens, and the ordinary people benefitted from the accessibility and affordability of the state-funded sports system.

On the other hand, the roll-out of Soviet sport under Khrushchev's leadership was much more extensive and internationally integrated than the two previous communist leaders. In 1961, the Communist Party Programme reported:

'People will increasingly devote their leisure to public pursuits, cultural intercourse, intellectual and physical development, scientific, technical and artistic creative endeavour. Physical culture and sport will become part and parcel of everyday life'.¹

Khrushchev's sports planners established new institutions, policies, and international relationships. Furthermore, the Soviet statistics reveal a growing number of everyday and elite sportspeople across the federal union. Yet, the Soviet Union included southern majority-Muslim republics with varying economic and urban development levels vis-a-vis majority-Slavic Russia. In response, we investigate the extent of Khrushchev's physical culture and sports development in urban Uzbekistan.

Notwithstanding, this work does not examine traditional and folk physical culture and sports. Sevket Akyildiz's article entitled 'Traditional Sports and Games among Central Asia's Turkic Muslim Peoples, 1400 to 1850 AD: Training, Hunting, and Festivals' (2022) describes that before and during the Czarist Russian military occupation of Turkestan (Central Asia) during the late nineteenth century, folk and traditional sports were popular in the region's leisure landscape.² Likewise, this paper

¹ Source: *Materialy XXII s'yezda KPSS*, Moscow: 1961, s.399, cited in James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, s.210.

² Sevket Akyildiz, "Traditional Sports and Games among Central Asia's Turkic Muslim Peoples, 1400 to 1850 AD: Training, Hunting, and Festivals", *Vakanuvis—International Journal of Historical Researches* (7/2), September (2022), s.571-601.

does not mention the intellectuals and freethinkers who undertook sports to escape the expectations of communist society. Nature sports like mountain climbing might have let climbers separate their consciousness from the collective momentarily. Mike O'Mahony contemplates that some sportspeople might have preferred '*personal physical expression and competition for competition's sake*'.³ In comparison, folk sports might allow for passive resistance against Moscow. Similarly, not discussed are sportspeople's memories of the Soviet past, for instance, Akyildiz's 'Cultural Change in Central Asia: Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories in Uzbekistan, 1964 to 1982'.⁴ Rather, the author emphasises the state's power over the masses and compliance and acquiescence with the Communist Party's agenda—admittedly, this is a traditional historiographical approach. Highlighted are the elite athletes' use of physical culture to establish careers, allowing them social mobility, fortune and fame. Equally important are findings about the numbers of Uzbekistan's residents of all genders, ages, and classes involved in everyday sports.⁵

The secondary sources used in compiling this study are written in English and published in Western countries and the former Soviet Union. Some are Soviet-era texts. The paper is one of several works by the author analysing the impact and implementation of Soviet physical culture and sport in Uzbekistan between 1920 and 1991.⁶ The work's content is primarily cultural and political history and aims to fill current research gaps and start a debate. However, further analysis is required

³ Mike O'Mahony, "Sites and Media: Introduction", in Katzer, N., Budy, S., Kohring, A., Zeller, M., *Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society*, Frankfurt: CampusVerlag, 2010, s.15.

⁴ Sevket Akyildiz, "Cultural Change in Central Asia: Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories In Uzbekistan, 1964 to 1982", *History Studies—International Journal of History* (12/1), February (2020), s.35-53.

⁵ Akyildiz, 2020, s. 35-53.

⁶ Sevket Akyildiz, "Olympic Culture in Soviet Uzbekistan 1951-1991: International Prestige and Local Heroes", *Polyvocia: The SOAS Journal of Graduate Research* (3), March (2011), s.1-16; Sevket Hylton Akyildiz, "Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin: Uzbekistan from 1925 to 1952", *Vakanuvvis—International Journal of Historical Researches* (4/2), Fall (2019), s.515–541; Sevket Akyildiz, "Sport in Central Asia under Gorbachev: Uzbekistan from 1985 to 1991", *Vakanuvvis—International Journal of Historical Researches* (6/1), March (2021), s.1-35.

using the Russian and Turkic language materials at the Tashkent and Moscow archives. Likewise, Uzbekistan's citizens' oral history and memories of the Soviet physical culture remain an unwritten study.

The paper has three parts. Part one briefly defines the concepts of 'Soviet modernity', 'Soviet culture', 'Soviet physical culture', and 'modern sport'. Part two traces Khrushchev's policies and discusses his impact on Soviet physical culture. Lastly, part three investigates Khrushchev's physical culture and sports expansion in urban Uzbekistan. Topics cover the built sports environment in the capital city of Tashkent, the developmental gap between urban and rural regions and between Central Asia and the European Soviet Union and how this influenced mass participation. Also noted is the statistical information about Uzbekistan's women and their involvement in modern sports culture.

Soviet Modernity and Culture

Soviet modernity was ideological and was intended to help build a utopian communist society. The communist leaders and intellectuals controlled it and contrasted Soviet modernity with Imperial Russian and Western forms. Marxism-Leninism stipulated that the Communist Party would govern and lead society, guiding the masses from the 1917 Russian Revolution onwards. Soviet planners' interpretation of what was modern and, therefore, 'good' and socialist played a vital in society and culture. In its general context, 'modernity' is –

'... a condition of social existence that is significantly different to all past forms of human experience, while modernization refers to the transitional process of moving from "traditional" or "primitive" communities to modern societies'.⁷

'Soviet modernity' was influenced by European Enlightenment, rationalism, scepticism and optimism. 'Soviet modernity' refers to

⁷ Robbie Shilliam, 'Modernity and Modernization', *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.56> (accessed 27 Sept 2023).

transforming a traditional, patriarchal and 'old' social order – based on religion, superstition and dynastic rule – into a scientific-atheist socialist society through the implementation of new technology, the latest agriculture, the nation-state and citizenship, industrialisation, bureaucracy, and urbanisation. In this paper, we are examining one element of Soviet modernity: Soviet culture and sports.⁸

'Soviet culture' was to socialise and acculturate citizens regardless of ethnicity or gender. Physical culture and sports were part of Soviet culture, transmitting Soviet values, attitudes, and identity. Stalin's Cultural Revolution between 1928 and 1931 marginalised the traditional cultures of the Soviet republics. Indeed, Stalin deployed a top-down social revolution that was brutal and hardline.

The Soviet values, universal literacy and education, clothing style, material goods, intellectual and artistic production, and town planning originated from Europeanised Russian culture (Sovietisation). Russian was the language of intercultural communication (Russification). Notwithstanding, in Central Asia, the Communist Party tolerated elements of traditional clothing, building design, and folk arts and sports. Indeed, a degree of multiculturalism was written into the Soviet Constitution.⁹ During Khrushchev's period, consumerism grew in the Soviet Union, as did the latest Western architecture, costumes, and youth culture.¹⁰

'Soviet physical culture' '*covered a wide spectrum ranging from hygiene and health issues to sports, defence interests, labour concerns, leisure, education, and general cultural enlightenment*', says Susan Grant.¹¹ The Communist Party said physical culture consisted of four parts: '*organised physical education, playful activities, active leisure*

⁸ Akyildiz, 2020, s.38-39.

⁹ See Sevket Akyildiz and Richard Carlson, *Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy*, London: Routledge, 2014.

¹⁰ Riordan, 1980, s.4.

¹¹ Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s*, London: Routledge, 2013, s.1.

pursuits and sport'.¹² Altogether, it was part of a modern urban lifestyle and used for mass leisure. As noted already, Lenin and Stalin established Soviet physical culture with outcomes connected with socio-economic development. Under Moscow's direction, 'rationally utilised' recreation was heralded to improve the worker's personal development. 'Modern sport' is the sports' rules and codes, games, clubs and services, competitions and championships, athletes, coaching and training staff, spectators and fans. Two early physical culture policies formed the bedrock of Soviet sports. The Ready for Labour and Defence Programme (GTO, established in 1931) addressed mass physical education, setting benchmarks, examinations, and content. Its values included mass participation and (unofficially) elite athleticism. The union-wide Sports Classification System (established in 1935) ranked the mass and elite athletes by their ability and skills. At the same time, the Committee on Physical Culture and Sport (established in 1936) managed implementation.¹³

Khrushchev's Leadership: Change and Continuity

Khrushchev's policies impacted society economically, politically, and culturally. His leadership saw domestic economic growth, increased urbanisation, improved material living for the everyday Soviet family, and more leisure time provision. Also, a space programme was inaugurated. Furthermore, a 'peaceful coexistence' approach was adopted at the 1961 22nd Party Congress towards the Western powers. Indeed, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Khrushchev relaxed state repression and censorship (a time known as the 'thaw') and encouraged cultural production and consumption. Looking back at Khrushchev's tenure, Jim Riordan reports the leader heightened the '*strong utopian elements in the Party Programme and Soviet ideology*'¹⁴.

'At the Twenty-First Congress of the Communist Party in 1959... Khrushchov, declared that the Soviet Union was entering the period of

¹² Riordan, 1980, s.4.

¹³ A. Timofeyev., Y. Kopytkin, *Soviet Sport: The Success Story*. Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1987, s.27-31.

¹⁴ Riordan, 1980, s.211.



full-scale construction of communism, that it was in the final stages of socialism' (Riordan, 1980, s.207).

On the political front, Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' in 1956 denounced Stalin's crimes against the Soviet people. As a result, the de-Stalinisation programme was implemented to remove the predecessor's ideology while retaining the Marxism-Leninism creed as the official state worldview. Furthermore, with the Cold War underway, Khrushchev suppressed the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and ordered the Soviet Army to intervene in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Khrushchev's Sports: Developments On and Off the Playing Field

Following the Soviet Union's military victory in 1945 against the Axis powers, Moscow (re-)invested in developing physical culture and sports to improve the health and well-being of the Soviet people. Real-time sporting events generate a pleasurable and fun experience for the spectators and fans, whether standing in stadiums or listening to the radio. In the post-war era, such a psychological boost helped public morale. The regime created a genre of sports news (newspapers and magazines) and actively showcased the benefits of Soviet sports as a model of progress and the 'good life'. In addition, the binding element of sport was important in the multinational and multicultural milieu of the Soviet Union, an arena of diversity and transformative development. The communists considered modern sports and games a secular cultural alternative to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

Below, we will explore sports and the masses and the built sports environment in urban Uzbekistan. However, it is helpful to note the impact of Soviet elite athletes on the international stage and the effectiveness of Soviet physical culture from the mid-1950s onwards.¹⁵ It shows that Khrushchev's 'peaceful coexistence' increased sports-related contacts between the communist and capitalist worlds. Akyildiz writes:

'On the sports front, in 1956, the Soviet Union Olympic team came top of the medals table at the Winter Olympics in Italy and the

¹⁵ Akyildiz, 2019, s.537; Akyildiz, 2012b, s.119.

Melbourne Summer Olympic Games. They came top at the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. However, at the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico and the Winter Olympic Games in Grenoble, France, the Soviet team came second place overall (Akyildiz, 2020, s. 40).

The above is noteworthy because societies draw upon historical events and the past to legitimate present and future actions and build 'imagined communities'. Louise McReynolds clarifies this matter further (and her words are apt considering Uzbekistan's formation in 1924-1925 AD).

'Societies write their histories according to their victories and defeats, which transforms the sites of their sports into Pierre Nora's... realms where memories assume a materiality that turns their subjectivity of individual experience into the objective building blocks that historians use to write narratives of the past and place' (McReynolds, 2010, s.127).

The Spartakiad Games were the Communist Party's version of the Olympic Games. The Spartakiad Games of 1956, 1959 and 1963 mobilised thousands of Soviet athletes and coaches with different levels of competency from across the country (see footnote 14 for chronological information about Khrushchev-era general sporting output and policy achievements).¹⁶

¹⁶ The following is from A. Timofeyev., Y. Kopytkin, *Soviet Sport: The Success Story*. Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1987, s.27-31, –

1953: Soviet boxers entered their first European Championships.

1954 & 1955: Soviet athletes succeeded at the Skiing World Championships, the Hockey World and the European Championships, the European Diving Championships, the World Shooting Championships, the World Modern Pentathlon, and the Rome World Gymnastics Championships.

More than 2,500 schoolchildren attended the Union-wide Schoolchildren's Spartakiad in Leningrad.

Furthermore, new sports faculties opened in Moscow, Leningrad and Kyiv physical culture institutions; in particular, the new faculties enabled the training of elite athletes.

1956: Soviet debut at the Winter Olympics, Italy.

The Lenin Central Stadium in Moscow opened.

The 1st Spartakiad of the Peoples of the Soviet Union, with possibly 23 million athletes participating in the early stages. More than 9,000 athletes took part in the final stages held in Moscow; they came from approximately 40 different ethnic groups.

Soviet Team attended the Melbourne Olympic Games.



Khrushchev's decentralisation and rationalisation policy, circa 1957 to 1959, was meant to move decision-making away from central power to 'local voluntary organisations' (and in line with the Marxist notion, the 'withering away of the state'). This policy influenced Soviet physical culture and sport until 1964.¹⁷

Morton says:

'In Soviet life generally, there has been an effort under Khrushchev to make the system work more efficiently by substituting incentives and persuasion for arbitrary compulsion, and by constricting an overgrown, cumbersome bureaucracy. The change in sports administration undoubtedly is part of this effort' (Morton, 1960, s. 58).

In reality, central authority remained in control.¹⁸

1957: Success at the Fencing World Championships, Paris, and Women's Chess Olympiad, Netherlands.

1958: The Union-wide Komsomol and Youth Spartakiad involved millions of its members.

1959: The 2nd Soviet Union Spartakiad, with nearly 40 million participants in the early stages, was hosted in Moscow with 8,432 athletes from 43 ethnic groups.

1960: The Soviet athletes attended the USA Winter Olympics.
Soviet athletes participated in the Rome Summer Olympics.
A new physical culture institute opened in Volgograd.

1961: A USSR-USA Athletics Match was held in Moscow.
In Moscow, the Modern Pentathlon World Championships were held.

1962: Winter Soviet Union Spartakiad takes place.
Soviet Team participated at the inaugural World Rowing Championships.

1963: 3rd Spartakiad Finals, Moscow, with 7,518 athletes involved.

1964: The Soviet athletes participated in the Innsbruck Olympic Games and the Tokyo.

¹⁷ Morton, H. W, "Transition to Communism: The Case of Soviet Sports", *Problems of Communism* (9/6), November-December (1960), s.55-58.

¹⁸ Morton provided one Uzbek example when the authorities ushered a sports-related meeting to a speedy end, thus preventing further debate and questioning: *'during the constituent conference in Tashkent. After several speakers, including the party secretary, had delivered addresses along standard themes, the orgburo [caretaker] chairman suddenly interrupted the proceedings to announce: "Many comrades want to go to the concert which will take place following the conference. In order to avoid having them arrive late, the Presidium offers this suggestion: that the conference hear two more speakers and then terminate the discussion (Sovetskii Sport, 18 April 1959)'.*

Under Khrushchev, the union-wide Committee of Physical Culture and Sports was instructed to hand over some administrative duties to the Union of Sports Societies and Organisations of the USSR. In this context, the union-wide Voluntary Sports Societies and state-run trade unions assisted in managing sports for the ordinary citizen across each of the 15 national republics.¹⁹ (In Uzbekistan, this voluntary sports society was titled *Mekhnat*, Labour, in cities and towns and *Pakhtakor*, Cotton, in the countryside.)²⁰

The 1961 Party Congress highlighted the building of the communist people. In sports, it meant increasing participants numerically and growing sports provision. The assessment method for awards and medals (the mass ranking system established in the 1930s) was broadened to incorporate more citizens. This reflected the mass participation (*massovost*) nature of Soviet physical culture. Also, the Ready for Labour and Defence Programme and physical education instruction were updated.²¹ Lastly, Riordan says the character training potential of sport emphasises; '*educating a new person, who would harmoniously combine spiritual wealth, moral purity and a perfect physique*'.²²

Sports Activities in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan was founded in 1924 during the Communist Party's delimitation of Central Asia (Turkistan) and was one republic within the Soviet Union. Akyildiz explains that

'... the Uzbeks constituted approximately 70 per cent of the total population of Uzbekistan, and the others included Kazakhs, Tajiks, Turkmen, Tatars, and Slavs. The total population of Uzbekistan increased from approximately 5 million (1917) to 18 million (1985)---

Thereupon, the debate was speedily concluded, and the conference proceeded to wind up its business in a matter of minutes by electing 69 members to the USSR Council for Tashkent, as well as a long slate of delegates to the higher oblast conference. Such transparent overzealousness was, of course, severely criticized by the press'. Source: Morton, 1960, s.57.

¹⁹ Morton, 1960, s.58.

²⁰ Riordan, 1980, s.168-170.

²¹ Riordan, 1980, s.168-170.

²² *Materialy XXII i'yezda KPSS*, s.142, cited in Riordan, 1980, s.209.



including, by 1991, more than 1.5 million Slavic migrants' (Akyildiz, 2020, s.41).

During Khrushchev's leadership, the urban infrastructure of sports was further expanded across the Soviet Union republics, including Soviet-controlled Central Asia. Below, the focus is on the most populous Central Asian republic: Uzbekistan. First, the situation in the capital city of Tashkent is outlined; it includes a review of what was to be found there sports-wise during Khrushchev's era. Second, the economic development gap between European and Asian Soviet regions is explained. Reference is made to sports provision. Also noted is the uptake of sports among Uzbekistan's urban women. Both these last two points are important in a Marxist-Leninist context because a critical factor in the justification of the bloodshed and hardship associated with the 1917 Russian Revolution was to advance women, poor young men, and the ethnic minorities of the former Imperial Russian society.

In Tashkent, the sports infrastructure was expanded. For instance, The Pakhtakor Football Club Stadium was built in 1955-1956; the best Russian teams and others from the Soviet Union's republics played there. The Soviet-era text, written in English (and printed in the former Soviet Union), *Cultural Establishments of Tashkent* (1958), states that about 80,000 Tashkent citizens joined sports clubs for training. In 1958, Tashkent had 94 Master of Sports of the USSR and nearly 20,000 sportspeople recognised by the Labour and Defence programme. Even if a significant number were ethnic Slavic, it does not discount that some were ethnic Turkic or Persian. The source does not reveal any data about this matter. Furthermore, locals could visit this city's nine stadiums, 62 sports gymnasiums, and seven swimming pools.²³ We need to remember the book's propaganda element; however, it shows progress in Tashkent. One intention was to showcase the republic to a broader (non-Soviet) Muslim audience in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

²³ *Cultural Establishments of Tashkent: A Brief Reference Book on Theatrical, Scientific and Cultural Instructive Establishments*, Uzbek SSR: Goslitizdat, 1958, s.181-4: The full address of the Uzbekistan Institute of Physical Culture was UI, Achunbabaeva 6, 1-a Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Soviet Union.



The most prestigious stadiums in Tashkent were Dynamo, Spartak (Spartacus), and the Polytechnic. One stadium called Krasnoe Znamia was situated on Fizkulturnaya Street (Physical Culture Street).²⁴ In terms of the organisation of everyday sports for the masses and their team leagues, the state factories and farms opened sports societies and clubs. Unlike the case of the elite (or 'professional') Soviet athletes, here, the policy was to advance sports-for-all.

The regime was eager to spot talent among youths and coach and educate them to become its future champions. Accordingly, specialist sports boarding schools were deemed the best method to train talent. The introduction of the Soviet sports boarding school model occurred in Tashkent in 1962—it mirrored the sports boarding schools that opened in communist East Germany in 1949. These institutions taught the union-wide curriculum in addition to physical education, coaching and instruction, exercise psychology, food and nutrition and health care. In the first year of study, students were enrolled aged seven to 12 and graduated at age 18.²⁵ The Soviet source of 1968, cited by Riordan, says that the Tashkent school provided students with: '*... soccer, swimming, athletics and gymnastics; the school grounds cover an area of 20 hectares, and included a 3-hall wing for gymnastics, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, and an indoor running track.*'²⁶

Though the above describes progress in physical culture and sport in the Turkic-Persian Muslim region, its implementation had several challenges and issues. The two notable were a developmental gap between the European Soviet Union – with the metropolis being Moscow – and the Asian periphery. Second was the lower uptake of physical culture among Central Asian women (see below). Indeed, throughout the 70 years of Soviet rule, the European region received more investment in physical culture and developed ahead of Central Asia. However, it had only been 33 years since Lenin and Stalin introduced modern physical culture and sports competitions into Central Asia (circa 1920), and much work had yet to be done.²⁷

²⁴ Abazov, 2007, s.248.

²⁵ Riordan, 1980, s.341.

²⁶ *Fizkul'tura i sport no. 7 (1968)*, s.5, cited in Riordan, 1980, s.342, 28.

²⁷ Akyildiz, 2019, s.515-541; Akyildiz & Carlson, 2014, s.4-7.



The development gap between the rural sphere – where most Uzbeks resided – and the cities (where most Slavic migrants lived) was significant during the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, Moscow's central planners were busily seeking to transform Uzbekistan's urban spaces. Conversely, in Uzbekistan's rural towns there were fewer sports venues and qualified personnel. For instance, one 1964 Soviet report says: '*that only 5-6 per cent of the rural young people went in for sport on any regular basis*'.²⁸ The collective farms opened sports clubs. Modern sports did develop here but at a slower pace than in cities. It was a problem because Soviet sport and its associated urban leisure formed part of youth socialisation and acculturation. Indeed, the project's success rested upon Central Asian youth participating in modern sports and internalising Marxist-Leninist upbringing and education.²⁹ Akyildiz's *The Young Pioneers and the Komsomol of Uzbekistan: Soviet Citizenship and Values* (2012) describes how the Soviet youth movements (the Young Pioneers and Komsomol) undertook physical education, exercise, and military-style preparedness; these institutions were key to youth upbringing.³⁰

Uzbekistan's urban and rural sports societies circa 1966 – two years after Khrushchev ceased to be the communist leader – reveal that the number of active sportspeople was in the tens of thousands in Uzbekistan (and was only surpassed regionally by figures provided by Kazakhstan). Akyildiz, citing Riordan, writes,

*'Soviet sources report that by the mid-1960s the official number of participating sportspeople, at all grades of the Labour and Defence programme, was in the many tens of thousands in both the urban and rural environments. The urban sports society had approximately 138,089 members, while its rural counterpart had almost 418,967 members.'*³¹

²⁸ A. Abdumalikov and Y.S. Sholomitsky, "Nekotorye puti vnedreniya fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta v sel'skovo naseleniya", cited in Y.V. Borisov, *Planirovanie razvitiya fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta sredi sel'skovo naseleniya*, Moscow, 1964, s.85, in Riordan, 1980, s.304.

²⁹ Riordan, 1980, p.308; Akyildiz, 2020, s.44.

³⁰ Akyildiz, 2012, s.58.

³¹ Voluntary Sports Societies (VSS) by membership and distinction: 1966, cited in Riordan, 1980, s.418, in Akyildiz, 'Cultural Asia Change in Central Asia', s.45.

In the above example, the reader needs to recall that Moscow's state planners used the quota system, so the statistical information reported by Communist Party cadres in Tashkent might be incorrect and intended to appease the Kremlin. However, even if falsified, the numbers are evidence of something happening in Uzbekistan's world of physical culture participants.

In support of the evidence above about the impact of communist sports on Central Asians, Elizabeth Bacon uses Khrushchev-era sources. Bacon says Moscow introduced the 'European type' sports and '*stadiums, swimming pools, and gyms*' in the 'Russianised' cities and large towns. Additionally,

'There is physical culture training, with gymnasts, football, volleyball, and basketball, and competitive matches between the football teams of large factories. This sports program, with rewards for achievement comparable to those in other parts of the Soviet Union, has produced some Uzbek "master" sportsmen and sportswomen' (Bacon, 1980, s.185).

However, Bacon highlights the limited take up of modern sports in the countryside, saying, *'it seems unlikely that the average Uzbek of oasis origin has been diverted from the sedentary pleasures of sitting, talking, and watching others'*.³² The words expressed in both quotations are commonly found in English literature published during the Cold War period when Western academics relied upon Soviet sources—because Moscow restricted their fieldwork visits to the Soviet Union.

An additional topic explored is Uzbekistan's female athletes. During the 1960s, they became more visible and active in the cities and large towns. Nonetheless, some rural Uzbek parents with traditional values disagreed with their daughters wearing tight sports costumes. Two Soviet writers, in 1964, highlighted the pro-communist activism of the early Central Asian female athletes and their role-model status, arguing:

³² S.P. Tolstov, *Narody Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*, 2 Vols, Moscow: Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1962, 1963 cited in Elizabeth Bacon, *Central Asians Under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change*, London: Cornell University, 1980, s.185.

*'We need to propagandise the importance of sport among women and physical education establishments should train more specialists from among local girls who would themselves have a hand in training good sportswomen.'*³³

Yet, between 1959 and 1969, the number of active female athletes in sports rose from nearly 3.6 per cent to 10.8 per cent of their total number. In contrast, in Ukraine, circa 1968, women accounted for 34.2 per cent.³⁴ Finally, the Soviet regime had a 'paternalistic' attitude toward women and sports. It discouraged them from playing in football matches or wrestling based on 'gender biology' and public morality.³⁵

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper shows that under Khrushchev, physical culture and sport developed apace both at home for the masses and on the international sports scene. The elite Soviet athletes attended an increasing number of championships to compete against the best athletes from the West. Moscow actively joined international sports movements and organisations to engage with the global 'bourgeois' community. The array of membership at the international level was comprehensive and included gymnastics, track and field, water, snow, combative sports, and chess. (It mirrored Khrushchev's approach to peaceful coexistence with the West and his drive to see the Soviet Union overtake the West economically and culturally.)

On the other hand, the homegrown Spartakiad competition – an alternative to the Olympic Games – mobilised the entirety of the Soviet physical culture and sports systems. As this paper details, many athletes were involved in it from all ages, backgrounds, competencies, genders, and ethnic and national groups. In the international sports events and the domestic union-wide Soviet versions, communist physical culture and sport were significant in creating a universal sense of belonging and identity amidst cultural and ethnic diversity. It does not mean traditional and folk sports were sidelined. Instead, they were performed within the communist physical culture system. At these spectacles,

³³ A. Abdumalikov and Y.S. Sholomitsky, cited in Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, s.319.

³⁴ Riordan, 1980, s.318.

³⁵ Riordan, 1980b, s.137.



communist officials and state symbols were on show. So, Khrushchev continued Lenin and Stalin's works and further expanded society's physical culture system, involving more citizens. The rational use of leisure and free time was to draw the people towards the Party's health and exercise projects and Marxist-Leninist values.

Uzbekistan was an important test case for the communist state planners and ideologues because it was culturally at the centre of the majority-Muslim region of Central Asia. Moscow's modernity programme targeted Muslim values, attitudes, and norms. In particular, it wanted to win over young men and women and those sympathetic to socialism. Like the rest of the Soviet Union, the notion was to create a new socialist leisure pattern, draw in rural and urban youths, and advance a new lifestyle. Furthermore, the healthier and fit citizens would be ripe for work in the newly built factories, industrial plants, and state and collective farms. At the same time, it prepared young men for obligatory military service. Altogether, the aim of sport – in conjunction with the regime's other socialisation channels – was to make loyal and acquiescent citizens that would associate their identity and lived reality with the Soviet Union and their Soviet republic.

The provision and uptake of the Soviet physical culture and sport in Uzbekistan under Khrushchev was mixed. The project was a work in progress 33 years after the first modern sports competitive event (held in Tashkent, 1920). It is best interpreted as a relatively successful and gradual implementation. The secondary sources say that Central Asian women in Uzbekistan, circa 1953 to 1964, participated in limited numbers. Conversely, in the European Soviet Union, the uptake was notably higher. How can we explain this? Perhaps it was due to traditional values and attitudes about gender mixing and local attitudes regarding masculine and feminine roles or because the modern sports roll-out was primarily an urban phenomenon. It did not hinder some male and female athletes from the region, whether Slavic, Turkic or Persian, from representing the Soviet Union at the Olympics and becoming role models for children and adults alike.

Furthermore, interest in the imported (European Russian) modern physical culture and sport acquired an audience. Many young men were attracted by the excitement and fun of the new leisure options—



notably football. Here, the voluntary sports societies membership (in 1966) is significant across Central Asia; the evidence shows that in their thousands, sportspeople had joined up, and a smaller number awarded the highest sports honours available (through the Ready for Labour and Defence Programme and the Ranking System).

The picture of modern physical culture and sports in Khrushchev-era Uzbekistan is complex; we need to be cautious about any statements about progress and modernity that ignore the authoritarian nature of the top-down communist development. Still, ordinary and elite Central Asian male and female sportspeople emerged during the 1930s and 1940s, successfully impacting domestic and international sports during the 1950s and 1960s. Also, Tashkent's sports sites and places reflected Moscow's plan to re-make urban society and to make contemporary leisure consumption an everyday reality for all. However, physical culture and sports are one element of societal transformation and have limitations in what they can achieve. Implementing a modern sports culture requires coordinated and funded policies and is part of a more comprehensive economic, educational, and social change.

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