

SOVIET SPORT: Background to the Olympics

James Riordan (1980), Washington Mews Books: New York & London,
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Book Reviewer: **Sevket AKYILDIZ**¹

Soviet Sport: Background To The Olympics

James (Jim) Riordan's *Soviet Sport: Background to the Olympics* (1980) investigates the establishment of the Soviet model of modern sports and its domination of the Olympic Games between 1952 and 1991. This book is a concise study based on fieldwork and primary and secondary sources. Sport in the Soviet Union was a surrogate religion, transformative socially and culturally, and as part of the nation-state-building programme of Lenin and Stalin, the healthy Soviet working-class citizen archetype became a propaganda icon. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) state planners argued that the Soviet system and society (the USSR) were superior to the Western capitalist model. However, the seventy years of its regime ended in 1991 with the Soviet Union's demise. *Soviet Sport* is a comprehensive account of one facet of the Marxist-Leninist project. It includes comments about all 15 Soviet republics that constituted the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Belarus, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Georgia, Armenia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan.

The book's author, Riordan (b.1936–d.2012), was a British lecturer in Russian Studies at Bradford University in the UK. His scholarship on Soviet sport and physical culture made him an international specialist. He spoke Russian, translated Russian-language sources on sport, journeyed to the Soviet Union for research, and lived in Moscow. While there, he interviewed athletes, trainers, and coaches. He wrote numerous books and academic journal articles, including *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (1977, 1980).

Sport was part of the USSR's ideological and political fabric; Moscow planned to create healthy workers and amateur and 'elite' athletes to showcase the Marxist-Leninist society to Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. The CPSU promoted its communist

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society, highlighted its progressive modernity, and emphasised people's health care. Riordan's analysis examines the strengths and weaknesses of Soviet sport, how North Americans and Western Europeans perceived it, and how Soviet citizens interacted with it. Despite the numerous problems and hardships people experienced in daily living under an authoritarian government, the Soviet regime sought to improve the lives of the masses through state-funded sport and universal education. Riordan outlines the significance of Soviet sport vis-à-vis the Western approach:

'When a nation decides that the pursuit of sport, free of charge, is the right of everyone, not a privilege to pay for; that as far as status and the development of talent is concerned, sport is on par with music and art; that the culture of the body is as vital as that of the mind for the harmonious development of the individual, and ultimately for the health of society...' (pp. 2-3).

The book is structured thematically, reviewing the subject over nine chapters. Altogether, the nine chapters explain the origins and development of Soviet sports culture, its philosophy, challenges, and Olympic Games successes. In the *Introduction* and Chapter One ('Dispelling the Myths'), Riordan makes the case for the book and argues that we should be objective about Soviet sport while acknowledging its problematic aspects. The author questions several Western perceptions, arguments, and media stereotypes. In Chapter Two ('The Evolution of the Sports System') and Chapter Three ('The Structure and Organisation of Soviet Sport'), Riordan traces the origins of the Soviet sports movement, beginning after the 1917 Revolution and ending with the late socialist institutions, structures, and policies.

Chapter Four ('Talent') explores talent spotting, sports schools, and the school curriculum. Chapter Five ('Professional Training') discusses trainers, coaches, university sports environments, sports research, and publications. The following two chapters are sport-specific: Chapter Six examines gymnastics, and Chapter Seven reviews Soccer. Chapter Eight describes Soviet women in sport, while Chapter Nine analyses the Soviets and the Olympic Games.

Riordan's *Soviet Sport* is a suitable introductory book on the subject, especially for students and scholars of the Olympic Games and the Soviet Union. However, having been published forty-five years ago, it is now dated. The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 shows that the book falls 10 years short of providing complete coverage of events. Riordan's book does not include the Soviet Olympic stories of the mid-1980s and those under General Secretary Gorbachev (1985–1991), and his *glasnost*, 'open government', and *perestroika* 'restructuring' policies. The book also omits discussion of limited capitalist and free-market economic policies in Soviet sports during the last five years of Soviet communism, criticism of the state-managed modern sport system, or the welfare of younger elite sportspeople. Because of its publication date, it does not mention performance-enhancing drugs among athletes. The Soviet athlete's first Paralympics in 1988 is noted in Riordan's later articles from the late 1980s and 1990s.

Soviet Sport: Background to the Olympics is clearly written and well structured. The book presents the political, cultural, and social background to its Soviet participation in the Olympic Games. Riordan's expert knowledge makes this complex history accessible to the

general reader. The content helps readers new to the subject understand the origins, purpose, and components of modern Soviet sport and the Olympic Games. Compiled and published during the Cold War, it is itself both a secondary and primary document. It is a legacy of an era, not so long ago, when the threat of Nuclear War between the capitalist and communist societies felt real. While numerous international politicians and sportspeople argued that sport is non-political, the CPSU made it resoundingly political and, after the Second World War, used their Gold Medal wins at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games to showcase the communist model of society to audiences at home and abroad. Riordan's account is well written, presented to the reader in clear English; yet, the story behind it reveals a profound ideological, economic, and cultural struggle between East and West over which ideological system was superior. The book is suitable for all readers and is an ideal introduction for students and researchers interested in cultural and sports history, the Olympic Movement, social control, and the human body.

Source:

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Sevket Akyildiz wrote this book review **without** plagiarism. November 2025.

Ethical Statement: No ethical issues to report.

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