

The hidden soldiers of the Soviet Union

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Nina Ponomaryova was a Russian athlete born seven years after the official constitution of the USSR. Her first years of life, took place quietly, in a rural province of the Urals, until at the age of 18, she decided to start her sports career in discus throwing. She would then become the first Soviet competitor to win an Olympic gold medal at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, which would be the first Olympics in which the Soviet Union competed, breaking an Olympic record that had been set in 1936.

But while Ponomaryova launched her career and established herself as one of the greatest athletes in the Soviet Union, the political and economic reality of the country was quite grim. After the Civil War of 1918, what would later be the Soviet Union was in ruins and the economy was at the lowest point in its history, for which the term "war communism" was introduced (Velarde, 2017). Progressively, all companies were nationalized, and all types of production were strictly controlled by the state. Faced with the discontent of the bulk of the population due to the new social and economic measures, Vladimir Lenin chose to use terror, violence, and repression, to guarantee his permanence in government, and ensure the triumph of the communist revolution.

Years later, Iósif Stalin would become the natural successor of Lenin, who appointed him General Secretary of the Government in 1922, and his goal would be to instill and prolong Lenin's ideals in Soviet society. In order to consolidate his power, Stalin would begin to systematically eliminate each of his rivals, and suppress any act of belligerence by establishing a totalitarian model that would control each of the spaces of society. And sport would not be oblivious to such control. During the first years of life of athletes like Nina Ponomaryova, Stalin's "five-year plans" were already under way, in an environment marked by the persecution of artists critical of the regime, and by the disappearance and detention of musicians, academics and intellectuals, who were considered "enemies of the people" (Mejía, 2021).

Thus, sport in the Soviet Union would become a social phenomenon of extreme importance, to the extent that it was an instrument of the established power to communicate and expose its political principles at an international level (Nuñez, 2002), and it would be a vital propaganda weapon for Stalin's communist regime. Soviet athletes were then an element of prestige for the country, and an index of the vitality of the regime and its communist policies. In this way, in the 1920s, the Soviet Union managed to make its sports

aspirations compatible with the political-sports strategy of the international communist movement following the popular front policy (Gounot, 2007). Later, in the 1930s, the State officially offered its support to elite sport and incorporated it as one of the fundamental pillars of its foreign policy.

Once inserted into the international scene with the opening of the foreign policy, the Soviet Union would seek to increase Soviet patriotism through sports scenarios, and at the same time, train elite athletes who would face capitalism abroad from the trenches of sport. Before the Second World War, sports policies of the USSR were still timid and conservative, staying away from the Olympic Movement and simply remaining in the International Workers' Sports Movement (Gounot, 2007). But after joining the League of Nations in 1934, the goals of Soviet sport moved away from the traditional values of working-class sport and more ambitious goals were formulated; It was intended to achieve world records and reach a position of power in sport at an international level, with a clear political influence that implicitly defended the Soviet communist regime.

Thus, an elite team with international aspirations was consolidated, which put aside its working-class roots and aspired to participate, as a socialist state, in the Olympic Games. In 1952 in Helsinki, it would be then the first participation of the Soviet Union in world games, where it would also achieve first place, and where athletes like Ponomaryova would go down in history with numerous world records broken in different disciplines. Four years later, in Melbourne, the Soviet delegation would beat the United States for the first time in history, and the USSR teams would beat the Americans in the race for world sporting supremacy. In fact, between 1952 and 1988, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, socialist athletes accumulated much more gold medals than their American rivals (Mejía, 2021).

Sport was then not only a clear reflection of the prevailing antagonism between East and West; between capitalism and communism, but also became an important diplomatic tool for the Soviet Union, as agreements and sports alliances with neighboring countries, allowed the USSR to ensure peace against the revolutionary objectives of the Communist International, and it also led to the rebirth of nationalist discourses; speeches that sought to demonstrate that successes in sport were proof of the superiority of the socialist system of the Soviet Union over the rest of the world. "For the first time a major State declared that sport was a political institution that played a significant role in the class war between the workers and the bourgeoisie, between the new socialist state and the capitalist world", point out authors such as Riordan (2002).

In this way, from the first generations of the post-revolution, Soviet athletes were trained in competition against capitalism, and although initially, the USSR boycotted the participation of its athletes in competitions organi-

zed and directed by the West, as events as the Olympic Games represented a distraction for the workers in their class struggle, these scenarios were then seen as an opportunity to promote communism throughout the world through sports, and to turn gymnastics and sports into means of the struggle of classes, which would make clear the supremacy of the Soviet Union and its communist system.

It was thus, as through the complete nationalization of sport, and the clear ideological purpose of the competitions in which the USSR participated, athletes became pawns of a regime that exploited their talent to achieve political ends. With the banner of "socialism in one country", Stalin would assume the reins of Soviet society, and would co-opt spaces like sport to achieve his goals at an international level, making it an essential part of the spirit of the party. To achieve this, the sports machinery of the revolution created sports facilities in all the republics of the USSR and prepared thousands of physical instructors who first trained Soviet athletes and then those of the rest of the world after the war (Mejía, 2021), making millions of athletes, hidden soldiers who would defend at all times, the socialist ideals of Lenin's revolution. Sport became nothing more than war by other means, and athletes, war machines at the full service of the regime.

Referencias

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