

Michał Mijalski, „The political role of sport in the Polish People's Republic in the years 1970-1980”

Contemporary sport is rooted in the principles of modern Olympism, where one of the key principles is its apolitical nature. Although due to its significant potential for social impact, sport developed a dense network of connections with the political world at an early stage of its development. Yet, because of its considerable influence on society, sport established a complex web of relations with the realm of politics early in its evolution.

The political atmosphere prevailing in the world after The Second World War also affected the situation of sports, causing it to develop according to two conflicting doctrines – the Soviet (USSR and satellite countries) and that prevailing in Western countries, referred to in the Polish People's Republic as capitalist. The USSR's entry into international sports competition, especially during the Olympic Games, fundamentally changed the balance of power and influence in world sports. After the war, the Central and Eastern European countries under communism adopted Soviet models in all areas of life, including the development of physical culture. According to the authorities at that time, it was considered an effective tool for ideological and propaganda warfare.

The main focus of the presented dissertation lies on the events that occurred during the governance of Edward Gierek in the Polish People's Republic, namely between December 1970 and September 1980. That decade, also known as "Gierek era" in Polish history, is associated with the dynamic development of the country, opening to the West, and so-called "propaganda of success". It was also a time of significant international successes for Polish athletes, both in individual and team disciplines. The author of this work aimed to show the process of rebuilding Polish sports after World War II and to illustrate the mechanism of the increasingly strong politicization of that area of life by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic, which serves as an introduction to the main considerations undertaken in the dissertation.

The objective of this study is to explore three key topics. Firstly, the process of the politicization of Polish sports in the PPR during the years 1970-1980, extended by a characterization of its phases. Secondly, the use of sports as a tool of domestic and foreign policy. Lastly, the identification of political control and supervision mechanisms involved in the process of selecting and training athletes preparing for participation in international competitions – especially in the Olympic Games, World Championships, and European Championships. The author also presented the way selected sports events in the years 1970-1980 were secured by Polish services.

The following main research hypothesis was posed: In the Polish People's Republic in the years 1970-1980, the political role of sports was related to the communist authorities' pursuit of strengthening their legitimacy, controlling and shaping public opinion through the management, political control, and supervision of sports. The involvement of politics in that area of life aimed not only to enhance the state's prestige on the international stage but also to control national identity and to shape a unified society in accordance with the principles of socialist ideology. This hypothesis was positively verified.

In writing this work, extensive use of archival materials collected in the Archive of New Files in Warsaw (sets of records: Main Committee of Physical Culture, Main Office of Physical Culture, Main Committee of Physical Culture and Tourism, Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, State Office of Physical Education and Military Training, Polish Sports Federation) and the Institute of National Remembrance (set of records from the Bureau of Public Access and branches of the INR in Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Katowice, Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, Rzeszów, and Wrocław) was made. Furthermore, the author conducted interviews with individuals who participated in the described events and drew upon articles from professional sports journals and mainstream newspapers from the relevant period.

Highlighting the role of sports in the PPR allows for a better understanding of comprehensive structure of this period and the impact it had on society. Sport was a tool in the hands of the authorities, used to propagate ideology and strengthen the image of the state. It also united the nation in supporting the white and red team and celebrating their successes. However, sports also represented a space for resistance and the manifestation of individual freedom against the restrictive regime and the expression of the PPR citizens' disobedience towards the USSR's authority. Analyzing the political role of sports during the PPR period may have significant implications for understanding the current public discourse on the relationship between sports and politics and for shaping the sports policy of modern states. Studying that issue also allows for a better understanding of the complex relationship between sports and politics and their mutual influences on historical and social levels.