

Sport in Central Asia under Gorbachev: Uzbekistan (1985 to 1991)

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Abstract

This paper assesses the modern and traditional sports of the Soviet Union shortly before its collapse in 1991. The case study is the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan under the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU, established 1917). Central Asia is a crucial historical case because it was a Muslim-majority region that Moscow wished to transform. The study is interdisciplinary and contains primary and secondary sources from the Cold War era. The research question asks: What did the implementation and impact of Soviet sport look like in Uzbekistan under Mikhail Gorbachev (CPSU leader from March 1985 to December 1991). Uzbekistan's sportspeople, facilities, Spartakiad ranking of 1983, Olympic athletes, and traditional sports are the topics examined.

Keywords: communist sport, Gorbachev, Soviet sport, traditional sport, Uzbekistan.

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Introduction

The British academic Shirin Akiner said: *'In the mid-1980s, the political climate in Central Asia was very much as it had been ten years previously. The Communist Party apparatus was firmly in place.'* She reports that the Soviet Union, in the mid-1980s, appeared to offer, *'... progress and stability, equality of opportunity for men and women, and education for all'*.¹ However, Akiner continues with her analysis, reporting that between 1985 and 1991, politics and society changed remarkably. All of the state institutions were effected, first by Gorbachev's reforms and then by national independence in 1991. During Gorbachev's reforms, everyday practices, like sport, were looked at anew as state ideology underwent reappraisal.

Events at the time moved fast; on the 25 December 1991, Moscow and the Soviet republics, after failing to reach an agreement about a reformed multinational socialist federation, dissolved the Soviet Union. The Central Asians, therefore, responded with astonishment and hopes for the future.

Given this, our paper looks at the final six years of Soviet sport before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's reforms of the late 1980s impacted on the Soviet institutions and Soviet culture. Since the mid-1920s, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had used its version of modern culture, incorporating physical culture, to integrate and acculturate the Muslim Central Asians. This paper will assess the modern and traditional sports culture in Uzbekistan between 1985 and 1991, when Gorbachev was the communist leader (from 1985 to 1991). At first, he continued with existing Soviet sports policies, but, during perestroika (the restructuring of the economic and political systems, circa 1986 to 1991), he permitted increasing commercialisation and privatisation in the sports sector. It was the most radical shift in Soviet sports since the 1930s. The paper touches upon perestroika and sport; however, our primary focus is the general state of Soviet sport culture in Uzbekistan after 70 years of communism. We will assess the implementation and impact of sport in Uzbek society during the late

¹ Shirin Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?* London: Whitehall Paper Series, 1993, p.20.

Soviet era. Also discussed is the condition of traditional or folk sports, and we consider why it remained popular for the Central Asians.

Unfortunately, due to the word limit, this paper will not discuss the following critical sports-related topics: athletes with disabilities; performance-enhancing drug-taking, corruption involving athletes and coaches; the close working relationship between the communist youth movement (the *Komsomol*)² and athletes; widespread criticism of the elite athletes' privileges; Central Asian women and sport.³ However, a discussion about Uzbekistan's elite women athletes is included in the section on the Olympic Games medal winners.

Uzbekistan was selected as the case study because it contains the largest population among the Central Asian republics (approximately 18 million people in 1985), and its capital of Tashkent was once the fourth largest Soviet city (population nearly 2,000,000 in 1984).⁴ By 1989

² A unionwide youth movement for citizens aged 15 to 28. The *Komsomol* was an extracurricular youth organisation whose function was to raise young people to be 'good communists'. Its facilities and services were broad, and it played a key in youth sport at all levels. The *Komsomol* took instructions from the CPSU. See also Seth Bernstein, *Raised Under Stalin. Young Communists and the Defence of Socialism*. Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2017.

³ I have summarised Central Asian women and sport in Sevket Akyildiz, 'Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin: Uzbekistan from 1925 to 1952', *Vakanuvis—International Journal of Historical Researches*, 4, no. 2, (Fall 2019), 515-541, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/vakanuvis/issue/48884/595032> (accessed 4 Nov 2020); see also Sevket Akyildiz, 'Cultural Change in Central Asia: Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories in Uzbekistan, 1964 to 1982', *History Studies: International Journal of History*, 12, no. 1, (February 2020), p. 35-54, <http://www.historystudies.net/dergi/cultural-change-in-central-asia-brezhnev-modern-sports-and-memories-in-uzbekistan-1964-to-1982202003798d093.pdf> (accessed 4 Nov 2020).

⁴ Shirin Akiner, *The Islamic Peoples of Soviet Union*. London: Kegan Paul, 1983, p.274-75; Shirin Akiner, 'Uzbekistan: Republic of Many Tongues', in *Language Planning in the Soviet Union*, ed. J.M. Kirkwood. Macmillan: London, 1989, p.103. William Fierman explores the total population in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan: 'These republics contain approximately one-fifth of the USSR's population. As of 1979, almost 29 million (62 per cent) of their 46.2 million inhabitants were members of "Muslim" nationalities.'" William Fierman, 'Western Popular Culture and the Soviet Youth: A Case Study of "Muslim Region"', *Central Asian Survey*, 7, no. 1 (1988), pp.7-36, p.7.

almost 1.6 million Russians and other Slavs had settled in Uzbekistan's cities to assist with Soviet modernisation and acculturation.⁵

The introduction and development of modern sports in Central Asia is thought-provoking because, in 1917, the citizens were mostly rural, religious, and ethnically diverse. Uzbekistan is perhaps the most robust case of modern sports expansion and success in the former Soviet Central Asia, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan following up behind. In contrast, Tajikistan displayed the least progress.

Moreover, for the Soviet planners, Turkic and Muslim-majority Central Asia was a crucible to trial the Soviet modernity and identity formation. It was a geographic region, far enough from Moscow, considered suitable by the regime to implement its social control systems and economic transformation. Indeed, it is no accident that the creation of Uzbekistan during 1924 and 1925 happened simultaneously as the CPSU introduced the newly established communist socialisation channels. These included the unionwide education system, physical culture and sport, secular civic rituals and ceremonies, and the youth movements (the Young Pioneers for ages 10 to 14, established 1922, and the *Komsomol* for ages 15 to 28, established 1918).⁶

About ideology and bias, we need to make clear the problem with Soviet statistics in both the primary and secondary sources. In Central Asia, falsification of statistics occurred when local cadres attempted to please Moscow and meet official planning quotas. Also, Soviet researchers and writers interpreted society from a Marxist-Leninist perspective; this probably prejudiced their works and statistics reporting. For this reason, the Soviet-era published books in the English language are not an accurate picture of events on the ground; nevertheless, they are useful sources to help us generally understand the Soviet sport development and how the regime wished to present itself to the non-communist world. Another point that makes writing about Soviet sport problematic is the limited number of published English works about Soviet sport in Central Asia. For this reason, the archives in Tashkent and Moscow require a visit from a researcher with

⁵ Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?*, p.73.

⁶ Akyildiz, 'Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin', p. 517.

the necessary Russian and Uzbek language skills to investigate the documents available and explain Soviet era sport in Central Asia.

The primary sources used in our research paper are documents of the Cold War. Many Soviet documents have been translated into English and are available online through the Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS) Arlington, Virginia, United States. They contain select information from Soviet newspapers and agencies, and Communist Party publications. JPRS documents provide us with the Soviet perspective and discuss the social and economic development of Central Asia. The book *Soviet Sport: The Success Story* (1987),⁷ published in Moscow for a Western audience, contains descriptive information on Soviet sport. It makes many unsubstantiated claims about the positive development of Soviet sport but fails to mention performance-enhancing drug-taking, corrupt officials, cheating by athletes, and the insufficient sports facilities for rural dwellers. Different Cold War-era works consulted include the British published *Let's Visit Uzbekistan* (1988),⁸ and the Soviet published *Uzbekistan* (1987)⁹ and *Uzbekistan Questions and Answers* (1987).¹⁰

Our research's secondary sources are British, European and United States studies published during the Cold War and the post-Soviet era. James Riordan's publications (1980, 1988, 1991, 1993) are helpful starting points about Soviet sport and result from Soviet Union fieldwork notes, Soviet newspaper stories, and Soviet and Western literature. Riordan explains the evolution of modern and traditional sports in the Soviet Union with insightful and non-biased observations. Other Western texts provide us with discussion on the broader themes of Soviet modernity and culture: Michael Rywkin (1990)¹¹ critically focuses upon the colonial and authoritarian nature of the Soviet Union, while Akiner (1993) researches the complexity and nuances of the relationship between Moscow and Central Asia. The edited book

⁷ A. Timofeyev, and Y. Kopytkin, *Soviet Sport: The Success Story*. Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1987.

⁸ Frances Wilkins, *Let's Visit Uzbekistan*. London: Macmillan, 1988.

⁹ Gulhammid Sobratee, *Uzbekistan*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1987.

¹⁰ E. Khodjayev and V. Mizhiritsky, *Uzbekistan: Questions and Answers*. Tashkent: 1987.

¹¹ Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1990; Michael Rywkin, *Soviet Society Today*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1990.

Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society by Nikolaus Katzer, Sandra Budy, Alexandra Kohring, and Manfred Zeller (2010)¹² explains the current European thinking about the Soviet sports question. Susan Grant's *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (2013)¹³ uses archival research and contains a chapter about the rural citizens and the non-Russian minorities.

In part one, 'Theory and Concepts', we will define Soviet modernity and culture and the relationship between Marxism-Leninism and physical culture and sport. In the section about 'Gorbachev's reforms 1986 to 1991,' we review perestroika and glasnost (the open discussion of political and social issues). An explanation of how perestroika impacted sport follows. In part two, we discuss sports implementation in Uzbekistan between 1985 and 1991. The topics evaluated are Uzbek society, the rural-urban divide, the sportspeople, and the sports facilities in the republic. In part three, we analyse the impact of Soviet sport in Uzbekistan; the topics outlined are Uzbekistan's Spartakiad ranking (a unionwide sports competition held in Moscow every four years),¹⁴ Olympic athletes, and the continuity of traditional sports. A final section briefly comments on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the former Soviet athletes' performance at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona.

Theory and Concepts

Soviet modernity: culture and physical culture

The world's first communist government formed after the 1917 Russian Revolution. The Bolshevik communists were motivated by Marxism-Leninism; this ideology justified their state power seizure and

¹² Nikolaus Katzer and Sandra Budy and Alexandra Kohring and Manfred Zeller, *Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society*. Frankfurt: CampusVerlag, 2010.

¹³ Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s*. London: Routledge, 2013.

¹⁴ The Spartakiad included Olympic and non-Olympic sports. The elite athletes are selected for the Olympic Games teams; however, the Spartakiad event involved millions of amateur athletes from across the Soviet Union.

legitimated their political authority. They claimed the role of political vanguard leading the masses (the dictatorship of the proletariat). Their official policy was to build a workers' society of equal citizens and the fair distribution of natural resources, goods and services. The final point of this was a utopia: a society said to represent pure or full communism. All Soviet citizens, regardless of ethnicity, would share, through universal education and indoctrination, a unionwide civic identity and culture.¹⁵

In this model, 'Soviet modernity' meant transforming the pre-1917 social order into a scientific-atheist communistic society. Religion and traditional culture, dynastic rule, rural life and premodern agriculture, kin and regional communities are replaced with science, popular sovereignty, the nation-state, citizenship, and up-to-date work practices—this 'modernisation' comprised of rationalisation, industrialisation, bureaucratisation, and urbanisation. Stalin's social interventionist method, after 1928, was top-down and sought to transform the multinational Soviet Union forcibly. In doing so, most bourgeois and upper classes, religious believers, and ethnic nationalists were labelled the 'enemies of the people' and imprisoned or murdered by the communist regime.

The 'Soviet culture' was one strand of the Soviet modernity project and devised to integrate and help control the citizens regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or age. In the Soviet Union, physical culture always existed in a symbiotic relationship with modernisation, socialisation, indoctrination, and mass entertainment. For instance, modern sports were a supposed remedy to religious belief, alcohol consumption, prostitution, and crime.¹⁶ Stalin's Cultural Revolution, 1928 to 1931, was to accelerate replacing traditional cultures in the republics. Central Asia typified the pre-industrial, conservative, and guild based society ripe for modernisation in the central planners' eyes. In particular, Central Asian culture and society were viewed by Moscow as 'backward',

¹⁵ See Sevetk Akyildiz, "'Learn, learn, learn!'" Soviet style in Uzbekistan: Implementation and planning', *Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy*, ed. Sevetk Akyildiz and Richard Carlson, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 11-31.

¹⁶ James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.7.

superstitious, and patriarchal.¹⁷ Edward Said writes that *'This twinning of power and legitimacy, one force obtaining in the world of direct domination, the other in the cultural sphere, is a characteristic of classical imperial hegemony.'*¹⁸

The origins of Soviet values and norms, universal literacy and education, costume and material life, intellectual and artistic works, and town planning and architecture are found in Europeanised Russian high and popular cultures. Its name was Sovietisation. The Russian language became the official language (known as Russification). In the context of the Soviet nationalities policy and in creating the Soviet people (*Sovetski narod*), the acculturation channels (including sport) were to 'bring together' (*sblizhenie*) and ultimately 'merge' (*sliyanie*) the Soviet nations into one communist society. Nonetheless, national traits would remain; ever since the 1930s, elements of the national costume, architectural styles, and traditional sport were incorporated into the Sovietisation process.¹⁹

The roots of physical culture are in nineteenth-century Europe and society's industrialisation, urbanisation, military training, and nationalism. During the 1930s and 1940s, Stalin looked to Western development patterns, and physical culture was one of many foreign borrowings that the CPSU would re-engineer to suit its ideology. In the Soviet form, says Grant, physical culture *'covered a wide spectrum ranging from hygiene and health issues to sports, defence interests, labour concerns, leisure, education, and general cultural enlightenment'*.²⁰ The CPSU reports that it consisted of four components: *'organised physical education, playful activities, active leisure pursuits and sport'*.²¹ The centralised physical culture formed a key role in urban living and the identity of the Soviet citizenry. The CPSU

¹⁷ See Ali F. Igmen, 'The Emergence of Soviet Houses of Culture in Kyrgyzstan', *Reconstructing the House of Culture*, ed. Brian Donahoe and Joachim Otto Habeck. New York: Berghahn, 2011, p.163-188.

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage, 1994, p.291.

¹⁹ Sevket Akyildiz, and Richard Carlson, *Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy*. London: Routledge, 2014.

²⁰ Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport*, p. 1.

²¹ *Entsiklopedichesky slovar' po fizicheskoi kul'ture I sportu*, Vol. III (Moscow, 1963), p.226, cited in Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, p. 4.

advanced organised leisure and a healthy lifestyle to create energetic citizens for work and the army. The Ready for Labour and Defence Programme was established in March 1931 and included diet and health, fitness routines, public hygiene, physical education and sport. In this paper, 'modern sport' denotes sports' rules and codes, clubs and services, sportspeople and athletes, coaching and training staff, spectators and fans. We refer to modern aquatic sports, ball games, combat sports, equestrian sports, field and track sports, martial arts, racket sports, and snow sports. Riordan says: '*Organised sport is regarded as a playful, competitive physical or mental activity, based on rules and norms, with the object of achieving a result.*'²²

Central Asian and Russian folk sport had roots in communal gatherings, military-training, and work-related strength training. In societies undergoing modernisation, folk sports survive if they remain linked with group identity. Included in folk sports are wrestling, martial arts, archery, and equestrian sports.

Reforms 1986 to 1991: perestroika and sport

During the 1980s, after 60 years of centralised government and a command economy, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc republics faced a cycle of significant economic and social crises. The military withdrawal from the Soviet-Afghan War (1979 to 1989) raised a question about Moscow's strategic aims, while the Chernobyl nuclear energy disaster (26th April 1986) produced a cloud of pollution that spread beyond the borders of the Soviet Union into Western Europe.

In an attempt to reform and perpetuate the communist system, Gorbachev implemented glasnost and perestroika and included anti-alcohol, anti-bribery, and anti-corruption campaigns. His reforms commenced in 1985 when he had implemented a policy with the slogan (*uskorenie*) to speed up political, social, and economic development. However, during perestroika, the new political milieu encouraged the criticism of corrupt state officials to make communist politicians and senior *apparatchiks* (CPSU members) more accountable to the Soviet

²² Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, p.3.

people. While in the 15 Soviet republics, Gorbachev replaced the older, conservative-minded CPSU leadership with younger, more dynamic colleagues. The economic reforms were to reduce government debt and partly liberalise the economy. At the national and republic level, the aim was to foster a more dynamic society and promote individual initiative and entrepreneurship. The planned savings from reducing military spending would go to healthcare, welfare, and cultural projects.

The Soviet citizens and nations, after decades of state-sponsored cultural repression and denied liberal freedoms, began to voice their concerns about the authoritarian-bureaucratic nature of the party-state model. Also, the non-Russian peoples started to discuss their national interests and 'constitutional rights' openly.²³ Optimism was in the air, and the Slavic and Central Asian people were growing more confident to articulate their cultural and social grievances, and in some cases, at local council meetings, political demands were directed at Moscow. At the time Rywkin said about Gorbachev's reforms: '*What will be more interesting, though, is whether Soviet society can develop a language of real political discourse.*'²⁴ The unfolding and collapse of the Soviet Union between 1990 and December 1991 are noted below in part three.

Change of cultural policy was not a new phenomenon in the Soviet Union; it was present since Stalin's Cultural Revolution. However, perestroika's introduction made permissible a wave of sports policies that were more far-reaching than anything since the introduction of the Labour and Defence Programme in 1931. It was the most significant revision of physical culture management for nearly 55 years in Russia and Central Asia. The bureaucratic and functionalist element of sports culture was reduced and replaced by the partial economic liberalisation, involving commodification, commercialisation and professionalisation of athletes. It started the de-regulation of the centralised sports system, increased self-regulation of sports clubs, and the self-financing of leisure services.

²³ Rafis Abazov, *Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2007, p.49-50.

²⁴ Rywkin *Soviet Society Today*, 1990, 182. See Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*. London: The Bodley Head, 2009.

The policy of free or low-cost access to sports facilities ended for the masses as the managers of gymnasiums, swimming pools, sports centres, and stadiums introduced, or increased, entrance fees. In 1987, co-operative sports ventures and health clubs opened. In the same year, the eight top trade union sports societies underwent a reorganisation to ensure that sport-for-all was a priority.²⁵

Newly permitted sports, like golf and baseball, created new opportunities for some sportspeople and entrepreneurs, but they also challenged the established state-controlled sports model.²⁶ The new sports contained individualistic, monetisation and gambling components that could weaken the significance of Soviet values at a personal and societal level. In reality, the traditional horse races had remained part of the folk games in Russia and Central Asia throughout the 70 years of Soviet rule, as did gambling.²⁷

Perestroika happened at a moment when the state-managed sport increasingly lost relevance in the lived reality of Soviet youth. Generational change revealed that youth with no experience of the Second World War hardships (the Great Patriotic War 1941-45) had a different mentality to their parents and required a tailored youth culture policy. The youth viewed the Ready for Labour and Defence Programme – the bedrock of the Soviet sport culture –, and the *Komsomol* youth movement as out-of-date.²⁸ Young adults, particularly

²⁵ Jim Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules: Soviet Sport and Perestroika', *Soviet Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, (January 1990), pp.133-145, pp.133-34. Riordan said the: '*The mood of glasnost appears more to favour sport for all than special privileges for the gifted*, pp.139-140. In fact, back in 1981, the CPSU leader Brezhnev said that sports schools and clubs should not only cater only for the elite athletes but broaden their membership in the local society.

²⁶ Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules', 140. The sports of golf, baseball, Grand Prix motor racing, American football, snooker, darts, billiards, bodybuilding, dog races (and horse racing), recently imported from the United States and Western Europe into the Soviet Union, had a distinct commercial flavour.

²⁷ Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules', 1990, 141-41. Horse racing had always continued in Russia and Central Asia under the Communist Party but had not been acknowledged so by the authorities.

²⁸ Sports leisure consumption changed in the 1970s and 1980s as families increasingly chose to remain at home to view their sports on television rather than participate in stadiums and clubs' collective culture. Source: Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, p.250.

in Russian and Central Asian cities, began establishing unofficial and semi-official sports, leisure and cultural groups, clubs, and venues. Increasingly they were drawn to Western popular youth trends.²⁹ In response, Gorbachev allowed them to run independently from the *Komsomol* and acknowledged the appeal of Western popular music, fashion, and sports.^{30,31} He also permitted native cultural groups and leisure clubs to operate self-reliantly.³²

Nevertheless, in 1989, both the Soviet Union and Soviet sport, despite social upheavals, were thought by many Soviet citizens and Western observers to continue. Rywkin understood that the Soviet Union was a complex and contradictory society and that Gorbachev's reforms had unleashed national and religious aspirations within the Soviet republics, still, about sport, Rywkin says: '*The future of Soviet sport looks bright. It is popular, financially well supported, with good training facilities, large numbers of eager participants, and mass audiences. Its athletes will profit if the current relaxation permits them to enter more worldwide events and gain recognition abroad.*'³³

²⁹ Jim Riordan, 'Soviet Youth: Pioneers of Change', *Soviet Studies* 40, no. 4 (October 1988), 556-72. Fierman reports that in *Komsomolets Uzbekistana* (15 September 1984) the *Komsomol*, in combating Western products, printed the Soviet imagery on mass-produced clothing, sporting goods, and tote bags for the domestic youth. Fierman, 'Western Popular Culture and the Soviet Youth', p.25.

³⁰ Riordan, 'Soviet Youth: Pioneers of Change', 556-72, Riordan writes that students at schools, colleges, and universities were given a greater say in their choice of sports activities.

³¹ Gorbachev's sport policy impacted on women in terms of equal access to sport. Before Gorbachev, despite official statements about gender equality, Soviet women athletes were prohibited from water polo, ice hockey, boxing, football, martial arts, weightlifting, bodybuilding, and wrestling. The CPSU said these sports were not suitable for women because of biological, physiological, and social reasons. Gorbachev, changed this policy to enable female athletes to participate in all sports. Also, before Gorbachev, Soviet athletes with disabilities were excluded from representing their country in sport. After 1986, Moscow accepted that its athletes with disabilities could represent the Soviet Union, and a team participated at the Seoul 1988 Summer Paralympics. Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules', 1990, p. 136-37.

³² Riordan, 'Soviet Youth: Pioneers of Change', p. 556-72.

³³ Rywkin, *Soviet Society Today*, 1990, p.167.

Implementation: Uzbekistan's sportspeople and facilities

To explain Soviet sports culture in Uzbekistan during the late 1980s, we describe the republic's population profile and society. Following on is an outline of the rural-urban divide in modern sports development. The focus then shifts to discuss the numbers of sportspeople in Uzbekistan and its built sports environment.³⁴ We are examining the numbers and types of athletes and the breadth and nature of Uzbekistan's sports facilities.

The Uzbeks are Turkish-speaking people, Turkic by race, and majority Sunni Hanafi Muslim. Uzbekistan's total population between 1924 and 1985 grew from almost 5 million to 18 million people. During this time, ethnic Uzbeks formed about 70 per cent of Uzbekistan's total population. In Uzbekistan, ethnic Tajiks form large communities in Bukhara and Samarkand. Since 1924, Uzbekistan was a multicultural society that included other Soviet nations like the Russians, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs, Tatars, and several of Stalin's deported peoples resided in the republic. Interethnic marriage, urbanisation, and radical secular upbringing influenced the Uzbeks' self-identification and the other ethnic groups.³⁵ The Russian settlers had first arrived in the region in the late nineteenth century after Central Asia had become part of the Russian imperial empire. During the Soviet era, more than 1.6 million Slavic people arrived in Uzbekistan as professionals and technical staff to assist with the Sovietisation of Central Asia and reside in a warm, sunny climate.

The CPSU, for financial reasons and to socialise the greatest number of citizens, concentrated its cultural management policy on cities and

³⁴ Jim Riordan has investigated the building of Soviet sport in Central Asia and Uzbekistan from 1920 to 1982, *Sport in Soviet Society* (1980); see also Sevet Akyildiz in 'Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin: Uzbekistan from 1925 to 1952' (2019); 'Cultural Change in Central Asia: Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories in Uzbekistan, 1964 to 1982' (2020).

³⁵ Sevet Akyildiz, 'Sport has become the privilege of the millions': Physical culture in Uzbekistan 1924-1991, *Proceedings of the XII Biennial Conference of the European Society for Central Asian Studies: Central Asia: A Maturing Field*, University of Cambridge, ed. Alexander Morrison and S.S. Saxena. Cambridge, Cambridge Scientific Publishers, 2016, 2; see also Viktor Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*. London: Hutchinson, 1988, p.2.

urban centres. Since the 1920s, Moscow's goal was to encourage the Soviet Union's rural majority population to migrate to the cities internally. The regime found this problematic in Central Asia; for instance, between 1917 and 1991, the Uzbeks, through choice, remained a mostly rural population. The Uzbeks' urban and rural distribution, and the other Central Asians, indirectly challenged the communist modernisation agenda. Almost 81.7 per cent of the Uzbeks within Uzbekistan were rural in 1926; in 1970, it reduced to 77.0 per cent.³⁶ The urbanisation in Central Asia was also slow because the rural population's natural birth rate was high. The rural-urban divide in the Soviet Union and Central Asia meant that Soviet development and modernisation spread unevenly across society. However, after the Second World War, Central Asia's key urban centres increasingly resembled the Russian and Ukrainian cities.³⁷

In physical culture and sport, this policy meant less spending on sports infrastructure in the rural districts. Indeed, throughout 70 years of Soviet physical culture and sport, the rural towns and villages, in contrast with the cities, had fewer facilities, inadequate funding, and lacked expert sports personnel.³⁸ Modern sport culture was less available than in urban centres. The large regional town of Ferghana, approximately 420km east of Uzbekistan's capital city of Tashkent, might have offered some modern sports institutions and services. However, outside of the regional centre, the majority population of Ferghana Oblast (an administrative region within Uzbekistan) did not experience the complete socialisation and health benefits of physical culture. In this agricultural region, traditional sports were popular before the 1917 Revolution, which continued to be the case afterwards. The Uzbek Central Committee Commission report (July 1989) mentions weakness in modern sports implementation – '*One third of the schools*

³⁶ Shirin Akiner, *The Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, p.277.

³⁷ See Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930-1966*, USA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

³⁸ Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society*, pp. 99-123. In the 1930s, Grant writes: *There were also more fundamental problems with the GTO and the GTO officials in the regions and provinces... [in the state farms] GTO instructors lied about their qualifications, exaggerated norm statistics, forged norm cards...*, and instructors lacked authority among the locals. p.39.

*are in unfit buildings: half of them lack athletic facilities and auditoriums, standard cafeterias; 70 percent of them are operating on two or more shifts. Only 44 percent of the rural population is equipped with water pipelines ... The network of children's preschool institutions, physical culture and sports facilities, and health care facilities is not developed fast enough.*³⁹

Modern sportspeople within non-Western societies generally indicate that a sports culture has either been promoted by a government policy or imported by individuals (like business people) and the self-organised sports societies. The numbers of amateur athletes reveal politicians' seriousness to make the citizens healthier and fitter for work, enjoyment, and national defence. While the elite athletes highlight the level of sports excellence a society has achieved. The following examines the numbers of amateur and elite athletes in Soviet-era Uzbekistan. It is a good indicator of the regime's investment in sport and its Labour and Defence Programme, and sports' mass popularity. To do this, we have used Soviet statistical data about sportspeople and facilities, as there are no equivalent Western sources available. As we mentioned above, the reader needs to be cautious of the bias and unreliability of Soviet data. Despite this, and in consideration of the primary and secondary evidence, the Soviet sources provide us with a general working picture of modern sport in Uzbekistan under Gorbachev.

One Soviet secondary source published for a Western audience is *Soviet Sport: The Success Story* (1987); it reports: 'About six million people regularly engage in physical fitness programs and sport in

³⁹ Report of the Uzbek CP Central Committee Commission, 'On the Tragic Events in Fergana Oblast and the Responsibility of Party, Soviet, and Law Enforcement Organs', 18300786b, *Tashkent Pravda Vostoka*, 30 July 1989, cited in USSR Report (15 November 1989) Soviet Union Political Affairs, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Springfield, Virginia, United States of America, JPRS-UPA-89-060, p. 45, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a346350.pdf> (accessed 7th Aug 2020). In the summer of 1989, the above report was produced in response to local Uzbeks street fighting with the Meskhetian Turk community over state resources in the Fergana region. To protect the latter, Moscow airlifted the Meskhetian Turk minority to new homes in towns outside of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan.⁴⁰ Let us consider this claim, in 1985 we know the total population in Uzbekistan was almost 18 million people, and predominantly young, so the figure of six million sportspeople might be plausible if all teenage and adult citizens, regardless of their skills and rural or urban location, are classified as participants.⁴¹

Furthermore, *Soviet Sport: The Success Story* highlights that each year: nearly two million citizens of Uzbekistan attained the physical fitness certificate; almost 1,820,000 'athletes' gained a mass sports ranking (with 19,000 receiving the first ranking badge); 5,000 athletes qualified for the title of Candidate of Master of Sport, and 300 athletes achieved Master of Sport status. These are the highest sports training and achievement awards in the Soviet Union.⁴²

By looking at the 1980s sources, it is fair to say that modern sports culture operated in urban Uzbekistan. The Western secondary source, *Let's Visit Uzbekistan* (1988), published in London for an English-speaking audience, is not a comprehensive examination of sport, and, in the climate of the Cold War, it might have been subject to a degree of (self-)censorship by its editors. Indeed, the Soviet Union was a closed society, and many Western researchers found it difficult to visit because of visa restrictions. As a consequence, they would have relied upon the information that the CPSU shared with them. Still, the book, *Let's Visit Uzbekistan* highlights the breadth and scope of modern sports and recreational pastimes in the republic at the time. The book mentions activities that most sports studies about Soviet-era Central Asia have ignored, such as winter sports, hunting and fishing, and mountaineering. While its content is just a snapshot of the topic, it reinforces the argument that by the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet sport culture was well established in the urban-centres of the Soviet periphery. Moreover, the book's author Frances Wilkins highlights the normality of Soviet sport in everyday life: 'Football is very popular with

⁴⁰ Timofeyev, *Soviet Sport*, p.58.

⁴¹ Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, 38; See also Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crises?* p.74. Akiner notes that 16.7 million Uzbeks resided in Uzbekistan in 1989, the 'below working age range' was 42.9 per cent, while the working age (16-65) was 49.2 per cent.

⁴² Timofeyev, *Soviet Sport*, p.58.

*boys, who even play it indoors when the ground is covered with snow in the winter. Basketball and volley-ball are also popular, and tennis is gradually beginning to be played, although there are still not many courts. Winter sports are also popular almost everywhere. These include ice-skating (often in open-air), ski-ing and tobogganing. There are now also a few ice-hockey teams in Uzbekistan, as ice-hockey has been a favourite sport in various other parts of the USSR for a great many years.*⁴³ Tennis courts appeared in Tashkent during perestroika, but tennis was a niche sport that required self-funding and access to private resources. Times were changing, as tennis had been dismissed in the early 1920s by the Bolsheviks as individualistic and bourgeois.⁴⁴

Rural and outdoor sports were popular too; this makes sense in a mostly rural population. Though fishing, mountaineering, and hunting with a modern weapon are not strictly classifiable as traditional or folk games. However, each of these originates in traditional sports and leisure: military preparedness, stamina training and royal hunting parties.⁴⁵ Wilkins says, *'Fishing is very popular in Uzbekistan, particularly with boys. They fish in nearly all the rivers and lakes, mainly for perch, roach, pike and chub. Mountaineering has always been a favourite sport in Uzbekistan. There are mountaineering clubs both for young people and adults in all the mountainous areas. Other people like to go out with a gun, although they do not usually manage to shoot anything more exciting than a few hares or pheasants.'*⁴⁶

The building and development of the sports facilities, physical education and training sites commenced in the late 1920s; however, after Hitler attacked Russia, Ukraine and Crimea in 1941, it was paused. After Germany's surrender in 1945, the Soviet Union emerged as a superpower—testing an atomic bomb in 1949 on the Kazakhstan Steppe. It was the moment that the Cold War emerged between the Soviet Union and the Western powers, played out in proxy wars, economic rivalry, and the cultural sphere. For instance, Moscow re-

⁴³ Frances Wilkins, *Let's Visit Uzbekistan*. London: Macmillan, 1988, pp.90-91.

⁴⁴ Dr. Shirin Akiner, SOAS, University of London, Master of Arts seminar, Spring 2000.

⁴⁵ See Akyildiz, *Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin*, pp.522-24.

⁴⁶ Wilkins, *Let's Visit Uzbekistan*, p. 91.

invested energy and resources into expanding physical culture and sport. Sports were a soft power tool for the East and West throughout the Cold War era.

All categories of sports infrastructure and services opened to cater to popular demand and a growing local population.⁴⁷ The CPSU promoted sports culture, and sports continued to grow at amateur and elite levels in Soviet society between 1950 and 1985. Indeed, the modern sports facilities were a visual and physical presence on the cityscape to say that the socialist lifestyle was a reality. In the Soviet book *Soviet Sport: The Success Story*, Uzbekistan's built sports infrastructure of the late 1980s appears plentiful. We can assume that the government statistics given below include dedicated sports sites, all school and college sites, and factory and farm sports facilities. These are the official figures given: 175 available stadiums, 3,000 gyms, 50 swimming pools, 2,400 shooting ranges and galleries, and 40,000 football pitches. Twenty thousand sports specialists and 642,000 volunteer coaches worked at approximately 12,000 physical fitness and sports collectives. The 642,000 volunteer coaches mentioned in the list probably include teachers, general assistants, and parents. Furthermore, nearly 4,000 sites, such as educational institutions, factories, and farms, provided daily morning exercise sessions.⁴⁸ The provision of sports sites mirrored the perestroika reforms allowing new sports. A special children's baseball school existed in Tashkent; by 1988, 30 baseball clubs operated in the Soviet Union.⁴⁹

The CPSU used the expansion of modern sports culture to showcase its success in terms of 'progress' and acculturation. The infrequent Western visitors to Central Asia received official tours of local sports sites; for instance, the March 1984 tour of Uzbekistan by British socialist and writer John Summer included an official visit to Chimen Winter

⁴⁷ Akyildiz, 'Cultural Change in Central Asia: Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories in Uzbekistan, 1964 to 1982'.

⁴⁸ Timofeyev, *Soviet Sport*, p. 58.

⁴⁹ A. Bezruchenko, 'Soviet Baseball Moves on from First Base', *Soviet Weekly*, 30 April 1988, p. 14, cited in Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules', 1990, p. 140.

Sports Complex.⁵⁰

Despite these developments, it is worth noting that in terms of stadium-size, the Soviet Union did not compare favourably with the developed Western states. Can we say the authoritarian regime was worried about crowd control? Particularly when large numbers of excitable male spectators, perhaps from different ethnic backgrounds, gathered together at football matches?⁵¹ After all, football hooliganism was an issue in the late European Soviet Union era. Even by 1991, the Soviet Union had only eight stadiums with a seating capacity greater than 50,000. These stadiums were at Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi, Erevan, Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Kiev and Minsk. In contrast, in the same year, in California (United States), nine college stadiums with a seating capacity of 50,000 existed.⁵²

Impact: Spartakiad ranking, Olympic athletes, traditional sport

The impact of Soviet sports culture on Uzbek society and the Soviet Union was notable in cultural change and mass participation. It also gave Uzbekistan recognition within the federal state and internationally. The elite athletes and teams' success helped strengthen the Soviet civic identity and sense of belonging among citizens. To explain this further, we look at—Uzbekistan's Spartakiad ranking of 1983, the Olympic Games athletes, and the continuity and popularity of the traditional sports.

⁵⁰ S. Vahobov, 'English Writer Gets Acquainted with Life of Our People', *Tashkent Ozbekiston Adabiyoti Va San'ati*, 30 March 1984, p. 7, cited in USSR Report (21 August 1984) *Political and Sociological Affairs, Soviet Southern Republics*, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Springfield, Virginia, United States of America, JPRS-UPS-84-073, p. 72 (Author's personal copy 2020, source: <https://discover.dtic.mil>).

⁵¹ Rywkin mentions one football fan riot in 1969 between Uzbeks and Russians in Tashkent, p.119.

⁵² Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.160; see also Akyildiz, 'Sport has become the privilege of the millions', Riordan, cited in Brown, Archie, and Michael Kaser and Gerald Smith, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Russia and the former Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.498.

By the 1980s, Uzbekistan's sports institutions and coaching centres had been in existence for several decades. The sports sites, working in collaboration with the higher education institutes and the *Komsomol*, selected and prepared the athletes to compete against the best opponents from Russia, the Baltic republics and Ukraine.⁵³ Riordan says that since 1972, Uzbekistan was a middle-ranking nation in Soviet sports.⁵⁴ The Spartakiad of the Peoples ranking is a useful indicator of the progress made by each Soviet republic in 1983. On the eve of Gorbachev's new role as CPSU leader, Uzbekistan athletes had already achieved recognition and status in Soviet domestic sport. The Uzbek athletes' sports team won sixth place at the 1983 Summer Spartakiad.⁵⁵ The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics, so the sixth position means that Uzbekistan remained a middle-ranking sports nation. B. Allamuradov, the first secretary of Uzbekistan's *Komsomol*, spoke in January 1984 about the importance of physical culture for young people and the need to build on recent achievements – *'One of the chief directions of our work is the training of physically strong young people with great endurance. The possibilities for improving the quality of mass physical culture and fitness work are constantly expanding in the republic. A confirmation of this is the sixth place position which was taken by our command at the VIII Summer Spartakiad of the Peoples of the USSR.'*⁵⁶ Riordan notes the early effects of perestroika and the growing scepticism towards state sport. He reports that the 1986 Summer Spartakiad *'passed off in a low-key fashion with no*

⁵³ The Uzbekistan Institute of Physical Culture was at U1, Achunbabaeva 6, 1-a, Tashkent, SSR.

⁵⁴ Akyildiz says, *'... by 1972 Uzbekistan was classified as a middle-ranking sports republic: Georgia, Belorussia, Ukraine, and Russia had 190 or more participants per 1,000 people; Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Estonia had 160 to 180 participants per 1,000 people, while Azerbaijan, Lithuania and Latvia had "between 129 and 145 participants per 1,000 people".'* Source: Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 307, in Akyildiz, *Cultural Change in Central Asia Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories in Uzbekistan, 1964 to 1982*, p. 45.

⁵⁵ B. Allamuradov, 'Educate Patriots', *Tashkent Pravda Vostoka*, 21st January 1984, p. 3, cited in USSR Report (29 March 1984) Political and Sociological Affairs, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Springfield, Virginia, United States of America, JPRS-UPS-84-030, p. 80, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA371939.pdf> (accessed 4 Dec 2020).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

*participation figures for the first time since the Games were held in 1956.*⁵⁷ The Olympic Games also saw Uzbekistan's athletes achieve success and maintain a standard comparable with the other Soviet republics.

The Olympic Games provided the CPSU with a platform to present its form of socialist modernity to a global radio and television audience. The achievements of the multi-ethnic Soviet athletes at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games gave the communist regime status in world sports culture. The CPSU used its medal-winning athletes for propaganda purposes to show the vitality and health of the communist society. Back in Central Asia, the internationally recognised Central Asian athletes became heroes and icons of the Soviet people; their industriousness and teamwork were examples of Soviet values.⁵⁸ The regime's ideologues manipulated the impact of a local Uzbek or Tatar Olympic medal-winner on impressionable young Uzbeks or Tatars. The winning athlete's face and body appeared on cinema news stories, on Young Pioneer and *Komsomol* magazine covers, and classroom posters. Indeed, athletes became role-models for children and teenagers to emulate, and their values and behaviour were something that even adults could acknowledge as conforming with Soviet behavioural norms.⁵⁹

Ever since the Soviet Union Team's first appearance at the Olympic Games, Uzbekistan athletes won medals. Two Uzbekistan residents participated in the Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952: the Uzbek, Galina Shamray (women's rhythmic gymnastics) won gold, while Russian Sergey Popov participated in athletics.⁶⁰ In the spirit of collectivism, retired athletes would be re-employed by the sports system as coaches

⁵⁷ Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules', p. 134.

⁵⁸ Dean Allen, "'National Heroes': Sport and the Creation of Icons', *Sport in History* 33, no. 4 (December 2013): 584-94; see also Hassan, David, 'Introduction: What makes a Sporting Icon?', *Sport in History* 33, no. 4 (December 2013): p. 417-26.

⁵⁹ Jenny Brine, Maureen Perrie, Andrew Sutton, *Home, School and Leisure in the Soviet Union*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980.

⁶⁰ Further examples are listed in International Olympic Committee (Uzbekistan): 'Uzbekistan', *The Olympic Movement*, 2015, <http://www.olympic.org/uzbekistan> (accessed 4 Dec 2020); see also National Olympic Committee of Uzbekistan, <http://www.olympic.uz/en/> (accessed 4 Dec 2020).



to train the next generation of medal winners. Despite the difficulties of living in an authoritarian-run society, these athletes show that a working relationship was possible between sportspeople and the CPSU, and both Soviet patriotism and international socialist friendship could be generated, even in the peripheral, less-developed Soviet regions.⁶¹

The involvement of Uzbekistan's athletes at the Olympic Games was dependent upon Moscow. During moments of tense politics between Moscow and Washington, the Uzbekistan athletes stayed away from international sports events. David Goldblatt and Johnny Acton explain how the 1980 Summer Olympic Games (Moscow) fell victim to the Cold War antagonism between the communist East and the liberal-democratic West. These authors say, '*Moscow put on an extravaganza to demonstrate the sporting and economic power of communism but the intended audience didn't show up, as the USA decided to boycott the event following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.*'⁶² In response, the communist regimes shunned the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles (United States). These included the Soviet Union, East Germany, the Eastern Bloc communist regimes, Iran, Libya, South Yemen, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia. Goldblatt and Acton say: '*While the communist nations staged a tit-for-tat boycott, La-La land mobilised its corporations and the magic of the movies. This was the first Olympic Games to make a profit, amidst a riot of sponsorship and Venice Beach glamour.*'⁶³ Two years later, Gorbachev introduced perestroika and the partial commercialisation of the Soviet sports system.

The clash of ideologies continued. The communist states of Cuba, North Korea, Nicaragua, and Albania boycotted the 1988 Summer Seoul Olympics Games (South Korea). However, the Soviet Union team did participate. Uzbek gold winners were Muharbek Khadartsev and Arsen Fadzaev in wrestling. Both had graduated from the Uzbekistan State Institute for Physical Culture in Tashkent. Other Uzbekistan residents

⁶¹ Sevket Akyildiz, 'Olympic Culture in Soviet Uzbekistan 1951-1991: International Prestige and Local Heroes', *Polyvocia—The SOAS Journal of Graduate Research* 3 (March 2011), 1-16. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/sjpr/edition-3/file67219.pdf> (30 Nov 2020).

⁶² David Goldblatt and Johnny Acton, *How to Watch the Olympics* (London: Profile, 2012), p.387.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

had success: Rodion Gataulin won silver in pole-vaulting, and Nail Muhamadiarov won silver in wrestling. Sergey Zabolotnov competed in the medley relay 4x100m swimming, winning bronze.⁶⁴

Stories about the Uzbek champions were published and widely read in the unionwide sports press (*Sovetsky sports newspaper*). They became household names and a talking point for people in the workplace. It was another sign of how Soviet culture had taken root in the Uzbek society; it also impacted local publications and the acquisition of Russian and foreign words into the Uzbeks' everyday language usage. Since the 1930s, with the introduction of universal education and Russian as the state's official language, Russian and European sports-related loan words (*futbol*, tennis, billiards, sport, medal) formed part of the new lexicon for the Turkic-speaking Uzbeks. Locally published sports literature contained sports news as well as moral and political propaganda. The *Uzbekistan Athlete (Fizkul'turnik Uzbekistana)* had a circulation of 101,000 in 1973.⁶⁵ The written word was supplemented during the 1970s and 1980s by Soviet television broadcasts of international sports events.

Traditional sports remained common and were actively pursued in the rural regions and during national holidays everywhere. Despite several decades of CPSU social engineering and interventionism, it was the case. As mentioned above, most Uzbeks lived, through choice, in the rural and middle-sized towns of Uzbekistan. How can we explain traditional sports' continuity in a hard-line socialist society that sought to make all citizens modern and progressive? Firstly, traditional sports were permitted to continue because the communists lacked the finances to build gymnasiums and sports halls in every Central Asian town and village. The regime utilised local educational sites and workplaces to fill the sports provision gap. In comparison, the urban centres and cities, the sites of socialist modernity, received the funds and personnel necessary to establish the modern sports culture. Secondly, the traditional sport was homogenised and institutionalised by Stalin and the CPSU; this enabled the regime to (re-)produce national

⁶⁴ Akyildiz, 'Olympic Culture in Soviet Uzbekistan 1951-1991', p. 13.

⁶⁵ N.N. Shneidman, *The Soviet Road to Olympus: Theory and Practice of Soviet Physical Culture and Sport*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, pp.166-67.

identity within a Soviet framework. The incorporation of specific elements of native culture in architecture, dance, and the arts, immediately after the 1917 Revolution, made the communists appear less cultural imperialist (unlike the case with the imperial Russian settlers). This cultural accommodation by the CPSU was to win hearts and minds, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, when the communists began to transform the Muslim social order. The approach exemplifies the Soviet nationalities policy maxim: 'national in form, socialist in content'.⁶⁶ Thirdly, many rural Central Asians, despite the coercive nature of the CPSU, remained culturally and emotionally attached to a deep sense of history that drew on pre-Soviet identities. In particular, traditional sports held ground in rural regions during annual celebrations and festivals. In this case, traditional sports events were not an act of resistance by Central Asians to the CPSU or its modernism, but a leisure mode based on historical memory that all the generations could appreciate and share.

Fourthly, Uzbek youth's attitude mirrors that of many Soviet youths during perestroika; they increasingly felt that the *Komsomol* and official youth leisure production were not meeting their generation's needs and wants. Traditional sport for some youths was a preference based upon enjoyment and interest. Fifthly, the regime used solid local traditions that nurtured talented wrestlers and weightlifters to supply the Soviet teams. Since the 1930s, the Soviet authorities had awarded medals to the best traditional sports athletes. Timofeyev says, *'Tournaments featuring folk games at various levels are held, up to Republican championships. Both sports rankings and the Master of Sport title are awarded for achievements in such sports. It is a curious fact that many widely-known champions entered top-class sport via folk games.'*⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Akyildiz, 'Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin', 526-27. Timur Dadabaev says: *'Traditionalism in Uzbekistan was preserved, in one way or another, throughout all the years of Soviet rule. To a great extent, the preservation of traditionalism was accomplished by camouflaging traditional features either as the remnants of ethnic celebrations or by incorporating traditionalism into the Soviet system of administration.'* Source: Timur Dadabaev, 'Post-Soviet realities of society in Uzbekistan,' *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 2, (June 2004): p. 141-166, 149.

⁶⁷ Timofeyev, *Soviet Sport*, p.74.

Some Central Asians played and enjoyed both modern and folk sports. Abazov says that football (soccer) was the most popular sport, followed by wrestling, boxing, martial arts, archery, and fencing.⁶⁸ During the mid-1980s, the function and categorisation of traditional sports were looked at anew by one Soviet observer. In 1984, the Soviet journalist Chori Lapitov responded to an earlier newspaper article complaining about the inadequate participation in sport by Uzbekistan's rural youth. Lapitov concedes that young people were not playing football in large numbers; however, he says they participate in traditional sports. He then claimed that in the villages, traditional sports were a part of Soviet sport. During festive celebrations, the CPSU viewed traditional sports as unofficial pastimes, while modern sports were 'real sport'. Lapitov highlights the resilience of traditional sports that predate both Russian imperial colonialism and the CPSU: *'National wrestling and uloq [a traditional equestrian sport] are all still going on at major celebrations in the villages, and at each one they attract the interest of thousands of people. I for one would also call this "real sport"'*.⁶⁹

There are variations of wrestling in Central Asia; for example, standing upright (*kurash*) was practised across Turkic republics; in Uzbekistan, they developed into two main styles named after separate regions, 'Ferghana rules' and 'Bukhara rules'.⁷⁰ Riordan explains that during perestroika, the regime looked at folk sports differently and positively; in fact, Gorbachev sought to include the ethnic minorities in his reforms. Riordan says: *'Furthermore, as well as movement towards caring more for minorities, the Soviet government is also showing signs*

⁶⁸ Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, pp.249-50.

⁶⁹ Chori Lapitov, [Editorial Report] 'On Popularizing', *Tashkent Ozbekiston Adabiyoti Va San'ati*, No. 18, 4 May 1984, p. 2, cited in USSR Report (21 August 1984) *Political and Sociological Affairs, Soviet Southern Republics*, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Springfield, Virginia, United States of America, JPRS-UPS-84-073, p. 57 (Author's personal copy 2020, source: <https://discover.dtic.mil>).

⁷⁰ P. Petrov, 'National Styles of Wrestling in the Soviet Union and the Post-Soviet States: Political and Sociocultural Aspects of Their Development and Use', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 31, no. 4 (2014): p. 405-22, 408.

*of encouraging folk game festivals, especially among non-Russian groups in the population.*⁷¹

The following will outline the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Uzbek athletes competing at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. The collapse of the Soviet Union is complex to explain, with short, medium and long-term factors. Academics have produced many analytical accounts to explain the demise of the Soviet Union and, more broadly, international communism.⁷² Gorbachev's reforms of the Soviet system proved challenging to implement for numerous reasons. In the face of long-standing economic and structural problems, Gorbachev could not implement, manage and institutionalise his new far-reaching reforms. The CPSU old-guard and the bureaucratic establishment favoured the status quo; they feared a loss of power and privileges and thus resisted the reforms or were reluctant to implement them. Furthermore, Seth Bernstein highlights an unintended consequence of the reforms: '*... perestroika challenged the ideological domination the party had enjoyed, however, it undermined the basis for Soviet rule as a whole*'.⁷³ As a result, during 1989 and 1990, from the Baltic to the Caucasus region, ethnic nationalist groups, long disillusioned with the CPSU and the reality of living in a centrally planned economy and closed society, took the first step by demanding national sovereignty.⁷⁴

Notably, the general response among the Central Asian elites and nationalists to the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union's political events was not to turn against the Soviet state and federal union; instead, they called for better political and cultural rights and freedoms.⁷⁵ The framework for national aspirations in Central Asian minds – a region

⁷¹ Riordan, 'Playing to New Rules', p. 137.

⁷² See Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*.

⁷³ Bernstein, *Raised Under Stalin*, p.228. For analysis of the post-perestroika narratives see Timur Dadabaev, 'Evaluations of Perestroika in post-Soviet Central Asia: Public Views in Contemporary Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, no. 49, 2 (June 2016): p. 179-192.

⁷⁴ Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, pp.49-50.

⁷⁵ See Sevket Akyildiz and Richard Carlson, 'Sovietisation in Uzbekistan 1980-1991: Success or Failure?', *Twentieth Century Communism A Journal of International History: Local Communisms*, no. 5 (June 2013): p. 156-174.

isolated from the outside world for over 70 years was found in the existing political apparatus, not by dismantling it.

However, the Central Asians were cautious, so they used a genuine debate about cultural loss and dislocation as a way to question the extreme nature of the CPSU modernisation policies.⁷⁶ The policies made them feel, at times, dislocated from their ethnic past. The citizens called for increased representation of their cultural heritage in national life, even citing the December 1989 Soviet Constitution about the preservation and state support of national culture.⁷⁷ Akiner writes about a deep grievance at play among the Central Asians against the CPSU policies and the '*... enforced westernisation and Sovietisation*'.⁷⁸ Among them, a small group of Uzbek nationalists advocated for the greater use of national culture in government policymaking, especially mainstream Islam, the Uzbek language, and folk culture. Simultaneously, Uzbek environmentalists lobbied politicians to protect the Aral Sea water resources and, more widely, the region's ecology.

Nevertheless, the situation was dynamic; events and circumstances developed to the point that during 1990, the Central Asian republics declared themselves sovereign in the wake of the Baltic republics. However, all of the Central Asian republics supported Gorbachev's call in March 1991 to establish the reformed Soviet Union. His vision failed to materialise, and self-determination seemed the only game in town. The Soviet Union dissolved on 25 December 1991, and all the Soviet republics became independent states.⁷⁹ Akiner describes this change of circumstances: '*As in 1924, when national boundaries had been imposed upon unprepared, largely unwilling Central Asians, so in December 1991, again without consultation or preparation,*

⁷⁶ Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arch of Crisis?* p.20.

⁷⁷ David Lane, *Soviet Society Under Perestroika* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 353-385. About the 1936 Soviet Constitution and modern sport see Articles 119, 123, and 126; in the 1977 'Brezhnev' Constitution (amended in 1989) see Articles 41 (Rest and Leisure) and 46 (Cultural Rights). Article 27, reads: '*In the USSR development of the professional, amateur and folk arts is encouraged in every way*', p.358.

⁷⁸ Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?* p.17.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 29-32; See also Akyildiz and Carlson, 'Sovietisation in Uzbekistan 1980-1991: Success or Failure?', *Twentieth Century Communism A Journal of International History: Local Communisms*, no. 5 (June 2013), p. 156-174.

independence was thrust upon the region. The sham decolonisation of 1924 now, suddenly became a reality'.⁸⁰

Given that, just one year later, it was a sports event that brought the former Soviet republics together in Spain. The Barcelona Summer 1992 Olympic Games were unique for the Uzbek athletes because the Soviet Union no longer existed. A newly formed United Team represented several former Soviet nations, including Uzbekistan and Russia. The ex-Soviet athletes had prepared years ahead for the 1992 Olympic Games, and the collective success of the United Team was evidence that Soviet sport continued to deliver quality athletes during glasnost and perestroika. Indeed, the United Team topped the final medals table, beating the United States. Athletes from the sovereign republic of Uzbekistan won three gold, two silver medals and one bronze medal. Oksana Chusovitina and Rosalia Galieva won gold in gymnastics; a gold medal was won by Marina Shmonina in the 4x100m relay track race. It was the first gold medal in track and field won by a resident of Uzbekistan. Sergey Syrtsov (weightlifting) won a silver medal. Anatoliy Asrabaev (shooting) won a silver medal, and Valeriy Zacharevich (fencing) achieved bronze.⁸¹ Their surnames highlight the multicultural nature of Uzbekistan's elite sportspeople. In this case, through sport, the social mixing of peoples was a CPSU strategy to build one Soviet people and society.⁸²

Conclusion

The CPSU used physical and sports culture to help create a new society of healthier and more industrious workers and citizens. It was

⁸⁰ Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?* p.32.

⁸¹ National Olympic Committee of Uzbekistan, <http://www.olympic.uz/en/> (accessed 4 Dec 2020).

⁸² Sevket H. Akyildiz, 'Assessing Uzbekistan's Olympic Performance, 1992-2012', *Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative* (27th August, 2012), <http://cesmi.info/wp/?p=202>, or http://www.bbc.com/kyrgyz/in_depth/2012/08/120827_sevket_hilton_take_on.shtml, or https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/institutional/2012/08/120824_cy_uzbek_shevket_akyildiz.shtml (accessed 9 August 2020).



used first during the 1920s by Lenin and developed widely by Stalin. All subsequent CPSU leaders advanced it in society, and during the Cold War with the Western capitalist powers, it was a soft power tool. Modern sport (and space technology) enabled the communist regime to portray itself to the West and the post-colonial countries as a dynamic developmental model. At the heart of Soviet sport remained its far-reaching social significance used to influence all classes, genders, ages, and ethnicities. The regime used soviet sport culture to help control and manage social cohesion, integration, mass health and fitness, employment, and mass entertainment. Olympic winners became heroes of the Soviet Union and represented the values and efforts of the patriotic citizen.

This model of Soviet sport remained more or less the case until perestroika; at this point, Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms that re-examined the interpretation of Marxism Leninism. He allowed for the partial commercialisation and free enterprise of Soviet sport. It affected the existing sports organisations, places of leisure, and both the elite and everyday sportspeople. Even the *Komsomol*, a youth movement associated with sport and athletes, acknowledged losing relevance in the younger generations' hearts. In response, Gorbachev allowed independent youth groups and sports clubs based on folk culture, Western-style popular culture, and sport.

Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, was nearly 2,800km from Moscow, but the picture looked similar in sports culture and perestroika. Like in Russia, modern sport in Central Asia was an urban phenomenon, and this remained the case all through 74 years of CPSU rule. Ideally, modern sport and its socialisation and acculturation would have reached the rural peoples – a place where most Uzbeks and Central Asians resided – but this would have required more time and funds. The Soviet cities and large towns are known for modernity and progress and major sports events and stadiums. State planners thought the young people would voluntarily migrate from the small towns and villages to the cities and become educated socialist citizens and benefit from state organised leisure.

Despite this, the last six years of the communist-era sport, 1985 to 1991, reveal an interesting Uzbekistan story. Though we have relied

upon Soviet information and data, as did many Western Cold War-era academics nevertheless, we can link this with observations made by post-Soviet scholars of Central Asia and private discussions with former Soviet citizens now living in the United Kingdom to create a working idea of the Soviet sport culture. To explain the implementation of modern sport in the Muslim-majority republic, we looked at a limited number of key topics because they indicate the strength and mass appeal of Soviet sport. In terms of the numbers of everyday sportspeople, the sources report high figures, and the compilers have probably included every conceivable type of athlete possible. Similarly, the urban sports facilities consisting of workplace clubs, youth centres, gymnasiums, and large stadiums were numerous and accessible to the masses. Unlike the statistical data about sportspeople, facilities are physical buildings and exist as photographs or in people's memories as places of relaxation and leisure. In turn, the sports sites and their coaching staff helped produce amateur enthusiasts, spectators and fans, and elite athletes.

Accordingly, the impact of Soviet sport on urban Uzbek society was significant, and the primary and secondary sources provide us with the evidence. During the Cold War, the rise of Uzbekistan's sports profile generally mirrored the emergence of sport in the Soviet Union. Uzbekistan was a middle-ranking sports nation in the Soviet Union and the top Central Asian republic regarding their mass and elite athletes' sporting achievements. The Olympic medal winners from multicultural Uzbekistan, of all sexes, show a viable training and coaching relationship between the sports authorities and the citizens. Elite sport opened up employment opportunities for young people and created national heroes for Uzbeks. It started at the first Soviet team appearance at the Summer Olympic Games in 1952. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the United Team, incorporating Uzbekistan's athletes, successfully competed at the Summer Olympic Games of 1992. My discussions with former Soviet Union citizens (not included in this paper) support the view that the urban Soviet Union had an array of sports facilities and services for all ages and competence levels. They report that sports news was a common talking point at the family dining table and among college and work friends.

In Central Asia, traditional or folk sport remained popular all through CPSU rule. The reasons were partly due to the insufficient reach of modern sports facilities in the lesser developed rural regions, the cheaper cost of hosting folk games, and the tolerance – and surveillance – by the communist regime of traditional sports events. The Central Asians were also culturally and emotionally attached to traditional games and leisure through a deep sense of history and collective memory.

The demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991 resulted in the Central Asian republics becoming independent nations and free to determine their national and foreign policies. The communist centralised economy has been replaced by a capitalist free market one shaped by globalisation. In many ways, modern sport in Uzbekistan is a legacy of a Soviet culture partly borrowed from Western arts and culture. Modern sport in Central Asia is the outcome of intercultural and multicultural connections over the last 100 years; and the product of empire, colonialism, and a modernity project. Nevertheless, a review of the Uzbek online newspapers and the government sites show how popular and widespread modern and traditional sports are in Uzbekistan. Indeed, both types of sports are claimed by the citizenry and the government as authentic Uzbek cultural heritage. Modern sport has roots in Central Asia for over 120 years, while traditional sports have an ancient connection. Today, as in the recent past, political elites use sport in nation-state building, social and cultural integration, health campaigns, and national prestige. Sports remain entertainment for everyday sportspeople; a means to get fit and mix with friends, a source of employment, and an enjoyable distraction from life's worries.

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