

## HT 2006: Supermänner, Superfrauen, Supermächte. Sport als Medium des Kalten Krieges

**Veranstalter:** Nikolaus Katzer (Hamburg); Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (VHD)

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**Bericht von:** Rósa Magnúsdóttir, Universität Island

Undoubtedly, most people think of the arms race and the nuclear threat when they think of the Cold War but increasingly, cultural and social history have brought in new ways of examining the Cold War period. While the Cold War was at its heart a conflict between capitalism and socialism, it often boiled down to a contest between the respective lifestyles in popular imagery. No aspect of daily life was left untouched by powerful propaganda machines and both superpowers cultivated a fear of the other and sought to present their own system in an attractive, non-threatening way. West vs. East and us vs. them became the dominant themes of the Cold War and within each respective superpower such bipolar views often controlled foreign and domestic policies.

The bipolar aspects of the Cold War, however, were rarely visualized as well as in sports competitions. Us vs. them took on a whole new meaning when the playing field was a gymnastics bar, a running track, a soccer field, or even the outdoors. In the sports arena there (most) always was an uncontested winner, having your flag raised and your national anthem played at international sports events symbolized, if even for a few minutes, that your political and social system was doing something right. For a few moments, star athletes represented not only superiority and excellence, but were living proof of modernity and progress in the respective system. The propaganda value of outstanding athletes and extraordinary achievements in sports certainly did not escape authorities and therefore a study of sports, its structural and organizational mechanisms, as well as its role in popular leisure and representations in the media, is an excellent way to better understand everyday life during the Cold War.

At the recent Historikertag, Nikolaus Katzer (Helmut-Schmidt-Universität/Universität der Bundeswehr Hamburg) organized and introduced the panel *Supermänner, Superfrauen, Supermächte. Sport als Medium des Kalten Krieges*, which al-

ready in the online abstract promised both exciting new material and innovative treatments of non-traditional subjects. In his introduction, Katzer presented the possibilities of sports research and emphasized that while sports were certainly used for political purposes during the Cold War, sports also inherently occupied a free space where despite outside confrontations and limits the rules of the game apply. Therefore, the political and social nature of international sports competition during the Cold War is an interesting example of the bipolar political conflict: in sports, as in politics, ideology and the struggle for superiority ruled and winning was everything.

Broadly speaking, the four papers of the panel all focused on the interdependency of the East and the West during the Cold War and the self-conception the relevant national contexts formed through sports and competition in sports. All the authors focused on representations of socialism and capitalism in mass culture and the competition between ways of life but their approaches varied somewhat as did their geographical focus.

Uta Balbier (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung) read a paper which provided a wonderful example of how national sport in both East and West Germany was not only dominated by competition but also interdependence. Authorities of both countries placed much emphasis on learning from the opponent and athletes were seen as representatives of their respective systems: as the East Germans coined it, they were „diplomats in training suits“. Relatively early on, East German rulers adapted a national discourse about sports achievements which was strongly based on the socialist planning strategy. Measuring and planning harvests on the corn fields was applied to success on the sports field and the West German neighbour became the measuring stick against which achievements and goals were measured. It soon became evident, that applying science in expanding the limits of human capabilities could redefine athletic achievements. Through its achievements in the sports arena, East Germany had found a playing field within the Cold War where it was both respected and taken seriously as a worthy competitor. It took a while but as of 1969 and the establishment of the Bundesinstitut für Sport in Cologne, the Bundesrepublik was also planning sports and athletes' performances based on technology and science. As of the 1970s, the belief in modernization and continued progress of achievements thus

dominated both regimes.

The panel got some extra publicity on the day the conference started when the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* singled out one of the papers as an example of the increased specialization of historians at the cost of grand narratives.<sup>1</sup> While flipping through conference programs can in almost every field be amusing and one often wonders whether subjects are worth studying, the article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* raised questions about the misconceptions many people have about history as a subject and as an academic research field. Without going into lengthy discussion, it should be evident to most that in order to be able to write grand narratives that include, for an easy example, say women, children, and minorities, history needs its specialists. And in order to better understand the grand processes of superpower politics and societal structures, we need sound research on smaller aspects of society, its inhabitants, their culture and their activities.

This was particularly clear in Eva Maurer's (Münster) study of alpinism during the 1950s thaw in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Soviet alpinism tells us much about the international superpower struggle during the Cold War and even more about internal struggles in the Soviet Union. Maurer showed how John Hunt's 1953 successful Mt. Everest expedition slowly found its way into the Soviet alpinist discourse. The English expedition becomes a prism for viewing the impact of the Khrushchevian thaw in the Soviet Union: Hunt reached the top three months after Stalin's death, and his 1954 account of the journey was published in the Soviet Union about six months after Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956. The Soviet state saw alpinism as something particularly Soviet and therefore Soviet authorities were careful in their recognition of this first successful ascent on Mt. Everest, as it was led by a Western, i.e. capitalist, alpinist. Readers response to the publication of Hunt's book (published in 30,000 copies) showed that there was popular interest in the expedition—and in the West. It was difficult for people interested in alpinism to believe, for example, that the great socialist state could not manufacture adequate sleeping bags and gears for alpinists and alpinism became yet another area where lagging behind the West started embarrassing the Soviet Union. Even more inte-

restingly, Maurer expanded the discussion of alpinism into the fragile relationship with China in the 1950s, showing how the Soviets understood a joint Soviet-Chinese expedition as a lesson, not only in alpinism but also in socialism. They found the Chinese lacking not only in their athletic performance but also in their understanding of the way socialism had developed in the 1950s. Big brother to the Chinese in the East but struggling to keep up to the West, Soviet alpinism is thus representative for larger societal and international changes during the Khrushchev era.

Evelyn Mertin (Deutsche Sporthochschule, Cologne) discussed the Soviet sports hero and the cult of the star athlete in the Soviet Union. In addition to setting world records and earning medals, heroes played a political role and had to fulfill a moral image, which were both orchestrated and constructed by the government. It was not enough for Soviet athletes to set world records and earn gold medals; they also had to be role models and they got in trouble if they displayed inappropriate behavior, especially when traveling abroad. Mertin rightfully pointed out that sports heroes were not only important foreign propaganda tools but they were also extremely important for Soviet domestic propaganda because for educational purposes healthy athletes were the perfect models for the ideal Soviet citizen. By investigating the career of two very different Soviet star athletes, long distance runner Vladimir Kuts and gymnast Ludmilla Turishcheva, Mertin showed two very different socialist heroes. Both Kuts and Turishcheva came from simple backgrounds but they proposed dissimilar challenges and tasks to the authorities when it came to promoting their heroism. While Kuts was hailed for his service in the military and his extraordinary achievements on the tracks, he was more of a problematic hero as he turned to the bottle and Soviet authorities worked hard trying to protect his socialist hero status, never mentioning the drinking or obesity problems he developed later in life. Turishcheva, however, a loyal Komsomol member, was almost too serene in her dedication to socialism, sometimes her serenity was noted by the Western media, but she always represented the perfect socialist hero, modest, successful, and loyal to the regime. Mertin's research fits very well in with the constructed socialist hero images that were visible in so many aspects of the Soviet Union, along with the mother, the worker, the veteran, and the engineer, star athletes played an important role in the

<sup>1</sup> Schloemann, Johan, *Der Kleinmeister im Gletscherkrieg*. In Konstanz versammeln sich die Historiker: Aber wissen sie, was die Gesellschaft von ihnen erwartet?", in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19. September 2006, S. 13.

propaganda machine of the Soviet Union.

Stefan Wiederkehr's (DHI Warsaw) paper on sex determination tests in sports was both highly entertaining and informative. Sex determination tests provide an excellent prism with which to view the superpower relationship through a gendered lens. Discussions and doubts of the gender of athletes clearly displayed the assumptions about „the other side.“ Western audiences were often presented with pictures of strongly built Eastern European women and the media described them as strong and masculine in their appearances. The Western female athlete, on the other hand, sometimes not fast enough but „sexy“ would describe her preferred hair styling method and be ascribed a traditional female role: she might have entered the male dominated world of star athletes but – contrary to the East German female athletes who were more often deprived of their femininity by the media – she remained primarily a woman. This was particularly clear in the German context where the contrasts between East and West were clearly constructed in West German media coverage of female athletes. Clearly, the success of Eastern European women threatened the self-esteem of the west and in true Cold War spirit the Western media reacted to the successes of socialist female athletes by deeming them too masculine, and went as far as undermining their success by doubting their gender. When a Western newspaper published a picture of a masculine Eastern European woman, it visually constructed a fundamentally different way of life: in a socialist society, women were supposedly unattractive and manly, in the capitalist world, women were feminine and sexy.

In the socialist bloc most, if not all, spheres of life were political. Work and leisure were equally politicized and in recent years, several social and cultural historians have diverted their focus from studies of factory floors and corn fields to the study of leisure and luxury. They have found that studying such topics can help explain important processes such as power relationships between the rulers and the ruled, the exercise of social control, and access to information about the outside world. As with so many aspects of Soviet and Eastern European history, sports history is a relatively new subject but with increased archival access as well as more emphasis on social and cultural history, increasingly researchers are turning their eyes to sports. The panel *Supermänner, Superfrauen, Supermächte* showed that young scholars are doing

original and relevant research in the field.

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