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SUPERPOWER: ROMANIAN WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS DURING THE COLD WAR

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how athletic victories in elite sports, particularly on the international stage, became Romanians' ultimate expression of "Romanian-ness" during the Cold War years. As a result of the Romanian socialist state's efforts to foster international successes in gymnastics, foreigners would ultimately associate elite women gymnasts' success with the Romanian nation itself. The chapters of this dissertation explore the ways the Romanian socialist state fashioned elite women's gymnastics as a key way to (1) fashion a sense of national pride and national community at home, (2) legitimize the socialist regime as a successful state, both internally and externally, (3) project positive images of Romania abroad in order to secure international recognition and prestige. During the Cold War, Romanian women gymnasts became cultural, national, and socialist heroes.

Using Romanian archival sources, a wide range of Romanian periodicals, and American newspapers and magazines, this study examines the institutional and cultural development of elite women's gymnastics in Romania from its earliest beginnings in the 1950s through the collapse of socialism in 1989. In the 1950s, Romanian coaches employed Soviet models of training to secure early women gymnasts' medals at the Olympic Games. By the 1960s, Romanian innovations and sustained investments in gymnastics recruiting and training, dubbed the "Romanian School of Gymnastics," transformed socialist Romania into a gymnastics powerhouse. The Romanian School enjoyed its heyday during the 1970s and 1980s, as superstar athletes such as Nadia Comăneci became a fixture on the medal stand at the Olympic Games. I argue that elite women gymnasts transformed Romania into a global sports superpower, allowing the socialist regime to challenge, in its own way, the prevailing binary frameworks of the Cold War.

Acknowledgments

While in pursuit of my "academic dreams," as I have often called my long journey through college and graduate school, I had the chance to meet many wonderful people who, knowingly or unknowingly, have enriched my life professionally and personally.

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Upon arriving at CEU's Gender & Culture Department, I entered a completely new, English-speaking environment. Here, I met and worked with Professors Andrea Peto, Peter Krasztev, and Joan Scott who guided me through the rigors of women's history and gender theory. My formative graduate school experience at CEU propelled me across the Atlantic to the United States where I began doctoral studies in history at the University of Illinois.

During my years of coursework at UIUC, I enjoyed participating in the exciting seminars taught by Professors Keith Hitchins, Tamara Chaplin, Maria Todorova, Mark Micale, Peter Fritzche, Antoinette Burton, Jean Allman, Harry Liebersohn, Lillian Hoddeson, and Nils Jacobsen. Tamara Chaplin helped me become a better graduate student, and I am grateful for her mentoring and friendship. Thank you, Tamara! As a teaching assistant, I learned from Mark Micale, Tamara Chaplin, and Craig Koslofsky how to make teaching history exciting and enjoyable for undergraduates who are often not history majors. In my own classes, I continue to strive to emulate their example. Moreover, the members of my dissertation committee, Tamara Chaplin, Maria Todorova, and Mark Micale generously gave of their time and attention when they read numerous drafts of this dissertation. Their attention to detail, as well as their thought-provoking questions, will help transform this dissertation into, I hope, a successful book.

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numerous drafts of my seminar papers and dissertation chapters, for helping me clarify my ideas and my prose, and for simply being the best advisor ever.

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Mihaela Rențea for her friendship. With her connections in the Romanian media, she made it possible for me to make contacts in the celebrity-driven world of elite women's gymnastics.

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Writing a dissertation can be a very lonely experience. While that was true for the time when I was stuck in front of the computer for hours, I was fortunate to have the company of family. My Michigan mom and dad, Janis and Jim Wood, as well as Erin and Tim Evers, helped to create a new family for me and I am so grateful for the way they welcomed me with open arms. Their generosity, love, and good nature (and good food) have enriched our lives throughout the time we've been in graduate school.

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Greg and John Michael make my life complete, and I consider myself very lucky to have them in my life. My heart will be forever yours.

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Introduction: Romania, Sports, and the Cold War

What do foreigners know about us? Dracula, Ceaușescu, and Nadia Comăneci...

-Unnamed Romanian citizen, 2003.¹

As they compiled information for Fodor's 2003 travel guide to Eastern and Central Europe, editors Deborah Kaufman and Douglas Stallings thought it appropriate to use a Romanian's remarks, told to one of their staff writers, to entice readers to visit and discover Romania, a small, out-of-the-way Eastern European country that is "full of wonders both natural and human-made."² In fact, they wanted to show Western tourists that Romania embodied more than the famous (and infamous) icons of "Dracula, Ceaușescu, and Nadia Comăneci." But why did these particular images define the Romanian's sense of national identity, culture, and history? To understand the perpetual fame of the sinister Count Dracula and his mythic ties to Romania, one would probably begin with Bram Stoker's popular novel *Dracula* (1871) or the 1931 Hollywood film.³ Leaving aside the stuff of legend and folklore, however, the other two persons mentioned by the Romanian are very real and intersected in a direct and fundamental way with the lives of ordinary Romanians throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century. The authoritarian regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the Olympic glory of gymnast Nadia Comăneci represent the two most important figures in recent Romanian cultural and political history. If Romanians' memory is connected to both a dictatorial regime *and* a young sports star, then it follows that both *politics* and *sports* must be deeply intertwined in Romania's Cold War history, combining to shape understandings of national identity for Romanian citizens. For

¹ Unnamed Romanian citizen quoted in Deborah Kaufman and Douglas Stallings, eds., *Fodor's Eastern and Central Europe: The Guide for all Budgets, Where to Stay, Eat, and Explore On and Off the Beaten Path* (New York: Fodor's Travel Publications, 2003), 473.

² Kaufman and Stallings, *Fodor's Eastern and Central Europe*, 472.

³ See Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1871; New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1988); and *Dracula*, dir. Todd Browning, Universal Pictures, 1931.

Romanians of the Cold War years, athletic victories in elite sports, particularly on the international stage, became the ultimate expression of "Romanian-ness."

This dissertation explores why.

As historians have shown, the Cold War was not only a conflict of two opposing ideological, political, social, economic, and military systems. A cultural Cold War was also an intrinsic part of the decades-long conflict between the communist and capitalist systems of the Soviet Union and the United States. Historians and other scholars have paid extended attention to areas of Cold War cultural rivalry and conflict, examining such mundane aspects of everyday life as consumer goods, popular music, architecture, domestic relations, and fashion.⁴ Sports, too, represented a significant element of the cultural battleground.⁵

Beginning in the late 1970s, Cold War-era sports emerged as a topic of historical inquiry. Pioneering studies by scholars such as James Riordan examined the Soviet Union's use of sports policies to strengthen and stabilize its communist regime internally and externally.⁶ Riordan's studies

⁴ For a general background on American cold war culture, see Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1960); Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Douglas Field, *American Cold War Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005). On American cultural influence in Europe after World War II, see Penny M. von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000); and Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). On American domesticity during the 1950s amid tensions of the Cold War, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). On material culture in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union, see Susan E. Reid, "The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:2 (2005), 289-316; Christine Varga-Harris, "Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home during the Khrushchev Era," *Journal of Social History*, 41:3 (2008), 561-589; and Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

⁵ See Robert Edelman, "Foreword," in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1-9.

⁶ The first book by James Riordan dealt with the development of the physical education system in the Soviet Union and dates back to 1977. See James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). His subsequent books shifted focus to the

opened the door for analyses of the international scope of communist sport, a scholarly enterprise that received greater attention following the Cold War boycotts of the 1980s (at Moscow and Los Angeles, respectively).⁷ However, the majority of studies dealing with sports during the Cold War years focus almost exclusively on the two superpowers -- the United States and the Soviet Union -- and their respective sports institutions and philosophies.⁸ Only a handful of studies bring attention to the countries in the shadows of the real superpowers: especially countries from the Eastern European communist bloc who also participated in Cold War sports conflicts.⁹ Still, academic historians have consistently overlooked Romania's particular importance in their analyses of Cold War sports confrontations. The majority of writings covering Romanian sports are ideologically-driven books published in Romania that celebrate the very successful socialist sports institutions initiated after the

political uses of sports in international arenas. James Riordan, *Soviet Sport Background to the Olympics* (New York: New York University Press, 1980); and James Riordan and Victor Peppard, *Playing Politics: Soviet Sport Diplomacy to 1992* (Greenwich, UK: JAI Press, 1993).

⁷ See James Riordan, *Sport, Politics and Communism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991); Jim Riordan and Arnd Krüger, *The International Politics of Sport in the 20th Century* (London and New York: E& FN Spon, 1999); James Riordan, "Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy," in *Sport and International Relations*, eds. Benjamin Lowe, David B. Kanin and Andrew Strenk (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1978), 316-346; Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan, *Sport and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Beginning in the 1980s, sports historians looked at the various intersections of sports and politics, and identified several broad areas of research that received considerable attention: fascist regimes' uses of sports, the "workers" sports in communist societies, race and ethnicity in sports, gender discrimination, and the Olympic Games as a political site. For a synthesis of the main areas of research, see Allen Guttmann, "Sport, Politics and the Engaged Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38:3 (2003), 363-375. An excellent comparative study about how the Olympic Games and the soccer World Cup became sites of national rivalry before World War II, with special attention to the US, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union, is Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport. National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁸ Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David B. Kanin, "Superpower Sport in Cold War and Détente," in *Sport and International Relations*, eds. Benjamin Lowe, David B. Kanin and Andrew Strenk (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1978), 249-262; Robert Edelman, "A Small Way of Saying No: Spartak Soccer, Moscow Men and the Communist Party, 1900-1945," *American Historical Review*, 107:5 (2002), 1441-1474.

⁹ See Andrew Strenk, "Diplomats in Track Suits: Linkages between Sports and Foreign Policy in the German Democratic Republic," in *Sport and International Relations*, eds. Benjamin Lowe, David B. Kanin and Andrew Strenk (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1978), 347-368; Gertrud Pfister, "Cold War Diplomats in Tracksuits: The Frauleinwunder of East German Sport," in JA Mangan, ed., *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War Without Weapons* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 223-252; Gyongyi Szabo Foldesi, "Social Status and Mobility of Hungarian Elite Athletes," *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 21:5 (2004), 710-726; Molly Wilkinson Johnson, "Sports, Mass Mobilization, and the Everyday Culture of Socialism in East Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003).

communist takeover of the post-World War II period.¹⁰ Besides praising the workings of the socialist system, these sports histories propagandistically claim that the overriding goal of Romanian athletes who competed abroad was to spread a universal message of world peace and understanding (then popular among the socialist leaders of Romania), and to strengthen friendship among different peoples of the world. (In truth, this was hypocritical, especially since athletes' trips abroad and interactions with foreigners were supervised and reported to the *Securitate*, the secret police).¹¹

Scholars who study the history of sports have generally seen sports as symptomatic of society, meaning that sports are a reflection of society's rules, conflicts, and social patterns.¹² Furthermore, scholars linked sports to cultures of national identity, nationhood, national consciousness, and nationalism. In their view, nationalism is seen as a body of ideas (and actions) intended to create communities of different groups and peoples, as well as legitimate governments. For instance,

¹⁰ See Dan Gârleşteanu and Nicolae Mărăşescu, *Decenii de aur, 1947-1967* (Bucureşti: Editura Consiliului Naţional pentru Educaţie Fizică şi Sport, 1968); Constantin Kirişescu, *Palestrica. O istorie universală a culturii fizice. Origini, evoluţii, concepţii, metode, probleme, împliniri* (Bucureşti: Editura Uniunii de Cultură Fizică şi Sport, 1964). Among the books published after 1989 that look generally at the history of sports in Romania see Alexe Nicu, ed., *Enciclopedia Educaţiei Fizice şi Sportului din România*, Vol. 1-4, (Bucureşti: Aramis, 2002); Ştefan Nobilescu, *RetroSport* (Bucureşti: Editura Enciclopedică, 1996); Nicolae Postolache, *Istoria sportului în România: date cronologice* (Bucureşti: Editura Profexim, 1995). For a very short history of Romanian gymnastics to 1996 detailing the Romanian women's gymnastics team for the Atlanta Olympics, see Kurt W. Treptow, *Romanian Gymnastics* (Iaşi, Romania: Center for Romanian Studies, 1996). In recent years, there were efforts by Romanian journalists or former sports officials to reveal the extent of the Communist Party's interference in Romanian sports. See, for instance, Mircea Angelescu, *35 de ani la pupitrul fotbalului. Implicarea Securităţii în fotbal* (Bucureşti: Editura Economică, 2003); Cristian Ţopescu, *Fair play* (Bucureşti: Editura Humanitas, 2003). There are, however, recent efforts from history students to study the place of sports in the context of daily life in Romania. See Loredana Necula, *Propaganda comunistă prin sportul de masă în România, 1971-1989* (B.A. thesis, University of Bucharest, 2002); and Bogdan Popa, *Educaţie fizică, sport şi societate în România interbelică* (Ph.D. diss., University of Bucharest, 2009).

¹¹ Recent scholarship revealed the extent of the *Securitate's* surveillance and political repression. See Ruxandra Cesereanu, ed., *Comunism şi represiune în România. Istoria tematică a unui fratricid naţional* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2006). In 2006, a committee created by the Romanian President Traian Băsescu compiled a report about the various activities of the communist regime in Romania. The committee, headed by the political scientist Vladimir Tismăneanu, consisted of several historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists. The ensuing 666-page report -- also known as "Raportul Tismăneanu" -- appeared online and is archived at the Romanian President's website. See Comisia Prezidenţială Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste Din România, *Raport Final* (Bucureşti: Comisia Prezidenţială Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste Din România, 2006), www.presidency.ro/?_RID=htm&id=83 (accessed 15 July 2009).

¹² Joseph Maguire and others, eds., *Sport Worlds. A Sociological Perspective* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2002), 141-143.

British sports historian Joseph Maguire identified three important functions of the relationship between nationalism and sports. First, sports functions as an instrument of national solidarity by promoting an internal sense of community. Second, sports can serve as an arena of political confrontation among nations by stimulating (non-lethal) aggression, engendering stereotypes, and fostering images of superiority versus inferiority. Third, sports can foster a cultural environment that links nations together by providing common enthusiasms and shared experiences that transcend national allegiances.¹³

Far from being a sports historian, but asking questions that opened up avenues of research for historians interested in sports, Eric Hobsbawm, in a study of the British middle class between roughly 1870 and the beginning of the Great War, suggested that sports functioned as a force of social cohesion and national identification.¹⁴ It is generally agreed that nineteenth-century European states used (mass) sports to create national cohesion amidst the development of mass society. Gymnastics societies, such as Turner of Jahn in Germany and the Sokol movement of Myroslav Tyrs, cultivated health and vigor through gymnastics exercise, thus teaching citizens to use their bodies in the service of their nations. Richard Holt argues that the "apolitical" character of sports, often claimed by those involved in sports, was a myth. The examples of French gymnastics, which was anti-German in the nineteenth-century, and British cricket and rugby, which were deeply linked to empire, provided evidence that "sport was inevitably embedded in the political values and practices of the host country."¹⁵

During the interwar period, international sport competitions became arenas of national display

¹³ J.A. Mangan, *Tribal Identities. Nationalism, Europe, Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 1.

¹⁴ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 142-143.

¹⁵ Richard Holt, "Interwar Sport and Interwar Relations: Some Conclusions," in Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan eds., *Sport and International Politics*, 210.

with athletes representing "the primary expressions of [national] imagined communities."¹⁶ Consequently, sports were (and still are) a cultural expression of nationalism. At the same time, sports reinforce national consciousness because "national teams" symbolize the unity of ethnically diverse modern states. Hobsbawm argues that friendly rivalries among nations were institutionalized as a "safety-valve for group tensions, which were to be harmlessly dissipated in symbolic struggles."¹⁷ According to Hobsbawm, the interwar period witnessed the solidification of sport as a means of national representation within international competition and the internal expression of identities.

In her recent book, *Globalizing Sport*, Barbara Keys looks at how Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the US participated at international competitions such as the Olympics and soccer world championships in the 1930s, arguing that international sports and national sports mutually reinforced each other. She writes, "International sport acted as a forum for nationalist rivalry, but nationalist impulses increased the internationalist power of sport."¹⁸ According to Keys, each of the three powers implemented sporting programs to increase their status in international arenas. Contrary to general belief, however, interwar totalitarian regimes were not the first to grasp sports' importance in international relations. Liberal states such as Britain, France, and Belgium (not Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, or Soviet Russia) were first to politicize international competitions.¹⁹ For instance, French historian Pierre Arnaud notes that France emerged from the Great War with its resources and population greatly weakened, but the fear of demographic decline and the frail economy coexisted with a post-Versailles "triumphant national mood." French cyclists and boxers became the ones "to

¹⁶ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 142-143.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁸ Keys, *Globalizing Sport*, 4.

¹⁹ See Arnaud and Riordan, *Sport and International Politics*, 51-66.

carry the weight of national expectations of glory" in international competitions at a moment when the French state became aware of the value of sporting propaganda.²⁰

The ever-increasing importance of sports in societies, especially since World War II, depended on radio broadcasts, television coverage, the printed press, and more recently, on the internet. As a result, sports historians who are interested in the links between nationalisms and sports draw on media scholars' findings about how media reporting links language to national identity issues. Without the media, national teams would be of diminished importance, and the Olympic Games would be a much smaller event. The changes in the size and nature of the sports-viewing public -- by watching faraway games via satellite, for example -- has effects on popular nationalism and stereotypes: sport commentators use the supposed styles of different national teams as "evidence" of a broader national character. As Jeremy MacClancy noted, Wimbledon, for example, is promoted as "proof" of Britain's keen interest in its sports traditions. However, the "hooliganism" of British soccer fans, frequently shown to TV audiences around the globe, is seen as a stereotype of British society: hooligan imagery suggests a society in decline as portrayed by the stereotype of the drunken, violent, and male soccer fan.²¹

As they researched sports sections of newspapers, historians found abundant evidence of stereotypes of national behavior.²² Often, these stereotypes are part of a larger discourse that constructs national character on the basis of sporting performances. In a study of major European

²⁰ Pierre Arnaud cited by Richard Holt, "Interwar Sport and Interwar Relations: Some Conclusions," in Arnaud and Riordan, *Sport and International Politics*, 211.

²¹ Jeremy MacClancy, ed., *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 13-14.

²² There are several studies published about national stereotyping in sports coverage. See for instance Neil Blain, Raymond Boyle and Hugh O'Donnell, *Sport and National Identity in the European Media* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993); Liz Crolley and David Hand, *Football, Europe and the Press* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); Joseph Maguire and Jason Tuck, "Global Sports and Patriotic Games: Rugby Union and National Identity in a United Sporting Kingdom since 1945," in Mike Cronin and David Mayall, eds., *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 103-126.

newspapers for instance, Hugh O'Donnell shows how sports act as a means for economically advanced states to present themselves -- through self- and other-stereotypes -- as possessing qualities that make them more modern and advanced -- in short, superior. O'Donnell proposes a geopolitical model that has at its core relationships between the Center (Germans, British, and French), the North (the Scandinavian nations), and the South (Italians, South American nations, and African nations). In his view, the North is characterized by "coolness and clinical rationality" (i.e. the Swedes), the Center has "strong mental control with discipline, efficiency, reliability, hard work" (i.e. the Germans), or committed and "courageous, realistic, pragmatic, fighting back in the face of adversity, giving it their all" (i.e. the British), or "reasonable, civilized, with flamboyance, flair, inspiration, charm and even style" (i.e. the French). Finally, O'Donnell's research points to the stereotypes associated with the South: "passion, hot temper, frivolity, sensuality, even hedonism) (i.e. the Italians), "fieriness, unpredictable, uncontrolled creativity, indiscipline, irrationality, recklessness" (i.e. the South Americans, especially the Brazilians and the Argentineans), "football magicians, having black magic"(i.e. the Africans personified by the Cameroonians). These stereotypes, although originating from England, O'Donnell argues, are still strongly reproduced and unchallenged today throughout European media.²³

Another idea linked to national stereotypes is that of the "national styles of play," which is not necessarily connected with the actual performance of an athletic team. Instead, it is an image built over time that derives from narratives of national identity more than from what happens on the playing field. For instance, the descriptions of the Italian *Squadra Azzurra* (the national soccer team) between the 1930s and 1980s reflect that the national team was a symbol of the "Italian way of life." The balance between defensive players (*braccianti del catenaccio*) and the forward players (*artisti*

²³ Hugh O'Donnell, "Mapping the Mythical: A Geopolitics of National Sporting Stereotypes," *Discourse & Society*, 5:3 (1994), 345-380.

del contropiede) reflects "two poles of the Italian national psyche: the negative tendency that follows the absence of organization and preparation, combined with the positive tendency of creativity and selfless teamwork."²⁴ In the same way, the French national soccer team was constructed in the press in the late 1950s as a "Russian salad, a jumble, a hotchpotch of doctrines." The team included the sons of Polish, Italian or Spanish immigrants; it was a team that lacked cohesion, despite an amalgam of very talented players. By the late 1990s, however, sports commentators converted the former "Russian salad" into a French "cultural mosaic," because of players such as Angloma, Karembeu, Dessaily, Thuram, and Zidane who arrived in France from overseas territories. This new "national label," echoing the "Republican model of integration and the inclusive notion of French citizenship," became influential because the French won the 1998 title of soccer world champions.²⁵ Media commentators viewed France's victory as a proof of the nation's successful response to challenges of globalization and of its coming to terms with its colonial past. France's victory was followed by a parade on the Champs-Elysees which was seen as a celebration of a multicultural society. However, this attitude was not reflected in civil society. For example, the 2005 riots in Paris pointed to the difficulty of integrating second- and third-generation immigrants of African and Arab descent into mainstream French society. The 1998 celebrations on Parisian streets were thus only a manifestation of what some scholars once called "ninety minute patriots."²⁶ Regardless of their duration, these exuberant street displays of national pride illustrate that victories of the national team do elicit national responses from the public. In celebrating the national team, the audiences celebrate the

²⁴ R. Grozio quoted in John Marks, "The French National Team and National Identity: 'Cette France d'un 'bleu metise'," in Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, eds., *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 44.

²⁵ Marks, "The French National Team," 47.

²⁶ The expression "ninety minute patriots" refers to the duration of a soccer match. See Grant Jarvie and Graham Walker, *Scottish Sport and the Making of the Nation: Ninety Minutes Patriots* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994).

nation itself and its representatives-- the sporting heroes.

Sports generate national heroes, and frequently nations are identified according to their sporting heroes. As historians Richard Hold and Joseph Mangan point out, heroes "mirror the place and times in which they live... [they] represent a people, and by discovering the meaning of their character... we discern the moral figure in the tapestry of the nation. They reflect its values, aspirations and ambitions."²⁷ As "imagined communities," nations are sustained by heroes whose qualities are supremely valued by the society and who are likely to have an instrumental power in the construction of the nation.²⁸

In order to be considered a national hero, an athlete must possess qualities synonymous with the public virtues that are thought to be at the core of that nation. Therefore, sporting achievements alone do not make an athlete a national hero. For instance, in Canada during the 1980s, the professional hockey player Wayne Gretzky became the "great one," the individual who personified "the hopes, wishes, and dreams of the Canadian people."²⁹ However, his marriage in 1988 to an American actress and subsequent move from the Edmonton Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings led to tragic headlines in the Canadian press: "Defection of "national treasure" stuns fans, players, executives," "Grieving for the great one," or "A nation in mourning."³⁰ His departure for the United States was articulated against the backdrop of a debate over free trade in North America, as well as

²⁷ Richard Holt and J. A. Mangan, "Prologue: Heroes of a European past," in Richard Holt, J.A. Mangan and Pierre Lanfranchi, eds., *European Heroes. Myth, Identity, Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 5.

²⁸ For a fine discussion of the making of one of Bulgaria's enduring heroes and the way his memory is constructed see Maria Todorova, *Bones of Contention: The Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009). For a general look at European sports heroes see Mangan and Lanfranchi, *European Heroes*. Also, for an interesting discussion on the making of Soviet sports heroes see Evelyn Martin, "Presenting Heroes: Athletes as Role Models for the New Soviet Person," *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26:4 (2009), 469-483.

²⁹ Steven J. Jackson and Pam Ponic, "Pride and Prejudice: Reflecting on Sport Heroes, National Identity, and Crisis in Canada," in *European Heroes*, 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

persistent Canadian anxieties about American cultural influence. Gretzky's change of teams endangered his status of a national hero. (In the press, he was immediately replaced by Ben Johnson as "the Canadian national hero.") At the same time, this incident provided an opportunity to define the US as Canada's national "other."³¹ Nations thus express their cultural ideals and anxieties through the actions of their national heroes. The mistakes of national heroes can undermine their privileged status. The rise and fall of sports heroes suggest, therefore, an important relationship between national citizens and their heroes. Spectators and reporters can make or break the "great ones."

In Romania's case, gymnast Nadia Comăneci is the incontestable national sporting heroine, acclaimed to this day at her every public appearance. Her athletic accomplishments on the gymnastics mats during the 1970s and 1980s transformed her into a national symbol of Romania, both abroad and at home. Despite the socialist regime's attempts to manipulate Nadia's image, Nadia remained a *national* heroine rather than merely a *socialist* one. Interestingly, Nadia Comăneci's defection to the West in November 1989 did not jeopardize her status as a national heroine. This distinction is important because, as I will argue, it demonstrates that, to the Romanian public, her departure from Romania represented a protest against the harshness of the socialist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Her celebration as a national heroine did not cease after the end of socialism. Although she is now an American citizen, Nadia remains on top of Romanians' list of national heroes due to her charity work, as well as due to Romanians' nostalgia for a golden age of athletic successes.

The periodic athletic successes of elite women's gymnastics, especially from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s, provided the Romanians with the opportunity to come together to celebrate the nation. At international competitions, and above all at the Olympics every four years, women

³¹ Ibid.

gymnasts performed in leotards that displayed the national colors. Consequently, gymnasts became national symbols of Romania. Broadcast for a global television audience, their winning athletic routines brought into Romanians' living rooms the sound of the national anthem and the sight of the Romanian national flag.³² With every gold medal awarded to Romanian gymnasts, the Romanian flag was raised above those of the competitors. It was that moment that made Romanians proud when they visualized their flag higher than the Soviet (then Russian, after 1989) and the American flags. By looking at the flag and listening to the anthem, Romanians were brought together by a team of tiny gymnasts, a group of children whose labor made Romanians feel proud. These celebrations of nationhood would be repeated every year during the European and World Championships and every four years at the Olympic Games. It was the constant "flagging" -- or reminding of nationhood -- that associated women's gymnastics with the Romanian nation and nationalism. Sports, particularly gymnastics in Romania's case, contributed to what Michael Billig calls "banal nationalism." He argues that, far from being only an intermittent mood of nations during national crises, nationalism is an "endemic condition."³³ In established nations, there is a continual "flagging" of nationhood, because symbols of national unity and identity are regularly rehearsed in public. Drawing inspiration from the work of Ernst Gellner, Anthony Giddens and Eric Hobsbawm that see the nation as an imagined construct, Billig's "banal nationalism" stresses the idea that the reproduction of nation-states depends upon collective remembering and forgetting, of imagination and unimaginative repetition. For Romanians, elite women's gymnastics before (and after) 1989 proved to be the site of rehearsing

³² In an empirical examination of the national significance of national anthems, a team of Israeli researchers demonstrated that listening to national anthems generates feelings of pride and patriotism. Listening to the anthem has the power to function as a tool to maintain a national identity. In the study, subjects were asked to write down any association that came to mind while listening to the national anthem. It turned out that, more than any other song, the subjects provided the same national associations (events, groups, figures, emotions), even if they belonged to different age groups and cultures within the Israeli state. See Avi Gilboa and Ehud Bodner, "What Are Your Thoughts When the National Anthem Is Playing? An Empirical Exploration," *Psychology of Music* 37:4 (2009), 459-484.

³³ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage publications, 1995), 6.

national identity.

Linking sports to nationalism is thus by no means new for historians.³⁴ Nor is it new for scholars to explore sport as an assertion of Cold War national identity. But in Romania's case, this connection is particularly significant: as this dissertation shows, elite women's gymnastics training, performances, and promotion proved to be *the* central sites where Romanian national identity was expressed abroad and promoted at home. Elite sport during the Cold War provided a workable way for the Romanian state to favorably define itself in relation to the wider Cold War world. Sports reflected the political ideals and goals of the regime. For example, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the communist regime relied on discussions of sports both in the West and the communist bloc and built new sports organizations following the Soviet model in order to affirm its forced subordination to the Soviets. Later under Nicolae Ceaușescu's twenty-five-year-long reign, the regime used sports, and in particular elite women's gymnastics, in new ways: to re-define a unique sense of Romanian-ness not only in relation to Western rivals, but also to the USSR itself. Consequently, to understand Romania's Cold War political and diplomatic trajectories, we must look to the training facilities, balance beams, floor mats, and winners' podiums of women's gymnastics.

Via its successes with gymnastics, Romania became a kind of global sports superpower, challenging in its own way the prevailing binary frameworks of the Cold War. Sports in general and gymnastics in particular, thereby engendered an athletic challenge to the hegemony of the US and the Soviets. (In addition, the challenges posed by Romania -- as well as East Germany or China -- created a dress rehearsal for the multi-polar world of the post-Cold War years.) In the realm of elite competitive sports, the hegemony of the US and the USSR was never certain. Instead, more so than

³⁴ Sports historians have detailed numerous aspects of the relationships between sports and nationalism. See Cronin and Mayall, *Sporting Nationalisms*; Mangan, *Tribal Identities*; Alain Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001); Blain, Boyle and O'Donnell, *Sport and National Identity*; and, most recently, Keys, *Globalizing Sport*.

in any other site (e.g., science, space exploration, or military power), the United States and the Soviet Union had to share athletic spaces with others. While the United States could bully North Vietnam, or Soviet tanks could halt the 1968 reform movement in Czechoslovakia, "superpower" clout could not be monopolized at the Olympic Games. On gymnastics mats, Romania became a Cold War superpower -- as did East Germany in swimming and Bulgaria in weightlifting. Nadia Comăneci became a symbol of Cold War superpower status like Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, or America's Neil Armstrong, the members of the 1980 US hockey "Dream Team" who defeated the favored Soviets at Lake Placid, or Ronald Reagan, the popular US president who revived a tougher stand in America's Cold War when he denounced the "Evil Empire." For Romanian athletes and the public, this status underlined sentiments such as "proud to be a Romanian." Romanians reveled in "their" athletes' international sports achievements. While Romanians could not rival the US or the Soviet Union militarily, economically, or scientifically, gymnastics provided a workable (and artful) way to project a unique national identity and strength abroad, as well as secure a modicum of international prestige in a world overshadowed by the influence of the Soviet Union and the United States.³⁵

Elite gymnastics became the sport that foreigners associated with Romania during the Cold War.³⁶ The 1976 Montreal Olympiad galvanized Romania's ties to gymnastics, as Nadia became the first gymnast ever to score a "perfect ten." Regarded as a sports legend who revolutionized

³⁵ From the nineteenth century and into the interwar period, Romanians always tried to define themselves in relationship to the West and the East. See Keith Hitchins, *The Romanians, 1774-1866* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Keith Hitchins, *Rumania, 1866-1947* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); James P. Niessen, "Romanian Nationalism: An Ideology of Integration and Mobilization," in Peter F. Sugar (ed.), *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: American University Press, 1995).

³⁶ Although athletes in other sports brought medals and victories home from international competitions, international audiences associated gymnastics with Romania, due to Romanian gymnasts' successes in that sport's major venue: the Olympic Games. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, two tennis players became well-known in the West after their performances in the Davis Cup: Ion Țiriac and Ilie Năstase. While widely acclaimed at home, the two players' results were seen more as individual accomplishments of talented sportsmen rather than the result of a Romanian-brand of training. Likewise, the track-and-field and kayaking medals won by Romanian athletes at several Olympic Games and World Championships since the 1950s were not seen as uniquely Romanian products. On Țiriac and Năstase, see Ioan Chirilă, *Ar fi fost prea frumos* (București: Curtea Veche Fundația ArtEst, 2002).

gymnastics by transforming the sport into an acrobatic artistic endeavor, Comăneci appeared to Western audiences as an enigmatic fourteen year-old who came from a country with no apparent tradition in gymnastics or sports background in general. (Stoker's Dracula never played cricket or soccer.) However, as the following chapters show, Nadia Comăneci did not emerge within a Romanian sports vacuum: Elite Romanian gymnastics developed first in the 1950s through the implementation of Soviet models of training; and by the 1960s, a new centralized system of training - labeled the "Romanian School of Gymnastics" -- transformed Romania into an international gymnastics powerhouse. In the competitive landscape of elite women's gymnastics, Romania became a superpower.

By producing women gymnasts who placed constantly at the top of the world hierarchy in elite gymnastics, the Romanian state was represented internationally as a hearty sporting power. The Romanian "national vigor" was displayed using tiny pubescent females. From mid-1970s on, Romania used children's bodies to bring medals and glory to a body of citizens that exulted in watching girl gymnasts outperform the Russians and the Americans. The Romanian press framed the triumphs of tiny Romanian gymnasts at the Olympics as national victories. The press language was reminiscent of militaristic nationalism: "We conquered the gold," "Romania on the top "or "Romanian gymnasts dominated the competition." This terminology, however, contrasted with descriptions of gymnasts' "tiny, young, yet skilful bodies," capable of enchanting audiences with their "graceful movements."³⁷ Artistic and acrobatic skills became thus the "weapons" for women gymnasts, otherwise unlikely soldiers in a battle for national and international glory. The little

³⁷ In an article describing the US's Olympic women's gymnastics team at the Atlanta Olympics, Ann Chisholm makes the same observation: "The pseudo-military victories of US female gymnasts [at the 1996 Olympic in Atlanta] are clearly oddities insofar as US women's gymnastics charges the most unlikely of citizens, prepubescent girls, with defending the honor of nation." See Ann Chisholm, "Defending the Nation: National Bodies, U.S. Borders, and the 1996 U.S. Olympic Women's Gymnastics Team," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 23:2 (1999), 128.

women gymnasts became Romanian Cold Warriors.

As representatives of the nation, Romanian women gymnasts had to fit a set model. If in the 1950s and 1960s, the gymnasts were mature, mostly in their early twenties, holding (at least theoretically) a job, graceful and very "feminine," the new acrobatics in elite gymnastics during the 1970s required a different body type. In order to perform complex and difficult somersaults, gymnasts' bodies had to be younger (most gymnasts were still high-school students), smaller, with lower centers of gravity, slender but muscular and of an almost "androgynous femininity."³⁸ Gymnasts' bodies were controlled and disciplined via rigorous cycles of training, dieting, resting and medical recuperation. The coaches' role was to carefully monitor and train gymnasts' bodies to execute the routines automatically and intuitively.³⁹ Coaches also required gymnasts to smile in order to please the crowds, even as the final exercise resulted from thousands of hours of strict training, overcoming injuries, and/or food deprivation. As in ballet, smiling was meant to conceal athletes' efforts and to maintain the spectators' illusion that gymnastics was not "hard work."⁴⁰

Because the Olympics were widely televised and broadcast in Romania and abroad, the feats of the Romanian gymnasts assumed a voyeuristic dimension. When competing, gymnasts' bodies were literally on display, being judged by both the referees and the public. To use Ann Chisholm's expression, gymnasts represented "feminine embodiments of the nation," and their bodies were carefully examined in terms of their strength, agility, elegance, and grace.⁴¹ In fact, as 'laboring

³⁸ Wendy Varney uses the notion of "androgynous femininity" to characterize the new style of gymnastics that Olga Korbut displayed at the 1972 Munich Olympics. See Wendy Varney, "A Labour of Patriotism: Female Soviet Gymnasts' Physical and Ideological Work, 1952-1991," *Genders Online Journal* 39 (2004) http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_varney.html (accessed 26 October, 2009).

³⁹ On modern physical activity as an example of Foucauldian sport, see chapter 7 "The Body: Discipline, Conduct and the Pleasures of Sport," in Richard Giulianotti, *Sport: A Critical Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 103-120.

⁴⁰ Wendy Varney, "A Labour of Patriotism...", 1.

⁴¹ Ann Chisholm, "Defending the Nation," 133.

bodies," women gymnasts were "doing the battle on nation's behalf."⁴² In the process, Romanian spectators viewed the athletes' bodies on TV and read about their accomplishments in the newspapers and thus formed the "imagined community" of the nation, in the sense suggested by Benedict Anderson.⁴³ Cheering gymnasts' achievements, listening to the national anthem and seeing the Romanian tricolor national flag raising ahead those of other nations in international arenas, Romanian men and women identified with the adolescent girl gymnasts in a periodically repeated process that fits Michael Billig's notion of "banal nationalism." Romanian elite women's gymnastics became thus the flagship of Romanian nationalism.

The chapters of this dissertation explore the ways the Romanian socialist state made sports, specifically elite women's gymnastics, into a working means to (1) fashion a sense of national pride and national community at home, (2) legitimize the socialist regime as a successful state, both internally and externally, (3) project positive images of Romania abroad thus securing international recognition, and (4) embody the Romanian nation by presenting the gymnasts as cultural national and socialist heroes. Chapter 1 explores how Romanian journalists and sportswriters framed sports in the early Cold War in political terms between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. In order to give legitimacy to the new socialist regime, writers quickly embraced Soviet principles and Moscow's foreign policy, condemning capitalist countries and their sports cultures. Sports commentators

⁴² I borrow the notion of "laboring bodies from Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe, *Globalization and Sport. Playing the World*. (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 31.

⁴³ Benedict Anderson stressed the role of newspapers in constructing a sense of national community among people engaged in the daily ritual of reading the newspapers. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983). On the television's role in shaping post World War II French national identity, philosophy and mass culture see Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

fiercely denigrated Western "capitalist" sport as a system that mercilessly exploited ignorant athletes, who were seen as mere commodities by business owners and promoters. Romanian journalists, who typically used Soviet sources, accused the West, especially the US, of using sports to further capitalism's goals: to train soldiers needed in "imperialist wars"; to amuse the benighted working class and thus divert their attention from the social ills of the West; and to take advantage of athletes' work in order to increase capitalist profits. Sports in America, as reported to Romanian readers, were plagued by racism, greed, corruption, violence, and "degeneration." Moreover, sport spectacles in the West were watched by rowdy, backward, and vulgar audiences, salaciously entertained by violence and short-lived sports heroes, whose glory would ultimately be both consumed and denied by this exploitive system. Finally, Romanian writers criticized the sexism of Western sports; they maligned capitalist audiences and promoters who seemed to favor only male athletes, as well as the unrefined rough culture of the mostly male audiences at sporting events.

Romanian writers used these derogatory images of sports in the capitalist West as a foil to simultaneously celebrate and validate the nascent elite sports in Romania, as well as the values of their Soviet benefactor. During the 1950s, socialist leaders in Romania required journalists to describe Romanian sports in glowing terms, and to point out the state's ability to encourage the public to embrace athleticism. Romanian officials claimed that socialist sports were a key way to produce a healthy and more effective workforce, which would, in turn, generate elite athletes who could best represent the new socialist Romania abroad. Journalists strove to depict Romanian worker-athletes as model socialist citizens. They argued that socialism was a viable and legitimate path of postwar development. In so doing, they deliberately aligned Romania with the Soviets, thus illustrating how the Romanian socialist state tried to make sense of its relationship with the broader circumstances of the Cold War.

This early Cold War practice of denigrating capitalist sport and exalting socialist values shaped Romanian approaches to elite women's gymnastics. The socialist regime saw women's gymnastics as a way to promote the image of the model socialist citizen-athlete and secure international recognition for the regime. As a result of Soviet training for Romanian coaches and because of early successes at the Olympic Games, the Romanian state quickly discovered that women's gymnastics would be its particular niche in the realm of Cold War-era international sports. Chapter 2 examines how the new Romanian Gymnastics Federation (RGF) directed the way women trained and participated at international competitions. Newly available archival material sheds light on the internal workings and philosophies of the RGF. Compared to the glowing proclamations of the Romanian press about sports in general and gymnastics in particular, RGF internal documents highlight dissent and resistance among coaches and gymnasts who did not readily embrace -- as the newspapers claimed -- the purported goals of the socialist approach. Gymnasts, for example, were not always icons of good behavior, and sometimes could not have cared less about political education or state policy.

Despite these internal tensions, gymnasts gained attention from the international press as a result of their performances at the 1952 Helsinki, 1956 Melbourne, and 1960 Rome Olympics. These early successes were not only a result of Soviet-style training methods, but also Romanian officials' behind-the-scenes efforts to gain the personal approval of international sporting organizations and representatives. For instance, numerous Romanian state officials labored to be hospitable to foreign delegations visiting Romania, sent publicity materials abroad about Romanian athletes, and even actively networked with international referees -- a crucial activity in a sport with a highly subjective judging process. Ultimately, the first international successes of Romanian women gymnasts were a collective enterprise that hinged on the work of athletes, coaches, sports officials, referees, and

journalists. As sports commentaries showed during the early Cold War, the postwar Romanian state used gymnastics to physically demonstrate its commitment to Soviet values.

Chapter 3 illustrates how the mid-1960s marked not only a change in the political leadership of Romania, with the rise to power of Nicolae Ceaușescu, but also major changes in the training and organization of the national team of elite women gymnasts. New directions in women's gymnastics coincided with a new regime and a new orientation in foreign policy -- the Ceaușescu government implemented policies that were designed to put greater political and cultural distance between Romania and the Soviet Union, as well as foster deeper feelings of Romanian nationalism at home. The Romanian state under Nicolae Ceaușescu established a major school for women's gymnastics at Onesti, where coaches cultivated new young national talents such as Nadia Comăneci. As Nadia's triumphs in Montreal show, the Romanian School of Gymnastics created a new brand of elite gymnastics, driven by young women athletes whose smaller frames allowed them to accomplish never-before seen acrobatic movements. With Romania's outstanding results at the 1976 Montreal games, Romanian gymnastics went global, claiming superpower clout alongside the Soviets in elite gymnastics. Despite the efforts of the Romanian state to control the image of its most famous gymnast -- and thus subordinate it to nationalist goals -- the international media's infatuation with Nadia complicated the Romanian sports officials' goals to "nationalize" its best athlete. As a sports celebrity in an increasingly global media environment, Nadia's image became an international (rather than merely Romanian) commodity, mostly due to Western audiences who were insatiably hungry for personal information about the famed "darling" of Montreal.

The success of the Romanian School of Gymnastics continued throughout the 1980s, even after superstar Nadia Comăneci's retirement from competition in 1981. Chapter 4 shows that the winning performances at the Montreal Olympics were the beginning of a long period of Romanian

gymnastics achievement. In fact, the 1980s generation of women gymnasts would accomplish even more than Nadia did in the previous decade. The Romanian School of Gymnastics sustained Romania's status as a gymnastics superpower throughout the 1980s -- a decade of deepening Cold War competition and rivalry. When the US also became a gymnastics powerhouse, Romanians contended directly against both of the official Cold War superpowers. Indeed, the Cold War field of women's gymnastics had to accommodate three superpowers, as Romania proved to be one of the nations that achieved ongoing preeminence in team competitions at the world championships and the Olympic Games of the 1980s.

Frequently, however, the new women gymnasts did not view their accomplishments in the same way as the Romanian socialist state. While the state-sanctioned press presented the Romanian School of Gymnastics as proof of a successful Romanian brand of socialism, gymnasts and coaches regarded their performances in their own ways. Their motivation for enduring endless hours of training and grueling competitions was twofold: First, gymnastics provided a way to secure material benefits that were otherwise impossible to obtain in the economy of shortages of 1980s Romania.⁴⁴ Second, gymnasts had a genuine passion for competition and, if their results -- as they put it -- would "bring joy back home" to their family members, friends, and fellow citizens, then that mattered most.

Elite women's gymnastics had a significant impact on Romanians' everyday lives during the last decades of the Cold War. Growing up in Romania during the 1970s and 1980s, I followed Romanian women gymnasts' exploits on television and listened to numerous conversations and comments about their accomplishments at international competitions. Family friends collected photo

⁴⁴ On the economic downturn of the 1980s, see, among others, Katherine Verdery, *What Was Communism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19-38; Ivan T. Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe 1944-1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182-253.

books and put together scrapbooks with photographs and newspaper clippings about Nadia Comăneci, Ecaterina Szabo, and Daniela Silivas. In the cities and the countryside, young girls imitated the gymnastic moves they saw on TV and integrated them into their schoolyard play. Doing a cartwheel or striking an ending pose "à la Nadia Comăneci" became essential skills for girls who "played gymnastics," for instance, in the makeshift playgrounds between the blocks of flats (even if the outdoor playgrounds featured asphalt surfaces instead of the rubber mats found in gyms). Persistent demand meant that parents could buy gymnastics' leotards for daughters from state-run shops. Girls wore their leotards at home or outside; impersonating gymnasts became a basic part of female life under socialism.

One final anecdote: After the fall of communism in 1989, many older Romanians tried to supplement their incomes by selling various possessions at flea markets in cities such as Bucharest and Sibiu. One could find old records, radios, cassettes, clothing, children's toys, and books -- items that recreated the universe of everyday things before 1989. The books ranged from classics of Romanian and world literature to cook books and sports biographies. In 2005, I came across Romeo Vilara's *Montreal '76: Nadia Comăneci's Olympics*, published in Romania in 1977, at a flea market in Bucharest.⁴⁵ While I was familiar with the content of *Montreal '76*, what surprised me about this particular copy was what I discovered tucked inside. The former owner had carefully clipped a series of newspaper and magazine articles published in 1990 about Nadia Comăneci's defection to the West. Perhaps the individual who owned the book considered it important to somehow preserve Nadia's story and thus continue an archive of her life, a life that clearly continued to evoke personal memories of 1976. After the fall of communism in Romania, Nadia remained a national heroine and the public did not cease to hunger for information about her new life after leaving Romania. Nadia Comăneci and elite women's gymnastics stirred the interest of Romanians and the sports audiences

⁴⁵ Romeo Vilara, *Montreal '76: Olimpiada Nadiei Comaneci* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977).

around the world, and ensured Romania's visibility as a superpower of the Cold War sports world, together with the United States and the Soviet Union. The history of sports and nationalism in Romania did not begin, however, with the Montreal Olympics of 1976. Rather, it begins in the late 1940s and 1950s as Romanian writers struggled to find a way to use discussions of sports to carve out a place for Romania in the new Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc.

Chapter 1: Socialism vs. Capitalism in Romanian Sports Culture during the Early Cold War

The danger of sport doesn't lie in itself, but rather in its political and ideological overtones – especially when sport is subordinated to a reactionary ideology.

Constantin Kirițescu, Romanian sports historian, 1964⁴⁶

As the ideological conflicts of the Cold War intensified throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the popular presumption of fair play in organized sports seemed to disappear in the face of overwhelming ideological and political pressures. As Constantin Kirițescu, a Romanian sports historian, noted in 1964, it appeared that sports had the potential to serve any society's ideological demands. Each system capitalized on this and accused the opposite side of using sports for political reasons. Thus, Kirițescu observed, sports became especially "dangerous" in the West because it was subordinated to the interests of Western capitalism. During the late 1940s, 1950s, and well into the 1960s, "capitalist" sports of the West became a favorite target of condemnation and satire for the Soviet and Eastern European sports press. State-controlled print media outlets in the Eastern Bloc often published derogatory reports of different sports events in Western Europe and North America, all part of a larger campaign of denigrating capitalism: a system of political economy that was the "abject enemy" of socialism. In contrast to the popularized images of decadent and corrupt Western sports promoters and profiteers, however, Romanian sports officials worked to build a sports system that emulated the Soviet approach to sports. To repudiate and undermine the cultural practices of the capitalist West, Romanians

⁴⁶Constantin Kirițescu, *Palestrica. O istorie universală a culturii fizice* (București : Editura Uniunii de Cultură Fizică și Sport, 1964), 480.

sought to mold "model athletes" who incarnated lofty socialist moral principles and politically "correct ideological profiles."

Using Romanian sports newspapers and archival documents, this chapter argues that sport became an ideological battlefield where Romania intended to demonstrate the superiority of the broader socialist system that originated in Moscow. It highlights the ideological landscape of the 1940s and 1950s that contributed to the development of socialist sports training in Romania. For sports commentators and officials, it was important to illustrate how sports in socialist Romania needed to be different from the sport systems of capitalist countries. At the same time, Romanian writers contrasted their images of decadent, destructive Western sports practices with the principled training and dignity of Romanian athletes. Exploitation and greed prevailed in America and the West, while community, nation-building, and social justice were thought by Eastern writers to triumph under socialist regimes.

The Functions of Sports in the West

Training imperialist soldiers

In its larger anti-Western propaganda campaign of the 1940s and 1950s, the Romanian press constantly denigrated Western sports. Publications such as *Stadion* magazine or *Sportul Popular* used titles such as "*Sportul lor*" ("Their Sport") to describe the greed of sports organizers in capitalist societies. Sports writers in Romania contended that Western physical education was not only intended to fortify the health of capitalist citizens. In fact, they argued, physical education served as early military training for much-needed soldiers in "imperialist" wars. The press noted that a postwar study of a United States' inspector for the Senate Public Health Committee revealed that during World War II, out of 17 million men aged 18-38 asked to serve

in the military, almost 6.5 million were found "unfit for combat."⁴⁷ Thus, capitalists needed to improve the quality of combat troop reserves, alternately dubbed in the Romanian press as an "army of killers and thieves" or "cannon fodder." So, capitalist physical education in the West ensured the building of better, more effective soldiers.

Good soldiers on the battlefield needed specific skills and sports provided them with abilities that could prove useful in war. The capacity to commit acts of violence and inflict suffering figured preeminently among these "talents." Western sports – such as football, boxing, and wrestling -- cultivated brutality and violence both on and off the playing field. Reports in the Romanian press discussed theories of Western scientists that justified sports violence. For instance, sports writers in the East discussed the American Freudian Professor F. Alexander and his Scottish colleague R.W. Pickford who argued that sports was a means of sublimation, or of satisfying innate aggressive and destructive instincts. Without sports, the academics continued, these impulses would become a social danger as they could cause individuals to explode into outbursts of senseless violence and destruction.⁴⁸ Furthermore, according to Soviet sports writer A. Alexeev, Western sports theorists claimed that "every sport symbolizes aggression, conquest, and destruction," thus making brutality and outright violence foundations of popular sports. Alexeev noted that Western sports functioned as an auxiliary tool for Western education theorists in their quest to bring up a new "generation of barbarians."⁴⁹ Sports thus contributed to the training of soldiers for new "imperialist" battlefields; early Cold War conflicts such as the Korean War (1950-1953) were used by Eastern writers to promote this view. According to

⁴⁷ VS Grajuli, "Teoriile filozofice reacționare ale sportului in slujba imperialismului anglo-american," *Cultură fizică și sport*, January 1950, 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 7; AV Culeșov, "Cultul cruzimii și al violenței in Șportul burghez," *Stadion*, April 1952, 20-21.

⁴⁹ Iacint Manoliu, "Recenzie: 'Adevărata față a sportului burghez' de A. Alexeev, Editura C.F.S.," *Sportul Popular*, May 8, 1952, 7.

commentators in the Eastern bloc, sports enabled Western aggression.

Western sports as entertainment: "violent" diversions from class struggle

Articles dealing with Western sports emphasized that athletes taught Westerners "to be contemptuous towards others, to love wild heroism and cruelty, and to be perverted morally and physically."⁵⁰ Sports clubs that served the interests of "capitalist imperialists" made every effort to keep young athletes away from "progressive political activity and from revolutionary struggles so they can disregard freedom-loving countries." Although the sports clubs claimed to be apolitical and aimed to promote relaxation and entertainment, Western sports clubs, Romanian authors claimed, served greedy selfish businessmen, and proved to be "a valuable tool to divert the public's attention from contemporary problems."⁵¹ The Romanian press often used examples from Western sport events to convince its readers that sports functioned as a diversion from revolutionary struggle and class-consciousness. For instance, on July 14, 1949, a Romanian sports writer argued that the "French reactionary circles" in Paris countered a mass demonstration organized by Parisian workers against NATO with a series of sports competitions in order to turn the public's attention away from the masses' demands. In another instance, Romanian journalists reported how Japanese newspapers chose the fourth anniversary of the Japanese defeat in World War II to avoid confronting past events by focusing instead on recent victories of Japanese swimmers at a competition in Los Angeles, providing readers with endless details on numerous columns and pages. Both French and Japanese "imperialists" diverted audiences' interest from the "real problems" of capitalist countries and used "neutral" sports to

⁵⁰ G Solovov, "Sistemul corupției," *Stadion*, January 1950, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

heal (or in these cases ignore) the truth.⁵²

Soviet sports commentator G. Solovov, cited by the Romanian *Stadion* magazine, argued that the entire system of physical education in the West aimed to "blind people" in order to "make them not aware of class contradictions."⁵³ That is why, Solovov continued, sports in the West cultivate cruelty, poor morals, and the desire to get rich at any cost. In his view, Western sports embodied all the shortcomings of capitalism. Profanities, violence, and even crimes were usual occurrences at every athletic event, according to Solovov. To convince his readers, the Soviet journalist cited an article from *France Football* about a famous Belgian soccer player who, unhappy with the referee's decisions on the field, assaulted the referee who only escaped with police protection. Using an example from *L'Equipe*, Solovov compared the 1950 soccer game between Spanish *Valladolid* team and the Swedish *AIK* to a bull fighting spectacle rather than a "normal" sporting event. Besides soccer, Solovov mentioned boxing and American football as arenas where "crimes, broken bones, and severe wounds" constituted the main attraction. In his view, American football players resembled medieval knights, ready for truly violent battles. "American football is nothing else but a bloody fight among mercenaries," wrote *Stadion* magazine in 1953.⁵⁴ Later on, in 1959 *Stadion* went even further and claimed that it no longer considered American football a sport due to the display of "violence and brute force." The violent features of many American sports replaced true athletic values such as "speed, swing, roll-out, and dodging," and, consequently, American football was not deemed a true sport.⁵⁵ The Romanian press concluded that Western sports, with their inherent violence, were

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Sportul lor: Atențiune, trosnesc oasele," *Stadion*, March 1953, 23.

⁵⁵ *Stadion*, July 1959, 19.

meant only to entertain ignorant audiences rather than be a window into the inequities of capitalism.

Throughout their entire history, some Romanian commentators claimed, Western sports were meant to satisfy the interests of the elite, while taking advantage of the masses. In a series of articles published in 1948, Egon Horn, a Romanian sports enthusiast, analyzed the history of capitalist sports and its functions. In his opinion, the bourgeoisie invented certain sports such as tourism, mountain climbing, golf, tennis, yachting, and billiards to get away from the unhealthy air of the cities and find entertainment. Meanwhile, Horn was quick to note, millions of working-class men and women "were spitting their lungs out at the bottom of mining sites or in industrial plants just to create that plus-value which allowed the bourgeoisie to savor the pleasures of entertainment and which promised workers heaven (only) in the afterlife."⁵⁶

Western sports as business ventures

According to Romanian sport journalists in the 1950s, Western sport was at the mercy of businessmen. Capitalists made and provided athletic equipment for competitions (exploiting their company workers in the process); at the same time, they exploited athletes by luring them into their scheme of sports-for-profit. Romanian writers pointed to cycling in France and Italy as typical examples for Romanian readers to see how capitalists used sport to increase their profits at the people's expense. The *Tour de France*, for instance, one author insisted, was created to launch the postwar bicycle industry. It also served every year as a lucrative source of wealth for businessmen such as Mr. Mouton, the head of a bicycle track trust, who asked for a 7 percent tax

⁵⁶ Egon Horn, "5000 de ani de sport: sportul burghez (II)," *Stadion*, August 1948, 2.

from all cyclists who were training or competing on French tracks.⁵⁷ Few could complete the initial races, which were extremely grueling -- only half of the cyclists that participated in 1950 in the Bordeaux-Paris circuit reached the finish line after eighteen hours of continuous racing. According to Romanian observers in the press, Maurice Diot, the "number one Frenchman" of the day who won the 1950 *Tour*, performed at a championship level only to protect his sponsorship and position within the company. Moreover, the race had little to do with the athletic abilities of the cyclists; Diot had to showcase the high qualities of the bicycle produced by his employer, so that the bicycle business could prosper.

Romanian commentators deplored the fact that Western sporting arenas were commercialized spaces. *Stadion* magazine argued that due to a clever publicity campaign in the Western media, the general public was made to believe that the cyclists who won the *Giro d'Italia* (Tour of Italy) or the *Tour de France* did so not because of their athletic abilities. Instead, they won just because they were riding Bianchi or Bartali-brand bicycles, ate Simenthal canned food, wore the "refreshing and lucky wooden Rhovyl shirt," or slept on Simmons, "the most comfortable mattresses in the world."⁵⁸ In fact, Romanian sports reporters thought that bicycle tours had become a "monstrous parade of ads for products such as beverages, fridges, chocolate, mattresses or shaving blades."⁵⁹ Instead of watching sportspeople competing against one another, the public could "admire the life and death matches between the *Gondollo* crackers and the *St. Raphael* appetizers." Romanian readers thus found out how commercialism slowly permeated Western sporting events.

⁵⁷ "Și ei fac sport: Adevăratul aspect al curselor cicliste din țările dolarizate," *Stadion*, May 1950, 23.

⁵⁸ "Și ei fac sport: Papa și sportul," *Stadion*, August 1950, 19 ; I. Goga, "Turul Franței, dramele și afacerile sale," *Sportul popular*, 19 July 1960, 8.

⁵⁹ I. Goga, "Turul Franței, dramele și afacerile sale," *Sportul popular*, 19 July 1960, 8.

Romanian sport journalists regarded Western sports as capitalist ventures meant to generate revenues for promoters and, at the same time, exploit athletes' labor and spectators' wallets. And in the race to secure profit, sports businessmen in the US cared little about the safety of audiences. For instance, Romanian newspapers reported on the 1960 Indianapolis 500, where a 30-foot high make-shift scaffold suddenly collapsed and "numerous spectators either died tragically or were critically wounded and transported to the emergency rooms."⁶⁰ Indeed, as the *New York Times* wrote in May 1960, there were "2 dead and 70 hurt as scaffold fell at the Indianapolis speedway."⁶¹ The Romanian newspaper reporting the incident, blamed the tragedy on the greedy car race organizers. Journalists concluded that the sport of auto racing has been transformed into a "race for profits, a dirty and abject business."⁶² The *New York Times*, though, found guilty only a certain Mr. Linden, a local entrepreneur, who was not affiliated with the speedway management, but only leased the makeshift scaffold to earn somewhere between \$5 and \$10 from race fans in need of an extra seat. Hardly an "abject business" as the Romanian newspaper initially reported.⁶³

While it is certainly true that Western spectator sports were commercial enterprises, Romanian newspapers avidly incriminated the "dirty business practices" that allegedly plagued sports in Western Europe and the United States. Sportswriters in Romania lamented the subordination of athletic events to the economic practices of capitalism, which involved the exploitation of athletes, disregard for spectators, and hunger for profit. Worse, journalists argued, was the strong probability that these values and practices would corrupt the international

⁶⁰ "Cu și fără comentarii. Afaceriștii in acțiune," *Sportul popular*, 28 July 1960, 4.

⁶¹ "2 Dead and 70 Hurt as Scaffold Falls at Indianapolis Speedrace," *New York Times*, 31 May 1960, 1.

⁶² "Cu și fără comentarii. Afaceriștii in acțiune," *Sportul popular*, 28 July 1960, 4.

⁶³ Ibid.

showcase of the Olympic Games.

Commercialization of the Olympic Games

Romanian sports journals constantly informed their readership about the first two postwar summer Olympic Games: 1948 (London) and 1952 (Helsinki). At the first postwar Olympics in London in 1948, socialist delegations (including Romania and the Soviet Union) did not take part in the athletic events, and the Eastern Bloc presses subsequently termed the Olympics an entirely "capitalist affair." Four years later however, Romanian athletes joined the Helsinki Games, and Romanian journalists used this opportunity to comment not only on athletic performances, but also on the commercialization of the Games. Sports journalist Radu Urziceanu started his reporting from the Games by pointing to the differences between the two Olympic villages: one for athletes from socialist countries, the other for the West. The first Olympic village was located in the Otaniemi district and hosted sportspeople from the Soviet Union and the other "popular democracy" countries. The other, the "Americanized" village, located in Kapyla, was the home-away-from-home for athletes of capitalist countries.⁶⁴

While the Otaniemi's atmosphere was "serene, quiet and of cooperation," the Kapyla village stood out as a site of "rowdiness, disorder and squabble." Radu Urziceanu described how, under American corporate influence, Kapyla became a soulless marketplace. American, Canadian, French, and English athletes became de-facto small merchants who exchanged their personal belongings such as sports shoes, clothes, and other knick-knacks with other athletes-turned-merchants. Urziceanu used harsh language to condemn the thorough commercialization and Americanization of the Olympics:

⁶⁴ On the separation of Olympic villages, see also John Bale, "'Oscillating antagonism': Soviet-British Athletic Relations 1945-1960," *East Plays West. Sport and the Cold War*, ed. Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews (Routledge: New York, 2007). 84-85.

First, the Americans forced Coca-Cola down Fins' throats, a drink that tastes like insecticide and moth balls, and smells like burnt celluloid. Then, during the Olympic Games, the American Coke drove all Finnish soft drinks out of the market. Especially on the Olympic Stadium, one could have searched in vain for something else to drink; nothing could be found except for Coca-Cola!⁶⁵

Together with Coca-Cola, Hollywood movies and cigarettes corrupted Finnish youth, Urziceanu was quick to add. Not only were Finnish children playing like cowboys or gangsters in the streets of Helsinki, but cowboy shirts or clothing with "violent colors depicting nude women, or cowboys with pistols" proved to be very popular for teenagers. However, Urziceanu saw the participation of socialist athletes at the Games as a positive sign that the Olympic Games could retain the ideals set initially by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics.⁶⁶ The journalist argued that although "Yankee" businessmen wanted to transform the Olympics into a huge business venture, the presence of delegations from the Soviet Union and other socialist states enabled the Games to achieve their true goal: "to strengthen the friendly relationships among young athletes from all over the globe, who got to know each other better and who showed their desire for world peace."⁶⁷

Western sports as exploitation

Like any other capitalist business activity, Western sports were based on the relentless exploitation of labor, according to writers in the East. Professional boxing was a favorite topic of discussion in the Romanian sports press, as the sport seemed to embody the worst of capitalist

⁶⁵ Radu Urziceanu, "Adevărata față a sportului din țările capitaliste s'a văzut și la Olimpiada de la Helsinki," *Stadion*, September 1952, 23.

⁶⁶ On Coubertin's goals for the Olympic Games, see Associated Press and Grolier, *Pursuit of Excellence: The Olympic Story* (Danbury, CN: Grolier Enterprises, 1979, 26-28; Eugen Weber, "Pierre de Coubertin and the Introduction of Organised Sport in France," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5:2 (1970), 3-26.; John Macaloo, *The Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁶⁷ Radu Urziceanu, "Adevărata față a sportului din țările capitaliste s'a văzut și la Olimpiada de la Helsinki," *Stadion*, September 1952, 23.

sports and the capitalist system as a whole: crude violence, greed, and the physical exploitation and destruction of sports laborers. In the late 1940s, the tragic cases of Tony Zale and Anton Raadick, both world boxing champions, were widely popularized among the Romanian public. After enjoying the pinnacle of success, they were quickly discarded when each lost against Marcel Cerdan, the European middleweight boxing champion and newest public favorite. These two athletes were forgotten and rejected -- at an age when "it was too late to learn other skills for another type of job."⁶⁸

While the future prospects for these two athletes were grim, businessmen like Jack Golomb, the founder of the Everlast boxing equipment company, were thriving. He gained the title of "king of the boxing gloves," while at the same time he exploited his factory's workers and successfully sold his products to "dumb" American consumers. A litany of famous champions -- Jess Willard, Jack Dempsey, Barney Ross, Max Baer, Henry Armstrong, Gene Tunney, Primo Carnera, and Joe Louis -- wore and popularized his products. Romanian sports journalists were quick to note that while boxers were risking their health and sometimes even their lives only to end up forgotten by the public, capitalists like Jack Golomb became richer and richer by "exploiting the athletes." Such men lacked any meaningful sense of morality, but instead acquired vast riches and ludicrous accolades. Golomb, for example, enjoyed success as "the king of boxing gloves."⁶⁹

Morality and Sports

Professionalism in the West

The issue of amateurism in sports was widely debated in Olympic circles and had echoes

⁶⁸"Sportul lor...", *Stadion*, June 1949, 2.

⁶⁹"Sportul lor...", *Stadion*, June 1949, 2.

in the Eastern European press. In June 1947, the International Olympic Committee formed a special subcommittee to discuss the issue of athletes' status as amateurs or professionals. Meanwhile, Romanian journalists (citing Soviet sports expert A. Nikolaev) accused the US of having the most "reactionary" attitude towards amateurism. Avery Brundage, who was at the time president of the US Olympic Committee and vice-president of International Olympic Committee (IOC), defined an amateur athlete as one "who practices sport only because he loves sport," without any entitlement to material compensation.⁷⁰ But Soviet specialists argued that this situation limited the access of working-class men and women to elite sports in the West.⁷¹ Amateur sports were considered a class-privilege for wealthy individuals who did not need financial reward and enjoyed the means to travel independently to competitions. Yet workers could not participate at international contests because they lacked funds. Thus, Nikolaev argued, by promoting amateurism, the US and other capitalist countries restricted sports to elites. This was due in large part to the fact that sport in the US became "an original industry...which generates enormous sums of money and interest."⁷²

The Romanian press often criticized Brundage and his theory of "pure amateurism in sports." In fact, as *Stadion* magazine argued, Brundage's amateur athletes were professional sportspeople.⁷³ Western "amateur" athletes did not have to care about their sports-related expenses because society carried them financially, "either through an expense account, a sports

⁷⁰ Brundage became president of the IOC in 1952. He kept this position until 1972, and retired immediately after the Munich Olympics.

⁷¹ In order to be more convincing, A. Nikolaev cites Western sources as well. He provides evidence from Helmuth Wagner, a traveler to the US, who published his opinions about the exploitative nature of American sport in the Swiss newspaper *Satus Sport* in May 1947.

⁷² A. Nikolaev, "Politica reacționarilor in sport," *Stadion*, February 1948, 6.

⁷³ Victor Bănciulescu, "Problemele amatorismului in 6 puncte," *Stadion*, February 1947, 4.

scholarship, or even directly with money."⁷⁴ All these compensations proved that the notion of "pure amateurism" espoused by Brundage did not apply neatly to athletes in the West who claimed "amateur" status. *Stadion* magazine wrote that Western sport only paid lip service to amateurism. Even cases such as the suspension of runner Wes Santee by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), a runner who received more than \$1,000 in per diem funds, were regarded as token examples of Western intolerance of profit in amateur sports and did little to prove a true commitment to amateurism. Western Amateurism, according to Romanian sports writers, was actually "professionalism in disguise."⁷⁵

The Romanian sports historian Victor Bănciulescu labored to clarify the issue of professionalism versus amateurism. Bănciulescu noted that the Soviet notion of "athlete-workers" resolved the tension between professional and amateur athleticism. According to Bănciulescu, Soviet workers practiced sports on a large scale. Mass sport subsequently provided the basis for the true athletic elite. Just as workers who performed well in the factories were rewarded for their results, the same principle would be applied to athletes who deserved rewards for their performances on sports fields:

Reactionary circles insinuated that Soviet sportspeople receive money for their sports practice in the stadium. It isn't true. In the USSR distinguished athletes receive rewards in the form of prizes, just as everywhere in the world. And the Soviets are saying that it would be unfair if the government would pay only the workers who distinguished themselves on the shop floor, but not also the sportspeople who bring glory to the Soviet state with their repeated performances. So performances should be equally rewarded, both in the industrial plants and also o-in the stadium. This is the notion of the athlete-worker who is also part of maintaining the wellbeing of the entire Soviet nation.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ " 'Amatorismul' din țările capitaliste," *Stadion*, October 1956, 14.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Victor Bănciulescu, "Problemele amatorismului in 6 puncte," *Stadion*, February 1947, 4.

Therefore, the situation in the Soviet Union was ideal. The division between amateurism and professionalism was an artificial one because all athletes were workers and thus their work in sports deserved rewards as did any other type of work. As the Soviet situation made clear, the Russians were the model that Romania needed to follow. Writing in 1947, before the 1949 reorganization of sport structures in Romania, Banciulescu declared that Romanians needed a workforce made up of both physical and intellectual workers who could contribute to the prosperity of the nation and, at the same time, play sports. Romanians "should practice sport, all of them! ... and [they should] regard physical education as a necessity, as a call to health and happiness." Bănciulescu continued by saying that every Romanian had a duty to provide time and necessary conditions for the enhanced training of the most talented athletes. "We won't allow them to become a burden for society via a harmful professionalism," he wrote. "They need to become masters of their art, for the public good of the nation they serve."⁷⁷

Violence

For sports commentators in the socialist bloc, violence constituted a defining feature of capitalist sport. Western athletes, coaches, referees, and spectators alike produced and consumed violence. The Romanian press argued that violence plagued and ruined sports such as boxing, wrestling, bicycle racing, soccer, and hockey.

Sports violence in the West ranged from small skirmishes between players and/or spectators to the deaths of athletes in cruel competition. In 1952, the press reported how in Yugoslavia soccer matches between Croats and Serbs, or between Serbs and Montenegrins, typically degenerated into violence on and off the field. As Romanian writers framed the issue, Tito's "fascist" government policies allegedly fed ethnic hatred and Yugoslavia's supposed

⁷⁷ Ibid.

subservience to the US were thought to be to blame for the violence erupting in the stadiums and streets of Yugoslavia.⁷⁸ In Western Europe, bike tours proved to be "cruel competitions" with a "disrespect for human life." In their desire to win at all costs, several professional cyclists were killed in accidents during these "death tours." Such were the cases of the Italian cyclist Orfeo Ponsin, who died in the spring of 1952 during the fourth leg of the *Giro d'Italia* or of another cyclist who died in a crash with an advertising car during the *Tour de Suisse* (Tour of Switzerland). Western professional bike circuits proved to be cut-throat and "dirty commercial business" – not athletic competitions rooted in true fair play.⁷⁹

Sports commentators saw Western professional boxing as a death row for athletes. Sports fans read numerous articles about boxers such as Eshman Thomas or Daniel Lynch, who died in boxing arenas while trying to secure better futures for their families. One could read about how "Little John," Eshman Thomas's son, watched his dad on television boxing against Roger Pryer in an Akron, Ohio bout. Little John dreamt about how the money won by his father would finally allow his poor family to afford a much-craved chocolate bar just like the one he once saw in a candy store window in New York City. At the same time, Mary, the boxer's wife, looked forward to buying a nearby garage so she could start a small family business. But Eshman Thomas's death in the arena crushed these dreams. Because boxing was just like any other business for the greedy "American capitalists," no boxing manager cared about a life lost in the name of profit. Boxing had ceased to be a "noble art of dueling with gloves."⁸⁰

Professional wrestling, too, symbolized the decadence of bourgeois societies and the

⁷⁸ "Întâmplări din sportul titoist: Pe placul stăpânilor americani," *Sportul popular*, 22 April 1952, 7.

⁷⁹ "Din moravurile sportului capitalist. Cursele ciclisme profesionale, întreceri ale cruzimii și ale disprețului față de om," *Sportul popular*, 29 April 1952, 8 ; V. Radu, "În lumea sportului capitalist. Moartea lui Orfeo Ponsin," *Sportul popular*, 10 June 1952, 7.

⁸⁰ I. Szakaacs, "Eshman Thomas nu s-a mai întors acasă," *Sportul popular*, 9 July 1952, 7.

profound disrespect for human life -- as opposed, of course, to socialist humanism. Articles in *Stadion* magazine deplored wrestling moves that caused nasty bite marks or skin scratches and even eye injuries and broken bones. How could such violence be called a sport, one author asked? The answer was found in the flaws of capitalism. The wrestlers who accepted these public indignities were forced to do so by unemployment and the constant menace of poverty. Former wrestlers who were no longer able to work had been exploited by sports businessmen in exchange for a "meager piece of bread."⁸¹

Photographs provided further ammunition for Romanian sports journalists to show how sports violence, business, and class struggle were intertwined. Articles published under the regular theme, "The American Way of Life" or "They Too Practice Sports," were accompanied by several pictures of injured boxers and cyclists with bleeding wounds, or women fighting in the mud, all trying to show the "decadence" of Western sports. Together with photographs, cartoons illustrated the brutality experienced by Western athletes. For example, a cartoon published in *Stadion* magazine in 1952 depicted the "primal instincts" directed towards the rival team and referees during the hockey games of the American national team, who finished in second place during the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. The cartoon also alluded to suspicious gangster mafia who, in the eyes of socialist propaganda, owned the whole hockey business in North America. With racist undertones as well, this cartoon served multiple purposes: it showed the violence on hockey arenas, the racism of US sport, its alleged subordination to the vulgar capitalism of mafiosi, athletes as "goods for sale," and the militarism of Western capitalism.⁸²

By publishing photographs and cartoons on violence in Western sports, the editors of

⁸¹ "În lumea dolarului!- Catch: un 'sport' în care arbitrul scapă uneori cu viață," *Stadion*, November 1949, 15.

⁸² Țicu Simion, "La Oslo s-a făcut o bună propagandă pentru sportul de tip nou," *Stadion*, March 1952, 13.

Romanian sports magazines were able to make readers visualize the "true values" of Western sports. Violence in sports attracted more spectators, and more spectators meant bigger profits for promoters. "Consuming" violence in sports arenas also made it possible for audiences to vent various (unrelated) frustrations when they booed or applauded violent sports scenes. Thus, the Romanian press argued, sports violence served as a diversion for capitalist societies, providing a "safe" space where aggression was tolerated. This "safe" space, they theorized, would eventually eliminate the need for class struggle, thus making sports a means to avoid a revolt of the masses. In their efforts to condemn sports practiced in the West, Romanian sports commentators thus found an interesting link between sports as business, violence in the arenas, and class struggle.

Racism

In continuing its tirade against capitalist sports, the sports press raised the importance of issues such as racism in American sports. Excluded from practicing tennis or playing on major league baseball teams, African Americans were discriminated against by "American capitalists who are hand in hand with the Ku-Klux-Klan."⁸³ Sports historian Egon Horn argued that wealthy whites not only conducted and sanctioned lynching campaigns against innocent blacks, but they also cheated when organizing boxing matches that did not allow African Americans to compete for championship titles. On the other hand, as demonstrated by the London Olympic Games, the same hypocritical capitalists in charge of American or British sports had no scruples about using black athletes to win precious medals for their countries, while simultaneously segregating African Americans from white Americans during meal times or in living quarters. Moreover, African Americans were not allowed to compete in swimming competitions against

⁸³ Egon Horn, "5000 de ani de sport: sportul burghez (IV)," *Stadion*, August 1948, 2, 15.

whites because "they would soil the pool water."⁸⁴ At the 1952 Olympic Games, the white members of the US delegation made sure to be in photographs together with the African Americans Olympic champions. However, this was largely understood as only a propaganda ploy, because just before the Games began in Helsinki, the same American officials insisted that black and white athletes be segregated in the Olympic village.⁸⁵

Beginning in the late 1940s, Romanian newspapers published many articles on American racism. The multitude of articles deploring American racism actually reflected what the US Department estimated: that almost half of Soviet Anti-American propaganda centered on the issue of racial discrimination.⁸⁶ Romanian sports reporters lamented the fate of black athletes after they retired from segregated sports. Former African American athletes struggled to obtain jobs, and some ended up working odd jobs for unscrupulous capitalists. Such was the case for the track-and-field athlete Willie Steel, winner of the gold at the 1948 London Olympics, who, after being fired from a Chicago phone company, was only able to secure a job as a janitor at the stadium of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Another Olympic champion, Willie Tolan, gold medalist at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, found himself in a similar situation when he was hired to clean the horse stables of a Chicago millionaire. Racism and segregation were seen as the dark underbelly of US Olympic victories, a sign of the inherent bigotry of the capitalist system. Romanian newspapers argued that black athletes were useful inasmuch as they brought medals and prestige to the US. "The American imperialists" had no problem abandoning the same

⁸⁴ G. Solovov, "Sistemul corupției," *Stadion*, January 1950, 15.

⁸⁵ Țicu Simion, "Unele fapte și comentarii dela cea de a XV-a Olimpiadă," *Sportul Popular*, 6 September 1952, 7.

⁸⁶ Damion Thomas, "Playing the "Race Card:" US Foreign Policy and the Integration of Sports," in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 210.

athletes to poverty once their sporting careers were over.⁸⁷

Some of the articles deploring American racism were translations of the Soviet-sponsored magazine called *USA in Wort und Bild* ("USA in Words and Pictures"). Known in the West as one of "Russia's elaborate propaganda weapons" published in the German Democratic Republic, this magazine published distorted pictures and stories from the American press. However, in the Romanian press the articles from *USA in Words and Pictures* were considered to be the true voice of American athletes outraged by extreme racism, although in reality the stories were coming directly from Moscow.

Corruption

Unexpectedly, even the Pope was subject to criticism in the Romanian sports press. What was the link between the Pope and capitalist sports? A. Kuleshov, the Soviet sports commentator, denounced the Vatican as "a docile tool of Wall Street," with 80 percent of its income originating from the US and Canada. Kuleshov noted, "The Holy Father of the Catholic Church knows and loves sports," and he attends competitions of basketball, soccer, and even boxing. For instance, Pope Pius XII had no problem giving his blessing to the American wrestler Frank Saxton, whose subsequent violent fight with a French wrestler showed the public what the Pope really blessed: "ripped out hair, pulled out teeth, and broken bones."⁸⁸ Not only did the Pope sanction violence in sports, but under his supervision the whole spirit of fair play in sports was discarded amidst a veneer of papal legitimating. According to *Stadion* magazine, the Pope, who proclaimed 1950 a "holy year," expected the victory of the Italian cyclist Bartali (a Catholic) in the *Giro d'Italia*. However, the Pope's expectations were crushed when the

⁸⁷ "Reversul medaliei," *Sportul popular*, 21 October 1952, 7.

⁸⁸ A. Kulešov, "\$portul în slujba Vaticanului," *Stadion*, December 1951, 22.

Protestant Swiss rider Koblet became the champion of Italy, despite the (alleged) concerted efforts of the Pope's agents to bribe him to slow down. Koblet's victory and the subsequent uncovering of the bribing affair in *L'Europe* weekly magazine brought the Pope into the public eye.⁸⁹ Pope Pius XII's blessing of violence, his supposed involvement in the *Giro d'Italia*, and in several other Italian sports federations which pumped money into the Vatican's sports center, were proof in Romania of the corruption of capitalist sports.

Western women athletes

Romanian authors constantly criticized capitalist sports and contrasted them with the sports in Soviet Union, and, by default, other Eastern European socialist countries. Journalists paid specific attention to the status of women athletes. While the Soviet woman athlete was considered equal to males, the Romanian press argued that, in the West, women athletes were at a major disadvantage. This, in turn, reflected women's limited roles in "bourgeois" society generally: housewife, cook, mother, "a man's slave." Therefore, as one article put it, it was not a surprise that women athletes in capitalist countries were not as visible or well regarded as male athletes. At the London Olympics in 1948, US male runners were able to win many medals in track and field competitions, but only one woman achieved such success. Similarly, in other sports like swimming, ice-skating, skiing or basketball, women were practically absent from the top positions. For Romanians, this constituted evidence that women athletes in the US, and by default other capitalist countries, did not enjoy equal treatment with and were seen as socially inferior to men.⁹⁰

Romanian sportswriters looked for patterns of blatant discrimination against women

⁸⁹ "Și ei fac sport: Papa și sportul," *Stadion*, August 1950, 19.

⁹⁰ "Aritmetica ziarului L'Équipe," *Sportul popular*, 7 October 1952, 7.

athletes in Western sports. For instance, they condemned the way the French sports periodical *L'Équipe* decided to unofficially rank the nations participating at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics; according to *L'Équipe's* arithmetic, women's results were assigned only half the points that similar male performances received. Therefore, even if women won Olympic golds, their performances were considered less important than, say, the bronze medals won by men athletes. The importance of this "arithmetic" was twofold. First, it proved that "reactionary" Western newspapers were panicked by the results of Eastern European socialist women athletes. Second, it constituted a proof of the inferior social status of women in capitalist societies. Western countries not only did not feature as many women athletes as the communist countries did at the Olympics, but they devalued women's performances.

In contrast, the Romanian journalists argued, "in our country women do not receive half the points, half the salary, or half the rights. And we are proud of it."⁹¹ Using as evidence a direct quotation from the Romanian Constitution, sports writers were able to point to women's equality to men in socialist Romania as an example of the "right" treatment of women within the communist bloc. Capitalists diminished the value of women athletes, and thus were, once again, at odds with the "healthy and progressive" values of socialism. The superiority of socialism, as a system that liberated women, was a rhetorical tool used throughout the entire second half of the twentieth century, but the arguments of socialist intellectuals were often at odds with the reality of women's status in socialist societies.⁹²

⁹¹ "Aritmetica ziarului L'Équipe," *Sportul popular*, 7 October 1952, 7.

⁹² On gender relations during communism see, among others, Katherine Verdery, "From Parent-State to Family Patriarchs: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Eastern Europe," *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Zuzanna Kiczko and Etela Farkasova, "The Emancipation of Women: A Concept that Failed," in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller eds., 84-94; Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (New York: Verso, 1993). For a general

Athletes as commodities

Sports journalists in Romania often argued that Western athletes were usable commodities. They could be bought or sold at their managers' whim. Moreover, players themselves got involved in crooked deals that ensured huge profits for illicit gamblers. Such was the reported case of the former world middleweight boxing champion Jake La Motta. In 1960, *Sportul popular* recounted La Motta's testimony at a congressional hearing in which the boxer admitted to fixing the 1947 match with Billy Fox. He reportedly did so to later receive the world title in 1949 in a fixed fight with Marcel Cerdan.⁹³ According to his deposition, La Motta had to pay \$20,000 to become a world champion, even though "gangsters warned him against disclosing any names associated with the mafia." La Motta's words constituted enough proof for the writers at *Sportul popular* to conclude that dirty business dictated the course of all professional boxing in the US, due to "the monstrous gangster fauna" that populates the sport.⁹⁴

Romanian sports writers compared soccer players in England and France to human commodities or, as they termed them, "slaves." Their legal status, according to *Stadion* magazine, was that of "goods" rather than athletes. "If other workers could sell their labor to any employer," one article reported, "professional soccer players could not do the same thing," because they could be bought and sold on a whim like any other commodity by club owners.⁹⁵

overview of how gender as a category of analysis is employed by historians of Eastern Europe, see Maria Bucur, "An Archipelago of Stories: Gender History in Eastern Europe," *American Historical Review*, 113:5 (December 2008): 1375-1389.

⁹³ The Martin Scorsese film *Raging Bull*, a hit of 1980s American cinema, portrays Jake La Motta's personal and professional life, as well as his encounters with the gangster mafia involved in illegal profits from sports. Romanian sports newspapers often mentioned the fixing of boxing matches. Interestingly enough, when a boxer who was involved in arranged fights would later become poor and destitute, the issue of fixing the matches was less important. See "Note externe: în căutarea fericirii...", *Sportul popular*, 16 January 1960, 7.

⁹⁴ "Cu și fără comentarii... la Motta face senzaționale mărturisiri," *Sportul popular*, 25 June 1960, 7.

⁹⁵ "Profesioniști sau scalvi?," *Stadion*, October 1955, 15.

This fact aggravated the secretary of the British Professional Soccer Players' Union, Jimmy Guthrie, who was heard saying, "We had enough slavery, help us get free!" at a congress of British trade unions. Famous soccer players such as Mathews, Sheckleton, or Bentley, agreed with Guthrie, but did not endorse his use of the term "slavery," considering it too strong. Nevertheless, the Romanian magazine considered the term "slaves" appropriate for pro soccer players, despite the fact that they received huge salaries from sports clubs. Although it did not entirely fit the Marxist definition, the term "slaves" was used to designate Western athletes' dependency. Unexpectedly, the term "slaves" was used concurrently with "mercenaries" to point to the fact that players had a modicum of agency and independence because they could market their skills to different sports clubs.⁹⁶ Either as slaves or mercenaries, Western professional athletes were doomed to be exploited as "goods" in an unfair capitalist game, earning only an short-lived glory.

Western athletes as ephemeral celebrities

Sports writer Egon Horn blamed capitalist sports for creating short-lived sports heroes. He considered the spirit of competition essential for sports because it contributed to the perfection of sports techniques which, in turn, built stronger bodies. However, Horn argued, capitalists embraced the spirit of competition for a different purpose: "to prevail over the weak one, to eliminate the loser and to get moral and material profits from each victory."⁹⁷ Consequently, in this quasi-Darwinian fight for supremacy, strong bodies were less important than the players who set the records, the champions, and not the ordinary contestants who were unable to fill the

⁹⁶ "Sportul lor: Atențiune, trosnesc oasele," *Stadion*, March 1953, 23.

⁹⁷ Egon Horn, "5000 de ani de sport: sportul burghez (V)," *Stadion*, September 1948, 2.

manager's pockets or obtain fame and glory for sports club owners.

Capitalist sports produced sports stars who were advertised in mass media, just like any other commodity in which Western companies invested capital. These champions were created almost overnight and with the same speed they were forgotten. Accidents, old age, and/or superior adversaries robbed them of their success. The press provided readers with numerous examples of athletes who, after tasting this fleeting sports glory, became marginalized in their own societies, often ending up in misery. Such were the cases of Olympic champion Jesse Owens who ended up waiting tables and working as a janitor, or a former world boxing champion who died on the London streets.⁹⁸ The American Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim across the English Channel, was later found by the police hungry and disoriented on the streets of New York City. No longer was Ederle a "unique and extraordinary" swimmer; instead, she had been quickly discarded and forgotten. In the "country of all possibilities," *Stadion* claimed, athletes' glory lasted only as long as it could bring profits to sports club owners, dubbed "sports gangsters."⁹⁹

Status of Western athletes' star

When talking about athletes from the West, the Romanian press seemed to divide them into two categories. In the first group, there were the innocent victims, always exploited and at the mercy of the "imperialist business owners." The second group featured "star" athletes who were arrogant and behaved much like their profit-seeking managers. Such was supposedly the case of three well-known American track-and-field athletes -- Oldbritten, Whitefield, and Cunningham -- whose behavior during a Norwegian tour scandalized the event. According to

⁹⁸ Egon Horn, "5000 de ani de sport: sportul burghez (V)," *Stadion*, September 1948, 2.

⁹⁹ "Și ei fac \$port: 'Glorie' sportivă," *Stadion*, July 1950, 23.

Stadion magazine, citing the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*, the three Americans acted conceitedly towards both the public and their adversaries while on tour in Norway.¹⁰⁰

Their first stop in Oslo was not the training field but the night clubs. The Romanian press contended that their main interest in Norway had nothing to do with culture or traditions, but the value of the prizes. Moreover, when the three athletes learned the prizes were modest, they demanded (unsuccessfully) valuable gifts of jewelry from their Norwegian hosts. Unhappy with the results, the Americans refused to participate in the competition. Romanian journalists concluded that their behavior was irrefutable evidence of the overconfident, vain, and self-important athletes produced by capitalist societies.¹⁰¹

The Romanian press noted that American athletes' behavior was even more outrageous at the Helsinki Olympic Games. Thus, Radu Urziceanu, one of the Romanian correspondents at the 1952 Games, noted that he expected American athletes to display their low moral values, an ethos that stemmed from "the mud of sports professionalism and business." He was not surprised at all at the sight of US athletes extravagant and indecently dressed, drinking, hugging, and kissing in local pubs. However, to Urziceanu's dismay, their arrogance went so far as to force bus passengers to get up from their seats so they could sit down. Good behavior and morals were apparently *not* some of the qualities of these visitors.

As a way to contrast the moral superiority and dignity of socialist athletes with the "depravity" of capitalist athletes, Romanian sports reporters mocked the peculiar behaviors of athletes from capitalist countries. Journalists considered many athletes' superstitions as direct

¹⁰⁰ "Și ei fac \$port: Zilele de lucru ale sportului imperialist," *Stadion*, August 1950, 21.

¹⁰¹ Among other articles of this sort, see "Și ei fac \$port: Zilele de lucru ale sportului imperialist," *Stadion*, August 1950, 21; "\$portivii Reisman, Cartland, Bergman et co. în 'demonstrație' la Bombay," *Stadion*, March 1952, 20-21.

"effects of their bourgeois education."¹⁰² Reporting from the Helsinki Olympics, Țicu Simion ridiculed athletes who were always praying to their respective Gods before competitions (especially the Muslim heavyweight lifters), or Canadian athletes who screamed from the top of their lungs before starting a sporting event. Uruguayan basketball players had the strangest ritual of all before their matches: "every player would bite their coach's hand." Their behavior would become even more bizarre later during the game when supposed episodes of hysteria led to "the mistreatment of the referees."¹⁰³ Țicu Simion poked fun at several athletes from the West who cried after their unsuccessful performances. Such was the case of the American track-and-field athlete Brown, who "cried his eyes out and bit the sand" after he missed the javelin target three times in a row, or the English gymnast Rantrik, who botched her parallel bars routine.

Simion noted this behavior was in stark contrast with the dignified actions and attitudes of Soviet and other socialist athletes. Despite the difficulty of competition, none of the socialist athletes ever cried or abandoned the competition, even if they were injured. Socialist athletes proved to be "modest, restrained, fully confident in their abilities, and always fought for the glory of their socialist countries."¹⁰⁴ Eastern European athletes were seen as exemplars of good behavior and the mentality of a "new athlete," with a healthy approach to life, the world, and sport. Differences between capitalist and socialist athletes could be measured not only in inches or seconds, but also in behavior, Simion concluded.

Western spectators vs. socialist audiences

The Romanian sports press did not limit its criticisms to Western athletes and sports

¹⁰² Simion, "Unele fapte," 7.

¹⁰³ Țicu Simion, "Unele fapte și comentarii de la cea de a XV-a Olimpiadă," *Sportul Popular*, 6 September 1952, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

promoters. Readers had the opportunity to be informed about the flaws of American sport spectators as well. For instance, in an article drawing on Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov's road trip notes of 1935, US spectators were described in less than flattering terms.¹⁰⁵ While commenting on a boxing match at Madison Square Garden in New York City, Ilf and Petrov noted that Americans who were watching the match were also constantly encouraged to purchase goodies from vendors selling cigarettes, salted almonds, chewing-gum, crackers, and even whiskey. Spectators consumed both sports and vices. As the two Soviet authors wrote, "ordinary Americans have to chew something all the time. Chewing-gum, candies, cigarettes – their 'jaws' don't stop from chewing, from moving."

Not only did they eat and drink during the game, but they also loved to shout. Ilf and Petrov asked ironically whether the real reason why the American public came to the game was to shout and scream rather than to appreciate sports. Ilf and Petrov suggested that rather than spend all their energies encouraging or cursing the players, American spectators could better use their vigor to build a "six-stories building with elevators, terraces on the roof, and a café on the first floor."¹⁰⁶ (However, the two Soviet authors never stopped to think of the similar reactions of a Soviet audience at a soccer game between Spartak Moscow and Dynamo Kiev.) For the Romanian editors of *Stadion* magazine, Ilf and Petrov's sarcasm played very well into their agenda of denigrating all aspects of capitalist sports.

In contrast to the "rowdy," even "brutal" Western audience always ready for shocking sports spectacles, spectators in socialist countries were depicted as having "understood that

¹⁰⁵ This book was recently edited by Erika Wolf and published as *Ilf and Petrov's American Road Trip: The 1935 Travelogue of Two Soviet Writers* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press and Cabinet Books, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, "Din sportul american," *Stadion*, July 1949, 14.

sports was not a frivolous party, but an element of social progress."¹⁰⁷ In this respect, mass sport purportedly contributed greatly to educating socialist audiences. Thus, sportswriters thought that socialist citizens in Eastern Europe could also *participate* in sports rather than be just rowdy consumers of someone else's games. Here, the virtues of mass sports were supposed to pay off and result in a refined, disciplined, and friendly audience, capable of understanding and coexisting with other competitors and spectators. Thus, commentators argued, not only could athletes and spectators practice sports, but they could also work together, because each of them was a member of a new community. Amateur sports had the potential to bring together workers who worked and played together, and respected each other. Thus, there was no room for shouting and rowdiness, but only for "applause and constant encouragement."¹⁰⁸

Sports journalists of the 1950s tried to educate the Romanian public about the importance of jettisoning a prewar "bourgeois" sports mentality. Journalist A. Vogel remarked on how the Romanian spectator was still far from able to appreciate a sports match "through the lenses prescribed by our country's general political interests."¹⁰⁹ Instead of looking at sports as a spectacle, where only the final results mattered, the ideal socialist spectator had to be able to evaluate the quality of a given sporting event, taking into account the physical abilities of the athletes, their behavior, and team spirit. In Raul Radu's opinion, the new type of spectator would use objectivity as a reference point when appraising any competition. Consequently, Raul continued, sports fans will value each player's role as a team member rather than his or her potential as an individual star athlete.

¹⁰⁷ Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, 480.

¹⁰⁸ Tudor Vornicu, "Spectatorii," *Stadion*, February 1949, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Art Vogel, "Spectator vechi, spectator nou" *Stadion*, June 1950, 2.

Proper socialist spectators could also recognize the value of the competitor, despite their attachment to a local team. Sports fans would not yearn for victory at all costs, and would not transform their favorite players into idols. The new spectator would stop blaming the referees for the inability of their team to win. Also, audiences would no longer use excuses such as "such and such player had no luck" and thereby failed to win. Because the new spectators were well-informed and able to judge the quality of an athlete, they would eliminate the variable of "luck" from any athletic equation. The team or athlete would win not because they were lucky, but because they were the best at that particular moment in time.¹¹⁰ Vogel warned sports fans displaying the "old mentality": they would be considered internal enemies, agitators against the new socialist order. "It's a good idea to look carefully at the agitator. He is the class enemy, the foreign agent. He is not our friend. He is the snake that must be crushed because he comes to poison our sport. Let's turn him in, let's throw him out, because he has no place within a social movement that wants peace, progress, and socialism!" Vogel noted.¹¹¹

"Degenerate sports"

In its criticism of the West, the Romanian press of the 1950s claimed that a "degenerate" capitalism gave birth to "degenerate sports." Several articles in the Romanian press analyzed new sports with "a great future" in the United States. Such was the case of eating or spitting contests, "pushing walnuts across the table with the nose," or pulling people up by their hair. In an article about competitive eating, three American girls were shown training for a macaroni-and-cheese eating contest, where "their competition will be a versatile Italian dog, specializing in

¹¹⁰ Raul Radu, "Educarea publicului. Despre un nou mod de a gândi al publicului sportiv," *Stadion*, June 1949, 14.

¹¹¹ Vogel, "Spectator vechi," 2.

eating macaroni very fast with or without sauce."¹¹² The criticism was accompanied by harsh irony, so Romanian readers could poke fun at "sports" in the West. The same sarcasm could be detected in another article describing the spitting contest. Labeled as a "mass sport" due to its accessibility to every American, the "sport" of spitting was supervised by a federation of fourteen sporting clubs. These clubs organized different contests, including the "grand triathlon" with spitting at a distance, spitting for height, and target spitting. An anonymous San Francisco sailor set the record for spitting chewing gum at a distance of 63.61 feet (19.39 meters).

Not only did ordinary Americans have easy access to this activity, but there were other beneficiaries as well. Chewing gum producers, according to Romanian writers, were very interested to spread spitting contests because their sales might increase. Also, the anonymous author of the article published by *Stadion* magazine contended, "the growth of spitting contests will also contribute to distracting American citizens' attention from the numerous needs of their everyday lives."¹¹³ The new American sports were not entertainment. Instead, *Stadion* argued, they were profit-driven and a diversionary tool in capitalists' hands. Ordinary Americans did not practice these sports because they had plenty of free time and wanted to be entertained. Millions of unemployed in the West, according to the Romanian press, involved themselves in these degrading sports in order to win money.

Among the "degenerate sports," newspapers often emphasized professional wrestling. Mud wrestling and roller skate wrestling constituted extreme versions of this acutely physical brand of sport. In the case of wrestling on roller blades, not to be confused with roller derby, women athletes would end up going home "with broken arms and legs, with pieces of opponents'

¹¹² "Și ei fac sport: Zilele de lucru ale sportului imperialist," *Stadion*, August 1950, 21.

¹¹³ "Și ei fac sport: Un nou 'sport' american," *Stadion*, September 1950, 21.

hair in their purses and other such 'souvenirs'."¹¹⁴

Other new and "useless" American sports criticized by the *Stadion* magazine were "handcuffs marathons," female mud wrestling, blindfolded boxing, rugby in the mud, roller derby, car crushing, and dance marathons.¹¹⁵ In the "handcuffs marathon" the winner was the pair who, after hitting and jostling the other bound pairs of participants, remained to run alone in the arena. The winners were able to win a \$20 prize, while the losers could at best hope for some medical attention, *Stadion* wrote. According to sports writer V.D. Popa, mud wrestling became a very popular sport in the US:

For the ordinary American citizen there is nothing new if two women start beating each other up in the streets. However, if this fight takes place in a sports arena, it could attract numerous spectators with money-filled pockets. That is the reason why the US organizes such wrestling matches.¹¹⁶

While Chicago was the US city with the most arenas for mud wrestling, this "sport" managed "to penetrate other imperialist countries as well, together with Coca-Cola, chewing gum and gangster movies."¹¹⁷ Popa decried the decadence brought to the old continent by the "Yankees," as the Romanian press liked to label all Americans. These new sports reflected the "American way of life," Popa argued, where money was supreme, and sports spectacles were intended to keep the working-class distracted "from their righteous struggle against the dreadful exploitation of American capitalists."¹¹⁸

Cold War Power Play

¹¹⁴ "Cu și fără comentarii: Catch...pe rotile," *Sportul popular*, 28 July 1960, 4.

¹¹⁵ A. Culeshov, "Cultul cruzimii și violenței în \$portul burghez," *Stadion*, April 1952, 21

¹¹⁶ V. D. Popa, "\$port," *Stadion*, June 1952, 23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

Breaching Olympic Etiquette

Sport commentators in Romania vilified the organizers of 1952 Olympic Games for openly discriminating against athletes from socialist countries. For instance, when Soviet or Hungarian athletes won gold medals at track and field competitions, the officials purposely postponed the award ceremony hoping that fewer spectators would witness the triumph of socialist athletes. Ţicu Simion, reporting from Helsinki, was quick to note that the delay of the award ceremony constituted an attempt "to hide the progress and accomplishments of the physical culture and sport movement from [socialist] countries where sport is no longer a tool for dirty exploitation, a profit-driven business venture, racist enterprise or tool for training [future soldiers] for a new global slaughter."¹¹⁹

Following the lead of the Soviet press, Romanian sport publications bashed the ways Western sports organizations treated their Eastern European partners. While countries such as Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, or Czechoslovakia were praised for largely "democratizing" international sports, following the Soviet model of "the most advanced sport movement in the world," other parts of the world chose "wrong ways" to renew the development of sports after the Second World War. Journalists pointed to the faulty relationships of international sports federations with socialist countries. According to the Soviet journalist A. Nikolaev, cited by the Romanian illustrated magazine *Stadion* in 1948, international sport organizations were guilty of harboring resentments towards socialist bloc countries.¹²⁰ For instance, instead of revising relationships with Franco's Spain, at the twenty-fifth Congress of FIFA, it was possible for Spain's representative to enjoy the limelight when he presented Jules Rimet, the president of

¹¹⁹ Simion, "Unele fapte," 7.

¹²⁰ A. Nikolaev, "Politica reac ionarilor in sport," *Stadion*, 17, February 1948, 12.

FIFA, with an anniversary cup. At the protest of the Yugoslav delegation, the reply of the Western officials was that "sport is outside politics," an unsatisfactory answer to those who objected to Franco's extreme right-wing regime. According to Romanian journalists however, the "sport outside politics" principle did not apply when Romania and Hungary were denied access to participate in the tennis Davis Cup in 1948 -- while Spanish representatives were welcomed. Consequently, *Stadion* magazine maintained that Western "apolitical" activists were afraid of Eastern Bloc athletes' performances: "These 'leaders' of world sport are trying by all means to block the contacts with the Soviet sport, and thus to stop spreading the influence of the new scientific methods of Soviet sport."¹²¹

Often times, sports commentators in the Soviet Union and the communist bloc criticized international organizations for their tendency to favor US sports teams. For instance, in 1952 the tennis Davis Cup was thought to clearly help US tennis teams to win.¹²² The competitors in the Davis Cup were divided into three geographical areas: Asian, American (with only four countries) and European (with 23 countries competing). According to the contested Davis Cup rules, the winners of the American zone would automatically play the final against the winner from the match between the other two geographical zones. Theoretically, the US had statistically better chances of winning the Davis Cup than all other competing nations. Not only would the US have a better prospect of reaching the finals, but they would have to play fewer games in order to do so. Conveniently enough, sports commentators did not recognize that the other three teams from the American zone (Mexico, Canada, and Cuba) would have the same chances of

¹²¹ Ibid., 6.

¹²² "'Cupa Davis' – numai pentru americani," *Sportul Popular* 2051, 13 May 1952, 7.

winning the tournament. This issue points to the clear direction of attacks in the sports press: the US was thus the primary target of communist criticism.

In the context of the early years of the Cold War, the West was accused of undermining the legitimacy of sports teams or events from Eastern European "popular democracies." For instance, in the summer of 1950, *Stadion* magazine denounced the "maneuvers" of the International Federation of Swimming to move the location of the European Swimming Championships from Budapest to Vienna because Hungary allegedly did not have the proper facilities to host such a large-scale event.¹²³ However, the Romanian magazine claimed to know the true reason for changing the location of the tournament. With Vienna as host, the International Swimming Federation could easily invite enemies of the socialist bloc: such as the representatives of Franco's Spain and of "executioner" Tito. Another example of the West's obstruction of sports in the East came a year later in 1951. According to *Stadion*, "American occupying troops in Western Germany and Austria" tried to block efforts of young people to participate in the World Youth Festival in East Berlin. This festival, that featured politics, sports, and cultural events, was sponsored by two Soviet organizations: The World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students.¹²⁴ With East Berlin as host, organizers viewed the festival as a way to promote international recognition of East Germany. However, when Gen. McCloy, US high commissioner for West Germany, and the "American lackey" president Adenauer, prohibited West Germans from crossing into East Berlin to participate, the Romanian press condemned the Westerners' attempts to restrict access to a

¹²³ "Și ei fac sport: Manevre," *Stadion*, 128, July 1950, 23.

¹²⁴ See "East Germans Host 10th World Youth Festival," 23 February 1973, box 26, folder 3, report 46, RFE/RL Background Reports on Germany, Open Society Archives, <http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/300/8/3text/26-3-46.shtml> (accessed on 11 June 2007).

festival that promoted international cooperation. The press applauded the efforts of Thea Ulatowski, a young girl from Hamburg, who, together with some other 450 of West German youth, defied the American troops. Despite beatings from American border guards, they arrived in Berlin and "marched to affirm their love for life and their irreconcilable hatred against the enemies of the new [socialist] way of life."¹²⁵

As illustrated by the Berlin Youth Festival controversy, the Romanian press scrutinized Western governments' efforts to restrict the participation of Westerners in sporting events behind the Iron Curtain. By the same token, Western authorities obstructed the efforts of socialist athletes to attend competitions in the West. Such was the case of East German chess international master Wolfgang Uhlmann, whose access to a tournament in the Netherlands was refused in 1960 due to a denied visa. East German authorities perceived this as "an act of discrimination," and demanded explanations from the hosts, especially after the Dutch chess players had been previously hosted very warmly by East Germans at Leipzig. To protest the actions of Dutch authorities, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania recalled their players from the Berg en Dal tournament, labeling the competition as an illegitimate international contest. In this way, socialist governments showed their "indignation" towards Holland's "lack of hospitality, courtesy, and disrespect for international protocol."¹²⁶ According to some statistics there were as many as 35 denials of visas for East German athletes by the US and other NATO countries between 1957 and 1967. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) finally recognized the East German National Olympic Committee in October 1965, and only at the Munich Olympics of 1972 was East Germany allowed to have its own

¹²⁵ "Americani nu i-au putut opri să ajungă la Berlin," *Stadion* 152, August 1951, 21.

¹²⁶ "Umbra războiului rece...pe table de șah. Autoritățile olandeze au torpilat turneul zonal de la Berg en Dal," *Sportul popular*, 3730, 1 December 1960, 2.

national team, as well as national flag and anthem.¹²⁷ Denying socialist athletes the chance to compete at several international competitions constituted yet another opportunity for Romanian sport press to criticize the capitalists sport system.

American counter-propaganda

Faced with sharp communist propaganda coming from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European "satellite" states, the United States made a sustained effort to show the virtues of the "American way of life," defined in opposition to Soviet totalitarianism. It was President Truman who defined the "American way of life" as "free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression," as opposed to the "Soviet way of life" that relied on "terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms."¹²⁸

Sports became an arena that made real the "American dream." The popular press in the US presented sports as a way to achieve the "American dream," where "anyone with talent [could] rise to the top in the meritocracy of competitive endeavor."¹²⁹ Sportswriters in the US considered athleticism important for ordinary Americans because it contributed to producing well-rounded individuals, and, in the context of the Cold War, athleticism was often interwoven with militarism as a way of protecting the American nation from the broad communist threat.¹³⁰

During the first years of the Cold War, American popular culture presented sports in an

¹²⁷ James Riordan, "The Impact of Communism on Sport," in *The International Politics of Sport in the 20th Century*, James Riordan and Arnd Krüger eds. (London: E&FN Spon, 1999), 60.

¹²⁸ Truman cited by Thomas, "Playing the "Race Card", " 208.

¹²⁹ Russ Crawford, *The Use of Sports to Promote the American Way of Life during the Cold War* (Lewinston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 11.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

almost mythical way. While professional sports functioned within the larger context of capitalist economics, the press chose to focus only on the positives of the sports business. Reports did not speak of corruption, racism, sexism, greed, or social inequality as problems of capitalist society. In fact, despite the "semi-chattel status of the players and the cartel nature of the professional leagues," sports journalists wrote of professional teams as "assets to the community" and "symbols of civic pride."¹³¹ Team owners were "individuals committed to community betterment," "embodiments of the American dream," "figures for emulation," and "positive forces in society."¹³² Sports club owners who became wealthy did so "through their own efforts," not because they exploited athletes' labor. In a way, culture producers in the US presented sports as an arena that obliterated or downplayed class distinctions. The message was that "all Americans were on the same, all-important team" and everybody, regardless of class or ethnicity, could "interact in the name of cooperation, and not of class struggle." American sports were constructed thus as a "melting pot," bringing together "rich and poor, young and old, professional and laborer" who were joined together by their love of national pastimes.¹³³

To effectively counter the anti-American sports propaganda of Eastern European communist bloc countries, the US took active steps to present "the American way of life" in a progressive light for foreign audiences. The Americans needed to find concrete ways to offset the "Soviets' triple threat -- consisting of participation in international trade fairs, cultural activities, and international athletics."¹³⁴ A USIA (United States Information Agency) report,

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 4, 9.

¹³³ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁴ USIA internal confidential report cited by Thomas M. Domer, *Sport in Cold War America, 1953-1963: The Diplomatic and Political Use of Sport in the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations* (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1976), 72.

issued in September 1954 and called "International Athletics -- Cold War Battleground," revealed that "the world-startling achievements in international sports made by the Soviet Union and its satellite in the last three years point unmistakably to their intention to wrest world athletic supremacy from the United States."¹³⁵ As a result, the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations took active steps to use athletes as propaganda vehicles and sports exchanges with socialist and Third World countries assumed a new cultural importance. For example, as Thomas Domer argued, Eisenhower created the President's Council on Youth Fitness as a way to respond to the accusations of "American softness," while Kennedy's creation of the Interagency Committee on International Athletics was meant to analyze and improve government sports programs.¹³⁶ The Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations' sport policies in the decade 1953-1963 -- "successful fitness programs, international sports performers and athletic exchanges" -- all point to the significance sport achieved in shaping domestic and foreign opinions about the capitalist US.¹³⁷

Just as the State Department used African American jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie or Louis Armstrong as a powerful cultural Cold War weapons, American athletes became cultural ambassadors for the US. For instance, in 1956 the State Department sponsored a tour of the Third World for four American tennis stars in order to convey a positive image of professional sports and the achievements of white *and* black athletes. One of the players was Althea Gibson, an African American tennis player who won a series of domestic tennis tournaments and was considered one of the top players in the world. Choosing a black athlete to represent the US abroad constituted the State Department's response to Soviet accusations of

¹³⁵ Domer, *Sport in Cold War America ...*, 68-69.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 297, 299.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

racism in American sports.¹³⁸

Because both the US and USSR were fighting in the 1950s and 1960s to gain the allegiance of the newly Asian and African independent states in a postcolonial world, the US used athletes of color as a tool of rapprochement to the African and Asian nations of color. For example, the State Department organized over 500 athletic goodwill tours between 1945 and 1968 as a way to show America's commitment to racial integration and justice.¹³⁹ As Damion Thomas noted, there were four reasons why using black athletes ranked high on the State Department's agenda. First, sports was an arena where African Americans presence was visible as opposed to other institutions. Second, foreign audiences were less likely to perceive athletic tours as a Cold War weapon, and sports did not achieve the label of "American cultural imperialism," like other cultural products "exported" by the US. Third, after the Soviet Union's re-entrance in the Olympic Games in the 1952, international sport meets were the arenas of direct confrontations par excellence between the two superpowers. And lastly, athletic events had a wide appeal to global audiences, thus American propaganda via sports could reach a more diversified population, including here children, teens and young adults before they would develop anti-American attitudes.¹⁴⁰

Sports and Western women

As Elaine Tyler May argued, during the Cold War the American family functioned as a bulwark against the communist threat.¹⁴¹ Women were encouraged to think that marriage and

¹³⁸ Crawford, *The Use of Sports...*, 195-196.

¹³⁹ Thomas, "Playing the "Race Card", " 212.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

family were essential in fighting communism at home. In the process, athletic opportunities for women were curtailed and women's roles became more decorative than participatory in competitive sports. Thus, cheerleading was deemed "appropriate" for women because it was a physical activity that was not strenuous or dangerous for women. It also embodied an acceptable vision of femininity at odds with the more masculinized Soviet women athlete popularized by American propaganda. At the same time, physical education experts advised American girls to avoid "boy" sports, because of the taxing practices and competitions on their bodies, and insisted they should focus instead on "more 'feminine' sports such as golf, bowling, tennis, and archery."¹⁴²

American printed press of the late 1940s and 1950s depicted American white middle-class women athletes as "beautiful and feminine," "built for beauty and display," while the Soviet sportswomen were seen as "masculine and homey," "built for wear."¹⁴³ In 1952 when the Soviets competed for the first time at the Olympics after the Second World War, Americans came in direct contact with Soviet athletes. In one documentary about women's sports, American propaganda commented how "big, muscular Russian [women] athletes completely dominated the 1952 Olympics, and the success of these powerful Soviet women repulsed American sensibilities."¹⁴⁴ But despite "looking beautiful," American athletes -- especially the members of the "Flying Queens" team whose motto was "Beauty, Brains and Basketball"-- "regularly lost, and worse, they often failed to give the Soviets a good game."¹⁴⁵ But eight years

¹⁴² Crawford, *The Use of Sports...*, 244.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁴⁴ *Dare to Compete: The Struggle of Women in Sports*, documentary produced by Home Box Office in 1999, and cited in Crawford, *The Use of Sports ...*, 272.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 270 and 274.

later, at the Rome Olympics, it will be an African American woman athlete who, although conforming to the ideal of white middle-class femininity, would win against the Soviets in track-and-field competitions.¹⁴⁶ Edwin Temple, the US track-and-field coach was convinced that his female athletes competed as hard as men, but in public they had to "act like ladies." Gender expectations for (middle-class) American sportswomen during the early Cold War fitted the mainstream ideal of American womanhood and meant that women athletes had to be "feminine," slender, behave "like ladies," wear make-up and be gracious in public. This was in sharp contrast to the more "masculine" Soviet female athletes, who were portrayed as "heavy," "slouching," and with no preoccupation for a "feminine look."

The Role of Sports in the East

A core task of socialist countries' sports was to show the superiority of the "communist way of life," and socialist citizens' wishes for world peace. The entire organization of sports in Romania beginning in the late 1940s was meant to build better workers who were able to strengthen the foundations of the new socialist regime, as well as to promote an attractive image of the new socialist state on the international stage.

As sports historian James Riordan perceptively observed in his work on communist sport, promoting excellence in sports served several purposes. First, elite athletes inspired others to practice sports; thus, they were great sources of patriotism. Patriotism, as cultivated by sports, was closely linked to nation-building, since sports could easily enhance feelings of loyalty to one's country – or political system in this case – across class, race, gender, language, religion, or geographical location. Second, participation in mass sports was thought to ensure a physically healthy nation, which in turn would guarantee a higher rate of national productivity. The notion

¹⁴⁶ Wilma Rudolph, a black athlete from Tennessee State University, was the first African American woman to win three gold medals at an Olympiad. See Crawford, *The Use of Sports*, 275-280.

of "physical culture" became a fad in the 1950s-1960s. The Romanian sports press and the Romanian state introduced policies of physical education at all levels of society.¹⁴⁷ Third, socialist sport was used as a social policy that would contribute to the "social emancipation of women."¹⁴⁸ Socialist regimes placed great emphasis on women's sport, and newspapers often popularized women athletes' accomplishments.

Communist sports fulfilled certain goals of foreign policy. As Riordan mentions, communist countries banked on sports' potential to bring international recognition and prestige. In particular, the Olympics "brought more exposure and prestige and were, in the view of some communist leaders, *the* measure of a nation's viability."¹⁴⁹ Moreover, sport (along with tourism) promoted unity among socialist countries: by participation in regional competitions, joint training camps, and meetings where sports officials could share research or design policies towards the West.¹⁵⁰ A 1950 editorial in *Stadion* asserted how international sport events that brought together sportspeople from socialist countries were "closely linked to the idea of the unity of nations in their quest for peace and progress."¹⁵¹

International role of Romanian socialist sport

¹⁴⁷ See, among others, Ioan Zlate, "Conținutul, sfera și interdependența noțiunilor: 'cultură fizică', 'educație fizică' și 'sport'," (I), *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 8, 1957, 455-464; Ioan Zlate, "Conținutul, sfera și interdependența noțiunilor: 'cultură fizică', 'educație fizică' și 'sport'," (II), *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 9, 1957, 517-525; Constantin Tudose "Conținutul, sfera și interdependența noțiunilor: 'cultură fizică', 'educație fizică' și 'sport'," (I), *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 10, 1957, 582-593; Constantin Tudose "Conținutul, sfera și interdependența noțiunilor: 'cultură fizică', 'educație fizică' și 'sport'," (II), *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 11, 1957, 657-665; Gunther Roblitz, "In legatura cu noțiunile 'cultură fizică', 'educație fizică' și 'sport'," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 8, 1958, 498-501.

¹⁴⁸ James Riordan, "The Impact of Communism on Sport," in *The International Politics of Sport in the 20th Century*, James Riordan and Arnd Kruger, eds. (London: E&FN Spon, 1999), 55.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵⁰ James Riordan, "Politics of Elite Sport in East and West," in *Sport and Politics: The 1984 Olympic Scientific Congress Proceedings*, Vol. 7, Gerald Redmond ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., 1986), 37.

¹⁵¹ "Adevărata importanță a întâlnirilor internaționale," *Stadion*, June 1950, 2.

International sport events acquired a special importance for socialist sport. Participation at competitions held abroad was crucial for projecting a positive image for Romania. Hosting competitions at home was equally important. For example, in the 1950s Romania hosted numerous international competitions and sport congresses. Among the most prestigious were the summer World University Games (1951), the World Youth Festival (1953), the Fourth Congress of the International Volleyball Federation (1953), the Congress of the International Target Shooting Federation (1955), and the Seventeenth Congress of the International Amateur Rugby Federation (1959), as well as European and World Championships for table tennis, volleyball, and basketball.¹⁵²

Although more costly than a trip abroad, international competitions on Romanian soil had the potential to bring numerous benefits. As *Stadion* magazine noted about the World Youth Festival hosted in Bucharest during 1953, foreign visitors, athletes, and reporters alike, could build friendships with Romanian athletes and could see first-hand "the wonderful conditions to practice sport of our youth," and "could convince themselves of the free and happy living conditions in the Popular Republic of Romania."¹⁵³ Moreover, Romanian sports officials were convinced that once the visitors would return to their homes, they would spread word of the hospitality of Romanians and about the warm, friendly atmosphere they encountered while competing in and reporting from Romania.

It was the duty of sports agencies to regulate Romanian participation at international competitions in a centralized manner. Between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, there were

¹⁵² Alexe Nicu, ed., *Enciclopedia Educației Fizice și Sportului din România*, Vol. 2, (București: Aramis, 2002), 241-242; Dan Gârleșteanu and Niculae Mărășescu, *Decenii de aur, 1947-1967* (București: Editura Consiliului Național pentru Educație Fizică și Sport, 1968), 225.

¹⁵³ "Întâlnirile sportive internaționale, prilej de strângere a legăturilor de prietenie," *Stadion*, October 1953, 3.

three changes in the structure of these organizations. *Organizația Sportul Popular* (OSP or Popular Sport Organization) was the leading agency of all sports activities in the immediate postwar period. In 1949, *Comitetul pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport* (the CCFS or The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport) replaced the OSP. CCFS was reorganized later in 1957 into *Uniunea pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport* (UCFS or the Union for Physical Culture and Sport). And finally, in 1967 UCFS became *Comitetul Național pentru Educație Fizică și Sport* (the CCFS, or the National Committee for Physical Education and Sport), an association that lasted until the end of socialism in 1989. These central bodies managed all international sports exchanges, including each sport federation's contacts with international counterparts. These governing bodies planned international competitions for Romanian athletes and teams according to international calendars, a fact that speaks to the partial integration and recognition of Romanian sports structures into international sport institutions.

Planning competitions abroad and at home with international partners was done according to certain goals that echoed Romania's foreign policy. Romanian sports officials from OSP, CCFS, UCFS, and later CNEFS had as a first priority the development of sports relationships with other socialist countries. Some statistics suggest that, at times, the volume of these exchanges reached 70% of the total sports exchanges Romania was involved in during the postwar period.¹⁵⁴ In fact, the printed press covered heavily these exchanges and wrote about the development of sports in the USSR, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, China, North Korea, Cuba, East Germany, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland, and less frequently Albania, Mongolia, and Vietnam.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ "Proiect de calendar pe 1959" (15 October 1958), File 501, p. 38, Colecția "Consiliul național pentru educație fizică și sport," Arhivele Naționale București, România (National Council for Physical Education and Sport Collection, National Archives, Bucharest, Romania, hereafter NCPESC-NA-BRO).

¹⁵⁵ See "Sportul in R P Chineză," *Stadion*, March 1951, 22; "Sportivii Coreei," *Sportul popular*, 24 June 1952, 7; "Cea mai bună sportivă a R.P. Cehoslovace," *Sportul popular*, 14 October 1952, 7; "Sportul feminin in R. P. Ungară," *Stadion*, May 1953, 19; "Realizările sportivilor chinezi," *Stadion*, October 1954, 5; "China: Țara celor 20

Sometimes, these relationships were limited by the level of institutional development of sports in certain countries, as was the case with Albania and Mongolia. Distance was also a factor; travel to Asian socialist countries was too costly.

Fluctuations in Romania's foreign policy towards Yugoslavia also influenced sports exchanges with Tito's federation. In the immediate postwar period, there were virtually no exchanges with Yugoslavia. Sport in Tito's Yugoslavia was "capitalist" because the "Titoist clique follows and carries out with servility the orders coming from the American masters."¹⁵⁶ This situation changed later so that in the 1970s and 1980s relationships with neighboring Yugoslavia flourished.¹⁵⁷ Exchanges with other socialist countries were advantageous not only because they fulfilled foreign policy goals, but because they were mostly based on reciprocity. Athletes, coaches, and other sports officials met annually at diverse international meets, and held special competitions for junior athletes. Junior and senior teams also trained together, and sport officials organized conferences and seminars where they exchanged ideas, training techniques and strategies, and sports publications.

Romania was interested in expanding regional relationships and exchanges with other countries as well. Regionally, relationships with Balkan countries -- Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Turkey -- continued the interwar sports tradition. Also, Romanian sport officials, athletes and coaches regarded in high esteem *Jocurile Balcanice* (The Balkan Games), seen as a regional version of the Olympics. Interestingly, Romania did not shy away from building relationships with Western countries, especially those with advanced sports institutions.

de milioane de sportivi," *Stadion*, March 1957, 14 (This number multiplied massively just one year later in "China: Sportul celor 600 de milioane," *Stadion*, October 1958, 6-7); "Sportul in R. P. Bulgaria," *Stadion*, 12, August 1959, 3-4, 6; "Progresul sportului cehoslovac," *Sportul popular*, 7 May 1960, 7.

¹⁵⁶ "Întâmplări din sportul titoist: Pe placul stăpânilor americani," *Sportul popular*, 22 April 1952, 7.

¹⁵⁷ Alexe, *Enciclopedia*, Vol. 2, 235.

France, England, Italy, and West Germany (the latter only in the early 1970s) figured prominently among guest countries invited to international competitions in Romania. At the same time, Romanian delegations frequently participated in tournaments in Western Europe.

Sport relationships with US increased in the late 1960s and 1970s, and some commentators explained this expansion as a direct result of performances of three athletes: tennis players Ilie Nastase and Ion Tiriac (who played against the US in the 1969 Davis Cup final) and gymnast Nadia Comăneci.¹⁵⁸ Romania cultivated relationships with Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and especially Mexico in the 1970s. Romanian gymnasts toured Mexico and were special guests of Mexican president Jose Lopez Portillo in 1977. And, as an important part of sports exchanges, Romanian coaches trained Mexican national teams in boxing, gymnastics, handball, kayak-canoe, wrestling, fencing, and volleyball before the 1979 University Games. Finally, sports officials tried to strengthen sports relationships with other Third World countries, as well as any country that displayed an open interest in Romanian sport.

Romanian foreign policy did not entirely determine Romania's sport relationships and exchanges. As sports commentator Nicu Alexe observes, building relationships with other countries was more "flexible" than what the official documents stipulated.¹⁵⁹ Personal networking of athletes, coaches, and officials during international competitions, as well as the growing reputation of Romanian sportspeople counted considerably. For instance, by 1968 Romanian volleyball coaches trained the national teams of France, Turkey, Belgium, and Mexico. Romanian coaches shared their expertise training kayak-canoe athletes in the United Arab Emirates and Japan, rugby teams in Czechoslovakia, handball players in Bulgaria, tennis

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 234.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 234-235.

teams in East Germany, women gymnasts in Italy, target shooting athletes in Japan, and soccer teams in Syria. There were also teams of specialists from abroad that trained Romanian athletes in track and field, water polo, wrestling, swimming and soccer.¹⁶⁰ Overall, by 1968, Romania had established contacts with 66 countries and maintained information exchanges with athletic federations and sport institutions from over a hundred.¹⁶¹ According to the Report of the National Romanian Sports Movement Conference, by 1975 socialist Romania sustained sports relationships with 129 countries worldwide.¹⁶² The numerous contacts with international athletic partners showed that Romanian athletes and specialists were recognized abroad. Their experience would contribute to increasing Romania's reputation as a country that could influence the development of sports in other regions of the globe.

Mass sport as basis for elite sport

While international exchanges targeted mainly elite sport, another important direction of physical education and sport in Romania involved mass sport. In fact, as many sport specialists noted, mass sport was thought to be a precondition for elite sport. As one newspaper put it, "More important than the exceptional athletic performance is to increase mass sport."¹⁶³ The idea was that the chance to find top athletes could definitely increase by involving large numbers of people. Consequently, these elite sportspeople would later have the potential to become the elite athletes able to represent Romania at international competitions. As sport journalist Raul Radu noted in 1948, "These top athletes, coming directly from the working class, would later

¹⁶⁰ Gârleșteanu and Mărășescu, *Decenii*, 224.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁶² Alexe, *Enciclopedia*, Vol. 2, 235.

¹⁶³ Raul Radu, "Vârful este? Da! Dar mai ales masele! Dela cap la coadă sau dela coadă la cap?" *Stadion*, September 1948, 2.

benefit from appropriate conditions of training," while continuing their work in production.¹⁶⁴ This concept of "producing" elite athletes echoed the Soviet model of "worker-athlete," and, theoretically, settled the issue of amateurism in Romanian elite sport. Radu considered amateurism as the only type of sport suitable to the social evolution of Romania, so the focus of sports organizations had to be on constantly encouraging workers to practice sports. For instance, Radu noted that, "Workers need to become soccer players and not vice versa, because the road to amateurism has to be lead by the proletarian morals of the working class."¹⁶⁵ Conversely, the elite athletes had to function as examples for the large masses of people who wanted to practice sports. In this context, the newly-achieved records of elite athletes -- for instance allegedly 172 new national records in 1948 alone -- had "a tremendous educational and propagandistic power."¹⁶⁶ The new training methods, quickly accessible to large masses of sportspeople, could prove the superiority of the new socialist regime in the context of Cold War sport rivalry, and also when compared to the previous capitalist development of Romania in the interwar years.

Benefits of mass sport

The early communist sport propaganda was interested in mobilizing the masses to become active participants in the building of socialism. Romania was not the only example.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Raul Radu, "Drumul către amatorismul adevărat," *Stadion*, September 1948, 2, 15.

¹⁶⁶ E Horn, "Cât mai multe recorduri!," *Stadion*, January 1949, 2.

¹⁶⁷ On the East German case, see Molly Wilkinson Johnson, "Sports, Mass Mobilization, and the Everyday Culture of Socialism in East Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003). For a general look at how Eastern European countries used mass gymnastics to display the strength and virility of socialist nations, see Petr Roubal and Orsolya Dano, eds., *Bodies in Formation: Mass Gymnastics under Communism* (Budapest: Open Society Archives at the Central European University, 2001); Petr Roubal, "Politics of Gymnastics. Mass Gymnastics displays under Communism in Central and Eastern Europe," *Body and Society* 2 (2003): 1-25.

Sports experts regarded mass sport as a "collective property of the working-class people."¹⁶⁸ Emil Ghibu, a highly regarded sports specialist and vice-president of UCFS, CNEFS, and the Romanian Olympic Committee (ROC) between the 1960s and 1980s, often explained that the payoff of mass sport would be substantial. Workers-athletes were encouraged to practice sports, and thus to use natural sources of energy such as air, water, and the sun, and to respect hygiene rules because all these activities "could and should increase work productivity." Ghibu estimated that around 70 percent of the increase of production could be achieved through better work productivity brought about by practicing sports. Thus, he wrote, "one of the most important tasks of the athletic organizations is to contribute to the good physical development of citizens, to strengthen their health, to fortify their bodies against illnesses, as well as to contribute to their psychological recreation, thus implicitly enhancing their work productivity."¹⁶⁹

The OSP and successor organizations put together campaigns to spread information on the benefits of sports. Sports officials organized annual conferences where "armies of sport activists" met and exchanged their experiences in encouraging mass sport in rural and urban areas nationwide. These sports officials, or "soldiers of popularizing sport," as they were labeled in the press, promoted sports among industrial and agricultural workers, as well as students. They offered to teach classes to local coaches, designed bulletin boards, distributed free sport newspapers, placed book stands at various local competitions, or broadcast sports news over local radio. While some sports commentators recognized the important role played by volunteers that worked "passionately and competently"¹⁷⁰ to organize mass sport competitions, sport

¹⁶⁸ Gârleșteanu and Mărășescu, *Decenii*, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Emil Ghibu, "Sarcinile cluburilor și asociațiilor sportive în lumina obiectivelor mișcării noastre sportive pe anul 1959 și a participării la Jocurile Olimpice de la Roma din 1960," in *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 1, 1959, 4.

¹⁷⁰ Gârleșteanu and Mărășescu, *Decenii*, 12.

journalist Raul Radu criticized local sport officials, who became bureaucrats and preferred only to write reports about mass sports rather than be actively involved in mobilizing youth for sports. For instance, Radu was unhappy that the local OSP members from Baia Mare County became remote from the masses and resorted to rumors to coerce workers to participate in sport conferences. He invoked Stalin's motto when promoting mass sport, "our power lies within the masses." Socialism could only be built with educated workers, Radu argued, and mass sport could be used as "a tool of physical and moral education of the working people."¹⁷¹

Organizing mass sport

Mass sport followed the general organization of a centralized socialist economy. Thus, according to their workplace, those interested in sport could be enrolled in five types of collectives of athletes. Blue- and white-collar workers could join sports organizations in industrial plants, those from rural areas who were interested in sports could be affiliated with the "Recolta" ("The Harvest") umbrella organization, students from higher education institutions would automatically become members of the "Stiința" ("The Science") association, while workers from trade union associations were part of the "Voința" ("The Will") association. Lastly, members of the Ministry of Army Forces and Ministry of Internal Affairs could practice sports at the Steaua (formerly CCA) and Dinamo sports clubs. Gradually, Steaua and Dinamo would become the Romanian elite sports clubs. They dominated national competitions and generated the majority of athletes for the national teams that participated at European, world and Olympic competitions.

Official reports boasted of the success of mass sport. The number of amateur athletes

¹⁷¹ Raul Radu, "Legătura cu masele, condiție esențială a succesului muncii de educație a sportivilor," *Stadion*, June 1949, 2.

enrolled in these sports organizations was a visible sign this success. There were almost 400,000 by 1950. Their number more than doubled six years later when "the Romanian movement of physical culture and sport counted 990,000 members, out of which 250,000 were women."¹⁷² While communist statistics could not be taken at face-value, mass sport penetrated Romanian society, and access to organized sports became easy. Another noticeable sign of mass sports success was the nationwide competitions that involved large numbers of participants.

In the early 1950s, the sporting group "Gata pentru munca si apărarea Republicii Populare Române" (GMA, or "Ready for Work and Defending the Popular Republic of Romania") was the main umbrella organization for mass sport, comprising a wide range of athletic activities. The GMA was established on May 14, 1950 as a Soviet-style organization meant "to help build socialism and defend world peace." Not surprisingly, other socialist countries in Eastern European and Asia imported it.¹⁷³ Six principles guided the GMA. First, the sporting complex was "scientific," because it followed the Soviet model, thought to be the most advanced sport system in the world. Second, it promoted a well-rounded physical education, without a strict specialization in a specific branch of sport. Third, GMA had practical benefits, because workers could use the skills developed through sports in "to build socialism" and defend their country. Fourth, the competitions promoted mass sport that involved amateur athletes from all walks of life: workers, peasants, students, and military personnel. Fifth, sport competitions were organized on a continuous basis, and thus provided worker-athletes with a continuous opportunity for physical activity. Finally, GMA "solved the integration of sport for

¹⁷² Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, 581.

¹⁷³ See Part V, Chapter 2 "Physical Education in Socialist Countries," in Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, 417-451; Loredana Necula, "Propaganda comunistă prin sportul de masă in România (1971-1989)," (BA thesis, University of Bucharest, 2002).

health purposes with mass sport." Participants in GMA, divided by age and gender (ages 15 and above), had to pass certain physical norms in order to obtain a sports badge, certifying their acquisition of skills in gymnastics, swimming, skiing, obstacle course running, throwing (including here "the grenade"), target shooting, and tourism.

Athletic abilities, though, would not suffice to obtain the GMA insignia. All competitors had to pass a written exam testing their knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and their awareness of hygiene and first aid. Only then could competitors be recognized as "well-rounded worker-athletes, builders of socialism and defenders of the country." Ceremonies for granting the GMA insignia were deemed as "a very important act of great social and educational value." In fact, to obtain the GMA insignia needed to become a "patriotic duty," so that each citizen would show their love for the country and their will to "increase work productivity in order to quickly build socialism."¹⁷⁴

The organization of GMA looked good on paper, but GMA turned out to be difficult to sort out on the ground.¹⁷⁵ Thus, despite the efforts invested in the GMA experiment, other, more successful, mass sport competitions replaced the GMA sports program. In the mid-1950s, the local and regional Spartakiads, became the main form of mass sport, so much so that in 1964 the first national Spartakiad allegedly involved almost 4.7 million Romanians in its first round of competitions.

Spartakiads were not a Romanian invention, however. The mushrooming of Spartakiads

¹⁷⁴ "Complexul Sportiv 'Gata pentru Muncă și Apărarea Republicii Populare Române,'" *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, April 1950, 222.

¹⁷⁵ "Incepeți munca pentru complexul 'Gata pentru Muncă și Apărarea Republicii Populare Române,'" *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, May-June 1950, 265-271; Florin Serban, "Aspecte pozitive și negative din desfășurarea complexului sportive GMA," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, July 1950, 383-387; Dumitru Nedelea and Traian Ciobanu, Cum se organizează activitatea complexului GMA la sate," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, March 1954, 53-57; "Observații asupra structurii complexului GMA," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, January 1955, 19-25.

in the Eastern European communist countries was a visible sign of the spread of the Soviet mass sports system. In Romania, the most successful of the Spartakiads was the 1964 incarnation that generated 1,910 regional, 549 county, and 64 national records.¹⁷⁶ Participants at the Spartakiads were largely recruited from among the amateur athletes affiliated with different industrial plants, enterprises, or institutes. Such was the case with nine gymnasts from the "23rd August" Factory in Bucharest, who transitioned successfully from "mass gymnastics" to "artistic gymnastics" and became regional champions in 1962.¹⁷⁷ None of these gymnasts, however, managed to join any national team or participate at national gymnastics competitions. This showed that Spartakiads did not "produce" elite athletes as it was expected to, but rather contributed to the popularization of a large range of sports, including gymnastics. The Spartakiads -- seen as a Soviet import by the 1970s -- were replaced by *Daciada*, a "truly" Romanian version of mass sport that was promoted especially after the successes of Romanian athletes at the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal.

In 1976 the Political Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party approved the establishment of *Daciada* as a nationwide competition meant to stimulate mass sport and provide useful ways to enjoy and spend free time.¹⁷⁸ What distinguishes *Daciada* from previous forms of mass sport is that mass and elite sports were brought together. Seen in the larger context of Ceaușescu's communist nationalism, *Daciada* was essentially a Romanian

¹⁷⁶ Kirișescu, *Palestrica*, 598.

¹⁷⁷ G. Ștefănescu, "De la gimnastica in producție la gimnastica artistică," *Sport*, 8, April 1962, 7.

¹⁷⁸ Another leisure activity enforced in 1977 by the of Ceaușescu's regime was "Cântarea României" defined as a "festival of socialist education and culture (...), a rich educational, political, ideological, artistic, cultural and creative activity meant to enhance the country's spiritual life, to increase the contribution of creative intellect of the Romanian people to the national and universal cultural patrimony." See Vladimir Tismăneanu, ed., "Comisia Prezidențială Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste Din România, *Raport Final* (București: Comisia Prezidențială Pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste Din România, 2006), 603, available online at www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/raport_final_cpader.pdf. (accessed 30 July, 2008).

competition, with a Romanian name pointing to the millennial history of Romanians in Southeast Europe.¹⁷⁹ *Daciada*, more than any other previous sport competitions, had as a goal "to identify talented athletes for elite sport."¹⁸⁰ In fact, evidence suggests that rather than recruiting elite athletes via mass sport, *Daciada* served Ceaușescu's desire to separate Romanian sports, rendering it free from any type of Soviet influence, a strategy also reflected in of his foreign policy.

After the fall of the communist regime in Romania, sport journalists admitted that often times they were under pressure to write false reports of the mass sport competitions. Such was the case of Vasile Tofan, writer for *Gazeta Sporturilor*, who disclosed that in the 1970s he had to write in the press that "over 5,000 young people" competed for a sports diploma at a *Daciada* competition in Prahova County, instead of a mere 450-500 real participants.¹⁸¹ Regardless of what happened on the ground, the stories that sports commentators fabricated for the mass consumption of sports via sports magazines and newspapers served as explanations for the success of elite sports in Romania and offered incentives for all Romanian socialist citizens to practice sport. One of the consequences of the mass sport competitions such as GMA, Spartakiad, or *Daciada* was undoubtedly the popularizing of sports among socialist citizens that, in turn, produced a surge of interest in watching athletic competitions, especially when the Romanian national teams would meet international rivals.

Apart from GMA, Spartakiads and *Daciadas*, mass sport was also promoted in schools

¹⁷⁹ *Daciada* derives its name from *Dacia*, the name of the state that Dacians -- a Thracian tribe -- founded in the first century BCE on the territory North of the Danube river and into the Carpathian Mountains. About the founding of *Daciada* see Constantin Macovei, " 'Daciada', o competiție românească, cu nume românesc din inițiativa tovarășului Nicolae Ceaușescu," *Sportul*, 8762, 19 January 1978, 1.

¹⁸⁰ "O nouă și elocventă expresie a sprijinului pe care partidul nostru il acordă educației fizice și sportului," *Sportul*, 30 December 1976, 4.

¹⁸¹ Vasile Tofan cited in Loredana Necula, "Propaganda comunistă," 85.

and at the workplace. In the printed press, articles described the value of physical education and sport in the overall development of school children.¹⁸² Photographs of kindergarten kids tumbling or trying to keep their balance on the beam accompanied reports about the successes of physical education curricula in the state-run school system.¹⁸³ "There is no doubt" one article insisted, "that our future great champions will be recruited from among the youngest gymnasts from our kindergartens."¹⁸⁴ Also, newspapers and sports magazines were filled with pictures from industrial plants where textile workers interrupted their (monotonous) work to "exercise for five minutes," (even in the middle of the night for workers in the night shift). Newspapers also published photographs taken in factory yards where working men and women would take a "gymnastics break" to learn exercises they could later practice in their free time.¹⁸⁵ Articles in *Cultură Fizică și Sport* outlined the medical benefits of the gym break and described how specific physical exercises were necessary for certain types of industrial professions.¹⁸⁶ Some authors concluded that practicing the right type of physical exercises at the right time could increase productivity in certain industries between 25 and 40 percent.¹⁸⁷ Besides its contribution to boost production quotas, practicing gymnastics at the workplace for no longer than 10 minutes was a cheap tool to combat tiredness, improve workers' health, and promote mass sport.

¹⁸² S. Baranyi, "Educatia fizică scolară în anii regimului democrat popular," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, February 1958, 93-97.

¹⁸³ See, for instance, "Primii pași," *Sport*, 14, July 1961, 16; "Cei mai mici sportivi," *Stadion*, November-December 1953, 50.

¹⁸⁴ "Cei mai mici sportivi," *Stadion*, November-December 1953, 50.

¹⁸⁵ See, among others, "Gimnastica de angrenare în producție," *Stadion*, June 1950, 4; "860 de gimnasti," *Sport*, 18 (41), September 1960, 15; Otto Benko, "Reportaj după miezul nopții..." *Sportul popular*, 12 November 1960, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Dorel Mihail and Efrim Cherteș, "Gimnastica în producție. Aspectele medicale în etapa actuală de dezvoltare din țara noastră," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, May 1958, 269-275; Efrim Cherteș and Dorel Mihail, "Gimnastica în producție. Probleme organizatorice și metodice," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, July 1958, 406-412.

¹⁸⁷ Efrim Cherteș and Dorel Mihail, "Gimnastica în producție. Probleme organizatorice și metodice," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, July 1958, 406.

In addition to trying to promote a healthy body of citizens-workers, Romanian sport officials in the 1950s and 1960s strove to build a large movement for mass sports in order to provide a base of recruitment for elite athletes. In turn, these elite athletes would promote a positive image abroad of a new communist state in Eastern Europe. It is unclear however, if Romanian elite athletes competing and earning medals at international competitions came from among the masses of the workers. Nevertheless, the communist regime in Romania continued its mass sport propaganda into the 1970s and 1980s. It also marketed mass sport to recruit elite athletes who would make Romania known as an important competitor at the Olympics. And at the same time, the spread of mass sport contributed to heightening levels of interest among Romanians in following European, World sports championships, or the Olympic competitions.

The new type of athlete

The formation of the "new man/woman" was an intrinsic part of the socialist regimes' social engineering programs. Multiple studies showed how all state institutions attempted to shape a new type of socialist individual, who would subsequently help build communist society.¹⁸⁸ Party officials and educators paid particular attention to socialist athletes because they occupied a very important and visible place in the social fabric of society, due to their inherent potential as role models. Thus, the concept of the "new athlete" figured prominently in all sports propaganda materials after 1948.

Leaders of the Romanian Communist Party¹⁸⁹ considered the Party guidance essential in promoting physical education and sport as an important dimension of the "new man/woman."

¹⁸⁸ The concept of "new man" dates back to the writings of Maxim Gorky and Soviet education theorist Anton Makarenko. For an analysis of the concept, see Lucian Boia, "Omul nou," in *Mitologia științifică a comunismului* (București: Humanitas, 1999): 121-153; and Antoaneta Tănăsescu, "Un Făt-Frumos de laborator, un Făt-Frumos de tip nou: omul nou," in *Miturile comunismului românesc* (București: Editura Universității București, 1995): 16-21.

¹⁸⁹ The Romanian Communist Party was called the Romanian Workers Party until 1965.

This way, athletes would become "determined and active fighters in the building of socialism."¹⁹⁰ In the late 1940s and 1950s, official party documents drew attention to the Soviet sport experience inspired by the "genial wisdom of the great teachers of the working-class Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin."¹⁹¹ Thus, the new type of individual, already successful in the USSR, could also be bred or reproduced in socialist Romania. Romanian sport newspapers also identified the main task that sports officials had to embark upon in order to achieve the goal of "producing" the new athlete: political education. Consequently, the press wrote about a variety of ways "to raise the ideological profile" of athletes. Sports clubs were urged to organize mini-conferences, to present reports about Marxism-Leninism, or to gather relevant information from the sport press and explain the great accomplishments of Soviet sport and athletes. Sport officials were also encouraged to use meetings and bulletin boards, so they could reach out to athletes and educate them "in the spirit of socialist morality."¹⁹²

This new morality had no room for behaviors deemed undignified. The press derided a complete series of manners or deeds considered anachronistic and not fitting for the new athletes. Thus, superstitions had to disappear from sports arenas, because it was science and not paranormal phenomena that could explain a victory or a defeat in competition. Luck, according to sport specialists, had no place in sports and it was not compatible with socialist sports. Instead, only science, scientific training, and attentive medical care for athletes could bring positive results.¹⁹³ Indeed, sports journalists remarked how tying one's shoe laces in an unusual

¹⁹⁰ "Hotărarea Biroului Politic al CC al PMR asupra problemei stimulării și dezvoltării continue a culturii fizice și a sportului," *Stadion*, June 1949, 2.

¹⁹¹ "Un document istoric în dezvoltarea mișcării noastre sportive: Hotărarea Biroului Politic al CC al PMR asupra problemei stimulării și dezvoltării continue a culturii fizice și a sportului," *Stadion*, July 1949, 2.

¹⁹² Raul Radu, "Două ședințe," *Stadion*, March 1949, 2, "Gazeta sportivă de perete" *Stadion*, March 1949, 14.

¹⁹³ Victor Bănciulescu, "Nu sport la întâmplare, ci educație fizică pe baze științifice," *Stadion*, February 1949, 2.

way, smoking cigars, not washing jerseys, wearing religious symbols, or keeping fingers crossed would not guarantee a victory when the technical preparation of a sports team or an individual player were inadequate.¹⁹⁴

The press encouraged each sports organization to build a sports library and to promote study groups where athletes could actively be involved in discussing not only the newest methods of training, but also party ideology. Besides presenting advice on libraries and reading groups, the sport propaganda also published pictures from staged photo-ops where elite athletes could be seen reading newspapers, books, or listening to Marxist-Leninist lectures. These staged photographs accompanied other manufactured messages from athletes who praised their new opportunities to study socialism. For instance, gymnast Melita Kerekeş declared in 1949 that, "I started reading about a month ago the works of comrade Stalin. Since then, I felt a new inspiration inside of me to work harder, and now I also understand better the new events in our society." Other gymnasts promised to immediately begin studying the "Short biography of Stalin" because "we'll learn beautiful things from it."¹⁹⁵

By definition, the "new type of athlete" was a model citizen, with a correct political and ideological profile, who promoted socialist patriotism and workers' internationalism, and was always ready to build socialism, defend the republic and promote world peace. Numerous articles in sports newspapers, official party documents, and manuals for coaches enumerated the qualities of the "new athlete" -- unending devotion to the causes of socialism and communism, "burning love" for the Communist Party and the homeland, revolutionary vigilance, work ethic,

¹⁹⁴ P. Gațu, "Superstițiile, echipamentul nespălat și apa sfântă a Iordanului," *Stadion*, July 1949, 15.

¹⁹⁵ Florin Șerban, "Sportivii studiază operele lui I.V. Stalin," *Stadion*, December 1949, 14.

and collectivism.¹⁹⁶ The new type of athlete was thus an active member of society, "a brave fighter for his assigned tasks in building socialism, "one that "understands the necessity of learning the most advanced science: Marxism-Leninism," and who will be a dignified member of society "not only because of his athletic abilities, but also because of his political preparation and education."¹⁹⁷

The new type of sports official

The new type of sportspeople included not only athletes, but also sport officials and coaches. In order to deepen their understanding of socialism, the leaders of CCFS made sure that sports officials had a working knowledge of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, they sent an obligatory bibliographical list to county branches of CCFS that started with the Marx and Engels' s "Communist Manifesto," and comprised books on utopian and scientific socialism, as well as current brochures outlining the recent decisions of the communist party about the sports movement in Romania.¹⁹⁸ Sport officials and coaches needed to rid themselves of the "bourgeois mentality" that plagued Romanian sport in the interwar period.¹⁹⁹ Thus, officials and coaches were not allowed to pressure players from other clubs, nor could they try to buy athletes, a practice reminiscent of capitalism.²⁰⁰

At times, OSP and later CCFS took concrete measures to ensure that sport officials behaved according to the party line. For instance, the personnel file of Constantin Pătrulescu,

¹⁹⁶ Nicolae N. Ceaușescu, *Pedagogia educației fizice și a sportului* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1976), 136-147, Loredana Necula, "Propaganda comunistă," 66-68.

¹⁹⁷ Raul Radu, "Doua sedințe," *Stadion*, March 1949, 2.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Tudor Vornicu, "Munca de educație și îndrumare," *Stadion*, September 1948, 2-3.

²⁰⁰ Raul Radu, "Stadion: Editorial," *Stadion*, August 1948, 2.

member of CCFS, mentions that although he fulfilled his obligations as head of the investment sector, "he manifested arrogance and indiscipline, and thus he was administratively penalized." However, Pătrulescu "was passive in his political activity. If he is not motivated, he remains passive. He needs to be helped to increase his political and ideological training."²⁰¹ Upon being hired, every coach had to sign a work contract that outlined his or her professional obligations and rights. Besides sport-related duties, each coach had to "continuously strive to increase his political and cultural level," and "to lead a sensible life, so they could be an example for the athletes they were responsible for."²⁰² In the same way, all coaches up for promotion had to be thoroughly verified and also fill in a specific questionnaire, detailing their political affiliation before and after 1948, their political training, whether or not they traveled abroad and if they had relatives outside the country (whom, where, and when did they leave). This type of information in one's personnel file was quite common in the 1950s pointing to the increased level of political surveillance of sports officials and the constant preoccupation to put "politically correct" officials in charge of the sports movement.²⁰³

However, finding politically correct officials to lead local branches of sport organizations was not an easy task. In the 1950s, high state officials were concerned about the lack of qualified personnel. In August 1955 a document classified as top secret and issued by the General Direction of the Council of Ministries noted that officials in charge of the local sport

²⁰¹ "Comitetul pentru Educație Fizică și Sport -- Secțiunea cadre-- Referat-- Pătrulescu Constantin," (1 March 1955), File 253, p. 277, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁰² "Contract de muncă 1959-1960," File 385, p. 45, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁰³ See Septimiu Chelcea, "Studiu de caz: dosarul de cadre al unui profesor universitar, 1950-1965," in *Viața cotidiană în comunism*, Adrian Necula ed. (București: Polirom, 2004), 118-131. About the manipulation of the personnel files of various contemporary Romanian politicians or intellectuals by the Romanian press after 2000, see Neculai Constantin Munteanu, *Ultimii șapte ani de-acasă: Un ziarist în dosarele Securității* (București: Curtea Veche, 2007).

divisions were not properly trained and did not have the necessary experience in their fields of activity. As a remedy, the document proposed that new leaders be recruited with the help of government's Human Resources Division. Furthermore, the new hires had to be selected, as much as possible, from among party members or candidates to party membership. They had to be "honest, good administrators, as much as possible locals," and at least high-school graduates.²⁰⁴ A report filed 29 days later lists all the presidents of the regional committees for physical culture and sport: they were all men, members of the Romanian Workers Party, and their main occupations ranged from unskilled and skilled workers up to accountants.²⁰⁵ The list shows a desire among high party officials to implement a network of sports officials loyal to the party and the new socialist regime. This list may also suggest that the lack of qualified sports personnel explained why organizing mass sport through the GMA sport complex fell short of its goals.

Sport officials found new solutions. As *Stadion* magazine wrote in 1947, "Romanian sport needs today a large number of sport instructors, educated officials, and a national sport institution of higher education" capable to generate sport specialists.²⁰⁶ For these long-term goals, the government was interested and finally managed to establish physical education institutes and special sport schools. As a short-term remedy to the lack of qualified sports personnel, sports officials turned to the Soviet Union. Thus, during the 1950s several Romanian coaches were trained in the USSR. For instance, a document issued in 1955 by Manole Bodnăraș, the president of the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport between 1952 and

²⁰⁴ "Corespondență. De la Direcția Generală a Consiliului de Ministri nr 35808/3072 către Președintele Comitetului pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport" (2 August 1955), File 253, p. 94, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁰⁵ "Tabel cu președinții Comitetelor pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport de pe lângă Sfaturile Populare regionale" (31 August 1955), File 253, p. 97-98, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁰⁶ "Problema nr. 1 a sportului," *Stadion*, October 1947, 11.

1957, listed several graduates coming from the Soviet Union who were hired at sports institutes and associations in Bucharest. Iosif Hidi, who graduated from the Institute of Physical Culture in Leningrad, returned in August 1954 and was immediately hired as a gymnastics assistant coach at the Bucharest Institute of Physical Culture. The list included data about the salaries of each new hire and whether or not they had "adequate housing."²⁰⁷ However, what adequate lodgings meant is not clearly described. But due to the housing crisis that plagued the Romanian capital in the 1950s,²⁰⁸ the sports leaders' preoccupation with housing shows their will to guarantee sports technicians and coaches all the necessary conditions to support good performances. A coach who was no longer busy with finding an apartment could devote all his attention to professional activity.

Conclusion

The hostility to capitalist sports lay at the foundation of the entire organization of sports culture in early socialist Romania during the late 1940s and 1950s. The ideological Cold War spilled over into international sports venues and the sports pages of magazines, as well as fueled the building of a sports system that could compete successfully with Western values.

In the context of the early Cold War, newspapers in Romania and throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union deplored the notion that Western sports were a training venue for healthy soldiers who would march off into more "imperialist wars" in the East. Second, the press condemned how Western sports aimed to distract the masses of workers from class struggle, providing new forms of entertainment that would dazzle the ignorant. And third, Romanian

²⁰⁷ "Lista absolvenților venind din URSS către Direcția Generală a Consiliului de Miniștri de la M. Bodnăraș" (19 February 1955) File 253, p. 305, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁰⁸ Tatiana Smama-Cazacu, "Instituția colocalizării," in *Viața cotidiană în comunism*, Adrian Necula ed. (București: Polirom, 2004), 110-117.

writers criticized sports as a source of profit for the sports clubs' owners who had no scruples about exploiting the athletes they "owned." Overall, Romanian sports experts concluded that Western sport was a tool of capitalist exploitation, a far cry from the role of sports in the East. Sporting events in the West engendered violence, racism, degeneration, fleeting fame, and arrogance. International sports organizations became subordinated to Western interests, and consequently, obstructed the spread of the ideals of Soviet-style sports. On the whole, sports became another battlefield for the Cold War. The United States actively tried to counteract the socialist propaganda, and used sports and athletes as vehicles to disseminate a positive image of the "American way of life."

In the 1950s Romania promoted mass sport because it could provide the country with both healthy worker-athletes and with elite sportspeople to compete abroad and make Romania known as an emerging sports powerhouse and model socialist republic. In this respect, Romania followed the lead of the Soviet Union and propagandistically advertised a "new type of socialist worker-athlete," able to show the superiority of the socialist system. But when would Romania find its own niche in the Cold War sports rivalry between the two superpowers? And why did women's gymnastics emerge as a signature sport for Romania?

Chapter 2: The Beginnings of the Romanian School of Gymnastics, 1948-1968

Romanian participation at the Olympics is a *national question*. The Olympic Games represents an occasion to show the world that in our country we build a better life that comprises all our citizens equally. Also we can show that the democracy we achieved with so many sacrifices is also present in sport – a place where the progressive forces of the world meet in a pacifist spirit to demonstrate the power of progress and democracy.

-*Stadion Magazine*²⁰⁹

Starting in the late 1940s Romanian athletes became active envoys abroad specifically charged to present a positive image of socialist Romania to foreign countries that did not know much about Romania and its new socialist path after 1948. Romania was not a singular case however. Governments of all communist countries paid special attention to the development of sport. They closely controlled, directed, and funded all sports activities and organizations.²¹⁰ In Romania's case, elite women's gymnastics became the sport that brought international recognition to Romania as a sports powerhouse.

Romanian athletes began winning medals in the 1952 Olympics, and sports officials soon realized that women gymnasts had the potential to bring fame to Romania, just as Soviet women gymnasts were doing for the Soviet Union. Despite the egalitarian gender rhetoric of the socialist regime, women's sports posed particular challenges for sports officials. Sports specialists often debated what sports were deemed "suitable" for women, and gymnastics was perceived as a perfect fit.

²⁰⁹ "Jocurile Olimpice și Jocurile Balcanice," *Stadion Magazine*, 4, 1947, 2.

²¹⁰ See, among others, Molly Wilkinson Johnson, "Sports, Mass Mobilization, and the Everyday Culture of Socialism in East Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003); James Riordan, "Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy," in *Sport and International Relations* ed. Benjamin Lowe, et. al. (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1978), 316-346; Andrew Strenk, "Diplomats in Track Suits: Linkages between Sports and Foreign Policy in the German Democratic Republic," in *Sport and International Relations*, 347-368.

This chapter begins with an introduction to postwar Romania's dependent relationship with the Soviet Union as a way to explain the broader development of women's elite gymnastics, a sport that would soon become synonymous with Romania at international sporting events. The beginnings of elite women's gymnastics were marked by a strong influence of the Soviet methods of training, and sports officials were quick to apply them to training women gymnasts in Romania. However, the process of applying these new methods was not easy or simple, due to some coaches' inertia and unwillingness to abandon their own ways of teaching gymnastics to young women. Nevertheless, the new methods prevailed, and it was not long until Romanian gymnasts achieved high performances at international competitions. Thus, at the Olympics during the 1950s and 1960s, the Romanians started to share the podium with their more renowned Soviet competitors. Notable Romanian Olympic performances turned out to be a truly collective enterprise, as the archival record shows. The last section of this chapter discusses behind-the-scenes efforts of gymnasts, coaches, journalists, and sports officials to give shape to every successful women's gymnastics routine at the Olympics. Endless training, political education and surveillance, and international networking were among the many activities sportspeople conducted as part of the Olympic endeavor.

Romania as a Soviet bloc country

The end of the Second World War brought Romania under the Soviet sphere of influence, a process that affected its entire postwar historical trajectory. Following the Soviet example, the Romanian Communist Party, called the Romanian Workers' Party, amassed complete political power. The single-party system quickly led to a policy of Stalinization in all areas of public life: economy, politics, culture, and sports. Nationalization and collectivization transformed the capitalist structures of the pre-war Romanian economy, while political Stalinism translated into a

monopoly of political power by the communist party with consequent campaigns suppressing all forms of political opposition.

The ideological control of the communist party changed cultural patterns as well. For instance, Romania's intellectual exchanges with the West were abandoned, the new education law passed in 1948 modeled the school system according to Soviet philosophies, and intellectuals who did not subscribe to Marxism-Leninism were removed from their positions and some were imprisoned. Also, the Academy of Sciences was replaced in 1948 by a new version that was dominated by communist academicians, while the "institution" of censorship banned the publication of several hundred book titles and periodicals. National cultural values were replaced by an internationalist socialist patriotism that "changed the focus from loving the country and its traditions to loving Marxism and the Soviet Union."²¹¹ To this end, the Romanian government created several institutions meant to cement its relationship with the Soviet Union: such as the "Cartea Rusă " (The Russian Book) Publishing House and Library, as well as the Institute for Romanian-Soviet Studies, or the Romanian-Russian Museum. Russian language became the mandatory foreign language in grade schools and universities. At the same time, Romanian history textbooks were rewritten as to accentuate the role of the Slavic element in the Romanian history and culture and to highlight the historic "help" provided by Russia to Romanians.

Until the 1960s, Romania was subordinated to the Soviet foreign policy goals via its membership in Comecon (from 1949) and in the Warsaw Pact (from 1955).²¹² The two

²¹¹ Vlad Georgescu, *Istoria românilor de la origini si până în zilele noastre* (București: Editura Humanitas, 1992), 263.

²¹² The Comecon (The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance) was the Eastern European economic organization meant to coordinate and push for the economic development of the Soviet bloc countries. Mongolia, Cuba, and Vietnam later joined the organization.

international bodies were directed by Moscow and provided "Soviet guidance" in all military and economic affairs. With Red Army troops in Romania thru 1958, Romania functioned as a satellite state in orbit of the Soviet colossus. In addition, the organization of sports after 1946 fell under the "Soviet spell." Communist authorities restructured the administration of sports to reflect sports bureaucracies in the Soviet Union. Thus, the changes in the sports administration in 1949 and 1957 followed closely the changes happening in the USSR during the same years.²¹³ This affected even the terminology used in sports administration -- the term "physical culture" from Russian replaced "physical education," previously used in Romania before the communist takeover.²¹⁴ The main institution in charge of sports became thus the *Comitetul pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport* (the CCFS or The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport) and the leading sports journal was *Cultură Fizică și Sport* (Physical Culture and Sport), a copycat of Soviet sports journalism.

Sports for women

Socialist regimes were very interested in promoting and developing women's sport. On the one hand, socialist women practicing sport could serve as a positive example for the socialist bloc in its athletic and cultural battle with the West. On the other hand, sportswomen could demonstrate the "strength, beauty, and youth" of those whose reproductive abilities would ensure the perpetuation of socialism. The Romanian press boasted about the growing numbers of women who practiced mass sport, and statistics showed that in 1953 over 200,000 women

²¹³ In 1949, *Comitetul pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport* (the CCFS or The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport) replaced the OSP. CCFS was reorganized later in 1957 into *Uniunea pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport* (UCFS or the Union for Physical Culture and Sport). On the changes in the Soviet sports organization between 1945 and 1958, see James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 161-182.

²¹⁴ Alexe Nicu, ed., *Enciclopedia Educației Fizice și Sportului din România*, Vol. 3, (București: Aramis, 2002), 94.

competed on a regular basis, with 30,000 being interested in track and field competitions and 26,000 in gymnastics. Together with reports that detailed women's involvement in mass competitions and physical education, the printed press also publicized successful elite athletes, who were simultaneously athletic performers and model "women workers, peasants or intellectuals with strong links to the people."²¹⁵ Praised as great athletes and model workers, women received Party decorations -- a recognition of their value as well-rounded citizens. The celebration of women athletes continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s and was especially visible every year on March 8th, International Women's Day. Every year on this day, newspapers wrote about women athletes and their accomplishments. Also, at training sites small parties were organized to celebrate women. For instance, a sports official noted in his daily reports from the training camp preceding the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, that "men athletes bought books and flowers and gave them to sportswomen, together with their good wishes [...] This is how they ensured an adequate atmosphere for this holiday."²¹⁶

Although widely celebrated in the press, women's sports posed specific problems. Women's physiology required specific training. Several studies published in the leading sports journal of the 1950s detailed the challenges posed by sport for women who experienced menstruation or maternity.²¹⁷ Specialists believed that force, resistance, agility, and dexterity were top physical qualities that women needed in order to become competitive athletes. However, when choosing sports, women had to make sure that they also "prepared [their] bodies

²¹⁵ "Femeia în sport," *Stadion*, 171, March 1953, 20.

²¹⁶ "Notă informativă " (8 March 1956), File 356, p. 82, Colecția "Consiliul național pentru educație fizică și sport," Arhivele Naționale București, România (National Council for Physical Education and Sport Collection, National Archives, Bucharest, Romania, hereafter NCPESC-NA-BRO).

²¹⁷ See among others, J. Kral and I. Pros, "Femeia și sportul," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 11, November, 1957, 648-656, and J. Kral and I. Pros, "Femeia și sportul (II)," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 12, December, 1957, 710-716.

for maternity," and second, sports had to be kept "within the limits of femininity, grace, and aesthetics." Thus, specialists encouraged women to practice exercises that would develop "flexibility, harmony, freedom and grace of movement." Sports that would require "hasty movements, endurance and force" were discouraged. Therefore, among some of the sports considered appropriate for women there were light track-and-field, swimming, figure skating, fencing, and gymnastics.²¹⁸ In the late 1940s sports specialists did not imagine the transformations that women's gymnastics would experience between the 1970s and the 1990s, when gymnastics involved more physical endurance, and when, interestingly enough, Romanian women gymnasts excelled and dominated international competitions. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the consensus in the Romanian press about the impact of sport on women bodies was that sport was not detrimental to women. However, caution had to be taken and certain sports were considered more appropriate than others, because they prepared women to become healthy mothers. Thus, some specialists claimed that, among all women athletes, ballerinas and gymnasts had the easiest deliveries since their training contributed to the strengthening of the abdominal muscles and the flexibility of the pelvis.²¹⁹

Sports officials were also concerned about retaining women athletes once they got married. For instance, the press noted how the French solved the problem posed by physical education teachers in France who abandoned their profession after marriage. Thus, the newspaper mentioned that, upon receiving the teacher's diploma, each French woman had to sign a bona fide agreement that she would not marry within the next 10 years. This way, officials

²¹⁸ "Cultura fizică a femeii," *Stadion*, 95, August 1949, 2.

²¹⁹ Dr. Valeriu Chiose, "Este sportul un obstacol în calea maternității, este maternitatea o piedică în calea sportului?," *Stadion*, 13 July 1956, 15.

argued, the money the state invested in women's education would not be wasted.²²⁰ Although it seemed unrealistic in practice, this solution was probably looked upon with interest by sports officials in Romania. Despite the official rhetoric that sportswomen were at the same time top athletes, model workers and reliable wives and mothers, in reality many women abandoned sports for various reasons, in many cases before they reached their top athletic shape. Thus, in his activity report for 1955, the women's gymnastics coach of "Voința" club from Cluj, Eugen Felvinczi, noted that several gymnasts abandoned gymnastics because of "school, illnesses, partying, or because they got married and their husbands didn't let them practice gymnastics anymore."²²¹ This retention problem influenced gymnastics in the 1950s and 1960s, and it was linked to gymnasts' age. In the 1950s and 1960s gymnasts were at the height of their careers in their early twenties -- around the time they would get married. Later on, when elite gymnastics changed in the mid-1970s, gymnasts' careers were almost over before reaching twenty years of age, and thus the marital status became a non-issue.

The making of women's gymnastics in Romania

The history of Romanian gymnastics dates back to the beginnings of the 19th century when the German system of gymnastics known as Turnverein was first introduced in Transylvania. But the founding of modern gymnastics is linked to the establishment of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation in September 1906, followed by the first national displays of gymnastics routines in Bucharest where athletes performed acrobatics on the high bar, uneven

²²⁰ "Note -- Știri -- Comentarii," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 7, July, 1958, 445

²²¹ Eugen Felvinczi, "Raport de activitate pe anul 1955 al antrenorului Felvinczi Eugen cu ½ normă la Colectivul Sportiv Voința din Cluj, secția feminină" (no date), File 385, p. 9, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

parallel bars and pommel horse.²²² Romanian men gymnasts participated for the first time at the Olympics in 1936 at the Berlin games, but with very modest results. The first participation of women's gymnasts at the Olympics took place after the Second World War in 1952 at the Helsinki Olympics where they placed ninth among participating nations. The first notable results of the Romanian team of women gymnasts came in 1956 at the Melbourne Olympics where Romanians brought home the bronze Olympic medal for their team performance. What accounted for the early successes of the Romanian gymnastics? The answer most probably lies in changing the techniques used to train the gymnasts selected for the national teams. Following the success of the Soviet gymnastics at the 1952 Olympics, Romanian coaches adopted and adapted the new methods of Soviet training.

Soviet-style gymnastics "the Romanian way"

Romanian sports media praised the Soviet model of training gymnasts. The chief reason for this praise was the overall performance of Soviet sportspeople at international competitions. Beginning in the 1950s, the Soviets achieved some of the highest results and acquired the respect and admiration of large audiences. Petre Dungaciu, the coach of the Romanian national team at that time, who studied and trained in Moscow with Soviet gymnasts, wrote in the Romanian leading sports journal that, "The impression that Soviet men and women gymnasts produced on the spectators is remarkable. Their force and mobility amazes us, their ability stirs powerful emotions, and their endurance makes us think that they are inexhaustible."²²³

But what were the new Soviet methods of training gymnasts? The leading sport journal

²²² Kurt W. Treptow, *Romanian Gymnastics*, (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1996).

²²³ Petre Dungaciu, "Problema calităților fizice în gimnastică și situația actuală a acestei probleme la gimnaștii noștri frunțași," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 9, September 1954, 9.

Cultură Fizică și Sport wrote a series of articles in the early 1950s intended to make gymnastics coaches familiar with as well as convince them to apply the "most advanced ways of training" on their athletes. For learning new exercises, the Soviets favored the *synthesis* method that replaced the *analytical* method of assimilating elements of a gymnastics movement. Soviet specialists argued that focusing on the separate elements of each movement and isolating them from the entire ensemble would compromise the structure of the final movement. Thus, Soviet trainers preferred to make gymnasts learn the entire exercise without fragmenting it, and use physics to their advantage: linking elements together would thus become easier using the inertia and reaction forces generated in the process.²²⁴ In order to ease gymnasts into the new movements, coaches had to start with teaching the easier movements and gradually to go to a different level of difficulty, to move from the simple to more complex movements, from known to unknown elements.²²⁵ Also, gymnasts were advised to use efficiently their own body weight -- "the interplay of gravitation and inertia" -- to decrease their effort in executing gymnastics elements.²²⁶

Soviet trainers focused on the significance of learning *correctly* each new movement. Coaches had to be highly prepared to explain and demonstrate each new technical skill they present to students and they had to be able to correct the movement before the skill would be incorrectly assimilated. Once the gymnasts executed correctly the new movement and repeated it without fault several times, the coaches were expected to create conditions allowing gymnasts to improve the movement by: executing the movement on different types of apparatuses (i.e. on the

²²⁴ M.I.Ucran, "Bazele învățării exercițiilor de gimnastică la aparate," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 9, September 1950, 496.

²²⁵ Robert Podlaha, "Exercițiile impuse și liber alese în gimnastica sportivă," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 11, November 1950, 637.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 639.

floor, as well as on the balance beam); or on apparatuses made of different type of materials and of different heights; executing the movement in a different environment ; using the movement with other movements in a different combination; removing the safety net when there is no danger of falling and injury.²²⁷

Petre Dungaciu was the main promoter and best known supporter of the Soviet methods of training in gymnastics. He studied at Moscow at the Stalin's Central State Institute for Physical Culture and he became one of the coaches of Romanian national team in the 1950s. First, Dungaciu encouraged the development of basic physical abilities as a foundation for learning acrobatic skills needed in gymnastics. Thus, Dungaciu insisted upon making sure that each gymnast could achieve their best level in force, speed, resistance, agility and mobility. Only after mastering these physical qualities, Dungaciu argued, could gymnasts achieve the performances that made the Soviets world and Olympic champions. He stated, "the correct poise and the maximum amplitude of the movements, the rhythm and the self-assurance are the precise result of the development of these physical skills."²²⁸ Following what he learned in the USSR, Dungaciu introduced in his coaching the method of the "great efforts" in gymnastics. According to this method, elite gymnasts needed to spend a hefty amount of time training because "a little, often mediocre and only seasonal training" was no longer sufficient to compete at international level. The "great efforts" method in gymnastics became necessary, Dungaciu argued, due to the increased level of difficulty for the gymnastics routines imposed by the International Gymnastics Federation, the difficulty of learning new technical skills and the harshness of judges at international competitions. Dungaciu also noted how the Soviet athletes were eager to adapt this new method because "their increased responsibility towards their own country and their arduous

²²⁷Ucran, "Bazele învățării," 502.

²²⁸ Dungaciu, "Problema calităților fizice," 9.

wish to represent their country with pride and glory at international meets."²²⁹

The old methods of training in Romania involved training only two or three days a week. Coaches also limited the number of repetitions of each gymnastics routine and preferred to make gymnasts work only at maximum two apparatuses a day (i.e. parallel bars and floor, followed by a day break, then work at balance beam and vault, etc.). Moreover, the old style of training required all gymnasts to do the same types of routines, regardless of whether or not they had different abilities to perform certain skills. Instead, the new Soviet methods required at least four training sessions a week, as well as an individualized approach for each athlete, so that each gymnast had to spend more time on the skills she needed to refine. The Soviets introduced also a "pre-competition training period" of at least two months when gymnasts would repeat and finalize all the routines they prepared for competitions, so they would be ready to perform. In comparison, before applying the new methods there were cases when Romanian gymnasts would put together and perform the new gymnastics routine for the first time during competitions.²³⁰ Needless to say, these old methods were to blame for the backwardness of Romanian gymnastics before coaches started to apply the new Soviet methods.

The "great efforts" method called the athletes to train harder at each training session and to put an even greater effort into training than they would during the day of the competition. By doing so, gymnasts were able to avoid becoming tired due to unforeseen circumstances during game day (possible delays, postponements or interruptions of competitions). "Great efforts" also meant longer training sessions (from 180 to 240 minutes every day), an increased number of repetitions of each acrobatic skill and a reduction of breaks between routines. Soviet specialists

²²⁹ Petre Dungaciu, "Despre aplicarea eforturilor mari in gimnastică," 3, March 1955, 16.

²³⁰ Ibid., 18.

warned that the "great efforts" method had to be applied very carefully, under the strict supervision of coaches in order to gradually increase the difficulty and intensity of exercises. Without an individualized approach and the coaches' attentive care, the "great efforts" method had the potential to negatively affect athletes, leading to strain, overworking, tiredness and injury.²³¹ In order to avoid any risk on athletes' health, coaches had to work together with medical staff to monitor athletes' efforts by weighting them, checking their pulse and blood pressure before and immediately after training sessions.

Sportspeople like Dungaciu popularized the Soviet methods and urged coaches to adapt them as soon as possible so that they could start seeing top performances in competitions, just like the Soviet gymnasts.

Overall, sport officials and journalists largely praised and emulated the Soviet system of gymnastics.²³² But for Romanians, following the Soviet model did not mean "the exact copying of this system, as in Sweden before 1948, but it was rather an adaptation to the concrete conditions and possibilities for our country, respecting fundamental Soviet principles."²³³

However, reports often noted that the implementation of the Soviet system of training in

²³¹ Ibid., 21-24.

²³² See for instance, among others, Art Vogel, "Să învățăm din experiența sportului sovietic," *Stadion*, 104, November 1949, 2-3; "Succesele internaționale ale sportivului sovietic," *Stadion*, 104, November 1949, 7; "Marea Revoluție Socialistă a deschis drum nou sportului," *Stadion*, 106, November 1949, 2-3; Vila Prizan, "Gimnaștii sovietici în turneu prin R. Cehoslovacă," *Stadion*, 110, December 1949, 10; Maria Cetina, "In sala de gimnastica," *Stadion*, 126, June 1950, 10, 23; "Aspectul moral al sportivului sovietic," *Stadion*, 128, July 1950, 4-5; "Strălucitele victorii ale gimnastelor sovietice," *Sportul popular*, 2088, 26 July 1952, 4-5; "Echipa feminină de gimnastică a URSS," *Sportul popular*, 2091, 2 August 1952, 4-5, A. Galitzki, "Campiona olimpică absolută de gimnastică Maria Gorohovskaia," *Sportul popular*, 2093, 7 August 1952, 4; Robert Podlaha, "Pregătirea gimnaștilor sovietici," *Sportul popular*, 2102, 28 August 1952, 7; "Urmand exemplul sportivilor sovietici," *Sportul popular*, 2142, 6 November 1952, 4-5; "Gimnaștii sovietici la Berlin și la Viena," *Sportul popular*, 2158, 9 December 1952, 7; "La Melbourne a învins sistemul sovietic de cultură fizică și sport," *Sportul popular*, 13 December 1956, 1; G. Komovaliuk, "Școala marilor campioni," *Sportul popular*, 3541, 5 January 1960, 7; Ioan Chirilă, "Astahova," *Sport*, 14, July 1960, 18; "Strălucita victorie a sportului sovietic la J.O. de la Roma a produs o uriașă impresie în întreaga lume," *Sportul popular*, 3686, 15 September 1960, 1, 4.

²³³ S. Baranyi, "Educația fizică școlară în anii regimului democrat popular," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 2, February 1958, 94.

gymnastics was not an easy task. Either coaches did not know the new methods, or they openly resisted them, placing more value on traditional ways of training.²³⁴ For instance, gymnastics coach and physical education professor Adina Stroescu reports how women gymnasts who trained and competed at Helsinki Olympics in 1952 did not focus on fundamental physical qualities necessary for a top Olympic performance. She contended that "gymnasts' routines lacked difficulty; their execution was weak, monotonous, without dynamism and rhythm."²³⁵ Shortly after the Olympics, the same old type of training continued, another coach noted, with disregard for the long-term goals of achieving a better level of the fundamental physical abilities such as force and endurance. Instead, some coaches preferred to continue training athletes "on the surface, unilaterally, and narrowly," not respecting the Soviet principles.²³⁶ Stroescu concluded her report on the performance of women gymnasts during the 1952-1954 period with a plea that "there should be a better understanding among the gymnastic coaches, a more unitary vision and a constant preoccupation to apply the new methods of training."²³⁷ What transpires from these reports is the fact that implementing the "most advanced methods of training,"²³⁸ from the Soviet Union, encountered resistance. Even if the new knowledge coming from Moscow was theoretically available via publications and personnel trained in the Soviet Union,

²³⁴ Robert Podlaha, "Despre unele aspecte ale pregătirii gimnaștilor," *Sportul popular*, 2134, 23 October 1952, 6.

²³⁵ Adina Stroescu, "Despre comportarea echipei feminine în cadrul Campionatului Mondial de gimnastică," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 9, September 1954, 42.

²³⁶ Dungaciu, " Problema calităților fizice," 12.

²³⁷ Adina Stroescu, "Despre comportarea echipei feminine," 49.

²³⁸ The gist of this new type of training consisted in applying the "big efforts method." This meant training eleven months a year with one month "active rest," four to five days per a week, around two hours and a half a day, and covering routines at all gymnastics apparatuses in each training session. Close to international competitions, the duration of training sessions could reach four hours daily. See Dungaciu, "Despre aplicarea eforturilor," 13-28.

in practice things were moving more slowly and results did not appear right away.²³⁹

Results of the new methods of training

The first noteworthy results of women gymnasts at international competitions started to become visible in 1954 at the Rome World Championships where they ranked fourth in the world, and also at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, where they grabbed a first Olympic bronze medal. By 1954, coaches like Dungaciu, trained at Moscow, managed to impose their training plans which followed closely the ones brought from coach Iakubinok, the head coach of Moscow gymnastics team. "Only by using the training methods of the Soviet school of gymnastics," Dungaciu noted in 1955, "was it possible for our national women's gymnastics team to achieve the fourth place in the world, and thus to bring fame to our gymnasts abroad." That also explained why the male team, who still practiced the old inefficient methods, continued to perform very poorly at international competitions.²⁴⁰

Soviet influence on Romanian gymnastics made some commentators (ironically) wonder if Romanians would ever have a chance to attain "world supremacy."²⁴¹ Surprisingly, thoughts about sharing the Olympic podium with the Soviet gymnastics power-house appeared as early as 1957. At that point though, it was merely an exercise in wishful thinking meant to point to the differences between the Soviet gymnasts and the Romanians. Commentators underlined that the Soviets benefited from practicing gymnastics for over 30 years (allegedly since the Bolshevik

²³⁹ The Soviet-style methods of training were widely published in the Romanian sport journals of the time. See for instance, Robert Podlaha, "Exercițiile impuse și liber alese în gimnastica sportivă," *Cultură Fizică și Sport*, 11, November 1950, 637-641, Dungaciu, "Problema calităților fizice," 8-13, etc.

²⁴⁰ Dungaciu, "Despre aplicarea eforturilor," 28. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, gymnastics officials often published notes about the underperforming male gymnastics in Romania. See for instance Albin Morariu, "Cauzele rămânerii în urmă a gimnasticii noastre masculine," *Sportul popular*, 3549, 19 January 1960, 1,6; Francisc Kocsis, "Tot despre cauzele rămânerii în urmă a gimnasticii masculine," *Sportul popular*, 3559, 6 February 1960, 3.

²⁴¹ Max Bănuș, "Gimnastica noastră feminină poate tinde spre supremația mondială?," *Stadion*, 6 March 1957, 11.

Revolution of 1917!) as compared to only 7 years for Romanians. Also, the Russians could have easily display two or three equally qualified teams for any international competition due to the large base of talented gymnasts they had. Romanians, however, were scrambling to put together a team where only one or two gymnasts could be considered top-quality. This fact also explained why there was a lack of competitiveness among the gymnasts in the national team that produced feelings of entitlement in gymnasts who considered themselves irreplaceable.

Moreover, when compared to the Soviet women gymnasts, Romanians needed to pay more attention to the artistic side of their routines. According to gymnastics expert Adina Stroescu, the Romanians lacked self-discipline and, more gravely, they lacked an elementary cultural education that would give them the understanding of musical rhythm and body movement.

"There are so many gymnastics routines that will be influenced by the lack of cultural, musical and artistic knowledge," Stroescu noted, "and a knowledgeable person will have a different understanding of beauty than an ignorant one."²⁴² This criticism seemed to have worked because the press reported three years later in 1960 how, shortly before the Rome Olympics, gymnasts were so preoccupied with choosing the music for their floor routines that they would listen to and comment on the artistic merits of Franz Liszt's *Preludes*, Tchaikovsky's *Waltz of the Flowers* or other piano compositions.²⁴³

Even if Romanian gymnasts trained following Soviet methods, initially their performances lagged behind the Soviets. These differences were evident in international competitions that brought together Romanian and Soviet gymnasts. Such was the case of a pre-Olympic meet in Bucharest in April 1960. Invited to compete against the Romanian gymnasts,

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ "Solul și muzica," *Sport*, 13, July 1960, 6.

the Soviet team led by Larisa Latinina, proved superior. Romanians "were extremely emotional" and were not able to achieve their potential. They also lacked the "grace and artistic" elements of the Soviet routines and were intimidated by competing alongside world-renown gymnasts. "Romanians worked more dynamically, [and were] more 'tomboyish,'" which opened up the room for error because the diverse elements forming the routine were not perfected. On the other hand, Soviet gymnasts were able to pause after each acrobatic element and used "more artistic movements that gave routines a more feminine touch."²⁴⁴

However, the Romanian gymnasts were able to learn quickly from gymnasts such as Latinina²⁴⁵ or Astahova, so that three years later there was "no qualitative" difference between the two teams. Moreover, as one commentator put it, "We can say that at the balance beam our [Romanian] gymnasts had more difficult routines, they felt more confident, and had no major mistakes" as compared to the Soviets.²⁴⁶ Another commentator noted in August 1960 that by constantly improving their performances, Romanian gymnasts "will have a definite say in the fight for the first places" at the Rome Olympics.²⁴⁷ The work of national team coaches Maria Ionescu and Caius Jianu contributed to the boost in gymnasts' self-confidence during competitions. As gymnast Sonia Iovan mentioned in an interview to the national sports newspaper, the coaches insisted that "even if you wake up in the middle of the night you need to be sure of your routines, " and that is why coaches "increased the numbers of repetitions for each

²⁴⁴ Elena Mateescu, "O înaltă școală," *Sportul popular*, 3593, 5 April 1960, 4.

²⁴⁵ Max Bănuș characterized Latinina as the "embodiment of perfection that displayed a very attractive feminine grace, in Max Bănuș, " Latinina gimnasta nr. 1, Elena Teodorescu și Sonia Inovan pe locurile 2 și 3," *Stadion*, 11 June 1957, 8.

²⁴⁶ Berta T. Corobeanu, " Colțul specialistului: Unele observații asupra tehnicii și compoziției exercițiilor gimnastelor noastre la bârnă și sol din ultimele concursuri internaționale," *Sportul popular*, 3603, 23 April 1960, 2.

²⁴⁷ Dan Gârleşteanu, "Înaintea marilor întreceri de la Terme di caracalla: Șapte fete se pregătesc să confirme valoarea gimnasticii noastre," *Sportul popular*, 3659, 2 August 1960, 4.

exercise ...ad infinitum."²⁴⁸

It seemed that starting with the mid-1950s, Romanian gymnasts found their own voice in international competitions at the Olympics, world and European championships. Some could even date this decade as the beginning of what specialists will later term "the Romanian school of gymnastics." Commenting on the performances at Rome Olympics, *Sport* magazine noted that in comparison with the Soviets who "preferred the expressive artistic elements" as a basis of their gymnastics routine, the Romanians' style combined acrobatic elements with artistic ones, but had a harsher line. Indeed, Soviet style training provided good results for the Romanians at the Olympics, but Romanians definitely did not become perfect copies of Soviet gymnasts. Instead, they took Soviet models and adapted them and, as a result, they were now able to compete on equal footing with the Soviet women gymnasts at various international competitions.

As a result of the new methods applied to train women gymnasts, the Romanian team obtained important results at major international competitions during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1952 at Helsinki, Romanian gymnasts did not place on the Olympic podium, but with their 9th overall place, Romanians came ahead of others, including Austria, France, Yugoslavia, Finland, United States, England, and the Netherlands.²⁴⁹ It was the Melbourne Olympics that provided Romanian women gymnasts with the chance to join the more successful Soviet and Hungarian teams in the fight for Olympic medals. By placing third in the team competitions and with another bronze medal won in the individual competition with Elena Leuștean 's floor routine, Romania started its series of gymnastics successes on the international sport arenas. At the 1960 Rome Olympics, Romania won the third place in team competitions after Soviet Union and

²⁴⁸ Al. I., "Sportivii -- despre antrenorii lor...", *Sportul popular*, 3669, 20 August 1960.

²⁴⁹ "Succesele sportivilor noștri la Jocurile Olimpice, " *Stadion*, 164, December 1952, 16.

Czechoslovakia, and the best gymnast was Sonia Iovan who came in fifth at the individual all-around competition. Romanian gymnasts competed "vigorously", in "a contest of exceptional beauty and unprecedented value."²⁵⁰ At Tokyo Olympics in 1964 the Romanians placed 6th, with a team that retained older gymnasts like Leuştean and Iovan, while the best gymnast, Sonia Iovan, placed only fourteenth in the individual competition. It seemed that the mid-1960s brought the development of women's gymnastics at a halt. The decision not to participate in gymnastics at the 1968 Olympics was based on the assumption that no member of the national team would win an Olympic medal. Gymnasts' lack of competitiveness in the late 1960s resulted in sustained efforts by sports officials to find solutions to invigorate and make famous the "Romanian school of gymnastics". Due to the efforts of coaches Bela and Martha Karolyi results peaked at the 1976 Olympiad with the brilliant performances of Nadia Comaneci.

Romanian gymnastics stars of the 1950s-1960s

Several female gymnasts became known to the Romanian public and ensured Romania's visibility at the international competitions in the 1950s and 1960s. Among these were: Berta Corobeanu, Elena Leuştean , Agneta Hoffman, Sonia Iovan, and Elena Ceampelea.

The first Romanian gymnast to open the door for success in gymnastics was Berta Corobeanu. Although she did not participate at any Olympics, she was the first national champion between 1947 and 1951 and she was known for her "remarkable grace"²⁵¹ as a gymnast. After retiring from competitions, Berta Corobeanu built a career teaching gymnastics and researching at the Institute for the Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest. She also used

²⁵⁰ Dan Gârleşteanu, "Echipa feminină de gimnastică a URSS din nou campioană olimpică; Echipa țării noastre a reeditat performanța de la Melbourne: locul 3," *Sportul popular*, 3682, 9 September 1960, 4; Dan Gârleşteanu, "O întrecere de o rară frumusețe și o neasemuită valoare," *Sportul popular*, 3683, 10 September 1960, 1.

²⁵¹ "Concursul de gimnastică, o demonstrație de tehnică, grație și precizie," *Stadion*, 121, March 1950, 19.

her expertise to write articles about gymnastics and comment on national competitions for the readers of Romanian sports newspapers and magazines.²⁵² But Berta Corobeanu also provided inspiration for another generation of gymnasts, among which the most accomplished would be Elena Leuştean.

Elena Leuştean, the star of Romanian gymnastics in the 1950s, was first discovered by the press at 14 during a national competition held in Bucharest in April 1950. *Stadion* magazine reported how, despite her short period of training, Leuştean was able to impress the audience with her graceful, calm, and confident execution of difficult acrobatic elements.²⁵³ Leuştean started her athletic career by being part of handball, basketball and track-and-field teams of her high-school, but at the insistence of her coaches she was "made to choose" gymnastics.²⁵⁴ She would later tell the press that she opted for gymnastics because of "the grace of movements."²⁵⁵ In fact Petre Dungaciu, Leuştean's coach, will declare later in 1969 in a book dedicated to Leuştean that it was the officials from the Committee for Physical Education and Sport and her coaches that already decided in 1953 that Elena Leuştean should abandon track-and-field -- her passion -- to dedicate herself entirely to gymnastics.²⁵⁶ Retaining a very talented athlete for gymnastics underlined the officials' interest in making gymnastics a successful sport to represent Romania abroad.

Press coverage of Leuştean changed throughout her career, according to her age and her

²⁵² Berta Corobeanu, "Un antrenament de gimnastică: ieri, azi, mâine," *Stadion*, 60, December 1948, 7; Berta Corobeanu, "Atletism și gimnastică," *Stadion*, 70, March 1949, 2.

²⁵³ "Mult tineret și noi centre în concursul interorașe de gimnastică - Veverițele," *Stadion*, 122, April 1950, 8.

²⁵⁴ Max Bănuș, "Lenuța...", *Stadion*, 3, March 1955, 8-9.

²⁵⁵ Ileana Prahoveanu, "O vizită plăcută," *Stadion*, 3, March 1959, 3.

²⁵⁶ Petre Dungaciu, *Elena Leuştean* (București: Editura Consiliului Național pentru Educație Fizică și Sport, 1969), 26-27.

abilities as a gymnast. At 14 she was compared with a "squirrel," not yet refined in her skills but with an important potential for gymnastics. At 20, after she had already participated in several international competitions, including a world championship, Leuştean was defined by her "grace, strength, détente, and coordination," qualities that stressed her athleticism, but also her femininity, a quality often invoked when describing women's gymnastics.²⁵⁷ Despite her mature age, Elena Leuştean was still called "Lenuța," diminutive for Elena, as if the grown-up gymnast retained something from her childhood days. The patronizing voice of male journalists could also be detected in a story describing the departure of Romanian athletes to the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. Gymnasts waiting to board the plane to Melbourne engaged in very "feminine behavior" and displayed "plenty of patience," considered to be a typical feminine quality:

The sweet gymnasts of the Popular Republic of Romania showed us the advantages of being women in such occasions, when there is such a long waiting. They pulled out their knitting needles from their luggage, and, impassibly and diligently, they started the long, monotonous and possibly calming road from the cuffs to the collar of a future sweater.²⁵⁸

Even if gymnasts were showing their athletic skills and strength at competitions, outside of the sport halls, the journalists associated women athletes with accepted norms of femininity. Romanian gymnasts remained "traditional" women after all, despite their assiduous training and achievements in strength, ability, endurance and intensity. They also fit the normative gender roles when reports about their marriages and children hit the press. For instance, at the Melbourne Olympics Leuştean not only was a top performer, but was successful in her personal life as well. At her arrival in Bucharest, the press commented about Elena Leuştean's walking hand in hand with the pentathlon athlete Victor Teodorescu. "They seem extremely happy, and

²⁵⁷ Max Bănuş, "Lenuța...", *Stadion*, 3, March 1955, 8-9.

²⁵⁸ Max Bănuş and Radu Voia, "Zbor spre Melbourne," *Stadion*, 21, November 1956, 50-52.

there's no wonder why: they got engaged at Melbourne in the midst of the Olympic atmosphere."²⁵⁹ The Olympic bronze medal *and* the forthcoming marriage contributed to the fulfillment of the gender expectations of Romania's top gymnast.

Unlike any other Romanian gymnast, Leuştean interrupted her performances to give birth to her son Şerban in 1962, just as the Soviet gymnastic star Larisa Latinina did earlier when giving birth to her daughter Tania. Back to training in 1963, Leuştean was greeted warmly by the press because of her reputation as a "serious athlete, who got back to work without extra precautions, with the tenacity typical of authentic champions."²⁶⁰ Married and with a child, Leuştean continued training and participated at her third consecutive Olympiad where she contributed to the sixth place earned by the Romanian team in Tokyo.

Finally, Sonia Iovan was the third most famous Romanian gymnast competing at the Melbourne, Rome and Tokyo Olympics. Despite her father's wishes that she become an accountant and attend the Economics Institute in Bucharest, Sonia chose gymnastics. Finally she did end up at the Economics Institute, but only after retiring from elite gymnastics and she started a teaching career as an assistant professor of physical education.²⁶¹ Not as "gracefully breathtaking" as Elena Leuştean, Sonia Iovan excelled in performing difficult acrobatic movements, and was a "tenured" member of the national team between 1956 and 1965.

Behind closed doors: changes and dissent in the Romanian Gymnastics Federation

The year 1957 marked a major moment in the reorganization of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation (RGF). Part of a larger effort aimed to reorganize the sport movement in

²⁵⁹ Momente de entuziasm in Gara Băneasa," *Sportul popular*, 2939, 20 December 1956, 1.

²⁶⁰ Ioan Chirilă, "Elena Leuştean ," *Sport*, 4, February 1963, 6.

²⁶¹ Ioan Chirilă, "Sonia Iovan," *Sport*, 2, January 1961, 5.

socialist Romania, the establishment of a new organization meant "not a simple change of names [the former body was called Central Commission of Gymnastics], but a real transformation in the conception and the working methods" of practicing gymnastics.²⁶²

The start of this new governing body constituted an opportunity to evaluate both the accomplishments and the deficiencies of the former organization in charge of gymnastics. The most notable success was achieving valuable international results, especially at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. Also, the Federation was praised for being able to successfully continue its routine activities during the transition period: organizing efficiently internal and international competitions and instructional meetings with coaches from all over the country, establishing new centers for youth training in several cities, editing a specialty journal, formulating regulations for gymnastics competitions, and also laying down the rules of the new governing body.²⁶³

However, the deficiencies of the former Commission of Gymnastics surpassed by far its accomplishments, according to an internal report of the new gymnastics federation. This report was officially and publicly discussed in an August 1958 meeting of federation officials, coaches and gymnasts. As a result, the federation promised to embark upon essential measures to eliminate all the faults, going as far as suspending coaches and gymnasts for a certain period of time. But what were the shortcomings in the commission's activity?

One of the flaws of the Central Commission of Gymnastics up until 1957 was its exclusive interest in dealing with the elite athletes and the national team at the expense of local and regional athletes and teams. One consequence of this orientation was the "unhealthy tendency of running after quick results," which contradicted the general aims of the physical

²⁶² "Raport. Uniunea pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport, Federația Română de Gimnastică," File 553, p.110, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁶³ Ibid., 110-111.

culture and sport in Romania.²⁶⁴ Instead, the report argued, efforts should have been oriented towards mass gymnastics and recruiting younger athletes from all over the country, in order "to provide the homeland with a healthy younger generation, able to work with high effectiveness, educated in the socialist spirit, safe from any bourgeois influences, ready anytime to defend the revolutionary achievements of the working class against plots from any type of enemies."²⁶⁵ But the report did not limit its criticism to stereotypic propaganda. It went further to criticize individual sport clubs, coaches, athletes and officials.

"Asociația Constructorul" was one such sport club that came under scrutiny. Marcel Duncan and Felicia Buja, coaches at "Constructorul," were accused of not using the sport as a "means for moral strengthening and growing a healthy young generation."²⁶⁶ Instead, they were guilty of encouraging gymnasts to have a star-like attitude ("vedetism"), or to skip work and training sessions, with no consequences. Consequently, the report continued, it was no wonder that gymnasts such as Olga Tudor, Elena Popovici and Agneta Wittenberger did not show up at work for months but they did receive their paychecks. The gymnasts developed "bad morals" due to their coaches' lack of oversight. For instance, when asked about her absenteeism from work, Elena Popovici explained that "her job place was too far away," and thus she was not able to go work. Her coaches were thus equally guilty for Popovici's lack of interest in performing her duties as a working woman.

The entire "Constructorul" club was blamed for the "indiscipline and cosmopolitanism" of its athletes. In addition, the sports officials found another deficiency in the club's lack of

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 111.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 113.

interest to attract young men and women for gymnastics from the large pool of young workers on its construction plants. As a punishment, the two gymnastics coaches and several gymnasts were directly reprimanded. Coaches Marcel Duncan and Felicia Rujea were removed from the RGF and also demoted from head- to assistant-level coaches for a period ranging from three to six months, with a decrease in their salaries as well. Rujea was also forbidden to continue coaching the Romanian representative team of women gymnasts. According to the minutes of the August 1958 meeting of RGF, coach Rujea, like the majority of those criticized, admitted to being guilty of some of the accusations against her. But unlike the others, she was the only one to stand up for herself. She explains her lack of enthusiasm to attract more young women to gymnastics because of the lack of proper training facilities. Moreover, she openly defied Francisc Lovi, the secretary general of the RGF, and blamed him for his non-involvement in the everyday activities of the gymnastics team. As the meeting minutes recorded, "indeed she made some mistakes but she only had the help of comrade Ionescu Maria and she also indicated that comrade Lovi came to visit very rarely and he never gave any technical instructions about coaching the national team."²⁶⁷ The 26 August meeting had almost all the ingredients of a 1950s "show trial": harsh judgments, self-criticism, and punishments. Despite this adversarial atmosphere, Felicia Rujea did not remain a passive recipient of criticism from high-ranked officials; instead she voiced her own criticisms and declared that punishments "will cut her enthusiasm, her desire and confidence in her own work," and that she could hardly believe that she was being punished after being previously praised on every occasion. Rujea openly defied the leadership of the RGF but, as the meeting minutes show, she proved to be a singular case.

During the August 1958 meeting, officials of RGF also criticized other sport clubs.

²⁶⁷ "Proces verbal al ședinței plenare a F. R. Gimnastică din 26 august 1958, ora 17,00," File 553, p. 177, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

"Steaua" (called "CCA" until 1961), the Army sports club, and "Dinamo," the club of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, were among those rebuked. Federation officials accused the two clubs of promoting "inadequate elements, interested only in making money when traveling abroad," and concretely cited the case of a male gymnast who ultimately ended up with a "conviction for hooliganism."²⁶⁸ According to the RGF report, the leaders of these two elite sport clubs and the coaches were guilty for this state of affairs, because they manifested an irresponsible "lack of class vigilance."²⁶⁹ Moreover, even gymnasts who were members of the Romanian national team – Elena Teodorescu, Sonia Inovan, Emilia Vătășoiu, Uta Stland, Elena Dobrovolski – were considered "inadequate elements, lacking a good professional training, and being extremely pretentious."²⁷⁰ Federation officials also criticized elite women gymnasts for their "unreasonable" demands. Such was the case of Elena Teodorescu, who tried to explain her "constant late arrival to practices because the federation did not provide her with a stove, as if the federation did not have any other business than to give the elite gymnasts stoves for cooking." And the criticism went further. According to the same federation officials, the school directors where some of the gymnasts worked as physical education teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with gymnasts' professional attitude towards their jobs: "How is it possible that these sportswomen who had the 'master athlete' title, were allowed to do anything without any consequences?" Although not entirely clear about the concrete details of these undesired behaviors, the report concluded that these actions could not be further tolerated and federation officials insisted on getting rid of "bourgeois mentalities manifested through cosmopolitan

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p.114, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

attitudes."²⁷¹

These criticisms pointed to larger problems that plagued the sport system in Romania and the other communist countries in Eastern Europe. First, the status of the athlete as a professional or amateur was something that Romanian athletes, coaches, federation officials and party officials were confronted with throughout the post-1948 period. Officially, gymnasts from the national teams were considered amateur athletes that were hired and paid by diverse institutions and enterprises. At the same time though, due to their demanding training schedules these gymnasts benefited from a special treatment that involved special dispensations from their assigned working duties. Also, they were criticized for not being able to fulfill all their duties as workers. It seemed that elite athletes were caught between the rigors of both amateur and professional status, and it was up to each individual to find the right balance. Second, athletes' motivation to earn medals for Romania was seen in contradictory terms. Federation and party officials, very much entrenched in the national communist ideology, insisted that patriotism was the chief reason for athletes to work hard to achieve the best results in international arenas. At the same time, officials often accused athletes of pursuing their egotistical material interests. An official report submitted in 1957, sheds light on how officials perceived athletes' motivations:

What is very serious [...] is that the idea of disinterested athletic competition, sprung from the patriotic impetus to raise the sporting glory of our homeland has been replaced with a matter of interest. Instead of seeing the medals and prizes as a result of the paternal care of our party and government, many of these [athletes] consider it as a right that our country is obliged to give them, regardless of the value of their performances [...] All that counts for them is the price of performance: money. They only want to get rich, and exert pressures on the federation officials with every national and international competition, increasing their material demands.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Ibid, p.114-115.

²⁷² Ibid., p. 115.

According to the federation officials, elite gymnasts seemed to forget "all the efforts and sacrifices of the Romanian workers to build a socialist society," because they were only interested in material benefits. This drive for wealth was seen as a sign of a "bourgeois professionalism" that needed to be eradicated. Gymnasts and coaches alike were guilty of perpetuating bourgeois values. One official asked, "Isn't this a proof of a bourgeois ideological influence that some gymnasts and even a few coaches use words such as 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.', considering themselves members of 'civilized salons,' and for them the term 'comrade' – a cherished working-class word – is so inappropriate?"²⁷³ Evidently, for the bosses of the RGF the salutation protocol was part of an obsolete (and scorned!) mentality, contradictory to a "healthy socialist attitude:"

It is upsetting that some people promote the idea that when two [Romanian] athletes are talking while in the company of a sportsperson from a capitalist country, they shall not use the word 'comrade.' Isn't this a practice of submitting to the bourgeois ideology? Isn't this the negative effect of the bourgeois mentality upon our sportspeople? We think so. In which capitalist countries that you visited, have you found such a protocol according to which capitalist athletes used the word 'comrade' in your presence, just to respect the ideological profile of the country you represented?²⁷⁴

Officials disapproved also of friendly relationships between coaches and athletes, because that could negatively influence the athletes' communist education. Coaches and athletes were not supposed to be friends, because that would erode the coaches' authority. Also, in the eyes of the RGF boss, prizes and incentives for elite gymnasts had the potential to transform them into "aristocratic athletes," interested more in material benefits than in bringing glory to the

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁷⁴ "Raport discutat în timpul ședinței din iulie 1958 cu sportivii de performanță, antrenorii și activiști din București," File 553, p. 102, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

country.²⁷⁵ Therefore, officials promptly demanded a careful revision of the system of prizes set in place for elite gymnasts. One of the first measures was to reduce the prizes and the "material advantages," so that they should stimulate only the sportsmen and sportswomen who displayed not only athletic abilities, but also moral, civic, political and patriotic qualities. Officials insisted that the new system of rewarding athletes should encourage only the truly multilateral athletes and should eliminate "parasitism" in gymnastics.

Referees were another target of criticism. "Because they lacked competence and objectivity," they were accused of altering the results of various competitions. First, referees were accused that they over-evaluated the performances of some known athletes and thus they endorsed elitist attitudes among several gymnasts. Second, these referees demoralized other competitors, and made them lose their self-confidence, ultimately leading them to regress. Several preeminent judges, among them Adina Stroescu, Elena Firea, and Elisabeta Abrudan, were called upon to take action against their colleagues and impose objective criteria for judging athletic performance. This in turn would have guaranteed the fulfillment of their duties to "educate politically, patriotically and civically" all gymnasts.²⁷⁶

The (mis)management of the Central Commission's finances was another subject of contention. To organize competitions that did not contribute to technical improvement and to spend money on "hundreds of gymnasts for transportation, for getting out of production, for room and board" was reckless. Instead, the money should have gone to buying gymnastic installations and increasing sports equipment for each club. It was estimated that 40% of the

²⁷⁵ It seems that the officials were using the terms "aristocratic" and "bourgeois" interchangeably, a sign of their poorly understanding of the Marxist rhetoric.

²⁷⁶"Raport. Uniunea pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport, Federația Română de Gimnastică." File 553, p. 118, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

budget of the Central Commission of Gymnastics was lost due to poor management of funds. Money was also lost when organizing international competitions in Romania. Not only did the number of Romanian participants exceed the number of foreign guests, but also the festive dinners had costly menus. Also, the accommodation of foreign guests at Bucharest's top hotel, Athenee Palace, contributed to an endemic waste of money. In the same manner, the gymnasts themselves played a part in the financial losses. They trashed their training equipment – the sports suits especially – and demanded their replacement too often. According to one official report, Elena Dobrovolski, among others, did not respect the schedule during the training camp due to the fact that "the supply store refused to give her gym shoes."²⁷⁷ The same report implied that those gymnasts who received money prizes for their performances should have secured their own training gear instead of waiting for the federation to do it.

Finally, the criticism addressed the overall performances of the commission. The report singled out some members of the commission and evaluated their activity. For instance, Carnelia Mateescu, the commission's vice-president, was constantly absent from each meeting of the commission and did not participate at all in its activities. Gheorghe Ghisoiu, in charge of the propaganda section of the commission failed in his tasks to instruct coaches and gymnasts in the spirit of communist education, by which the report understands "civic and patriotic education." Carol Bodo, as president of the competitions division, was guilty of individualism, preferred to work alone, and did not make any efforts to build "a lively and combative organization."²⁷⁸ Francisc Lovi, the secretary general of the commission, and Maria Ionescu, federal coach, tolerated such behaviors and they were equally blamed for the federation's failure to meet the high stakes entrusted to it. However, Lovi and Ionescu were allowed to retain their positions and

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

would continue their leadership of Romanian gymnastic into the 1960s. In the end, despite all criticisms laid out in the report, the officials had confidence in the power of all members of the federation to take firm action against the deficiencies that obstructed the proper functioning of the RGF. This optimistic tone that ends the 1957 report is in sharp contrast with its entire critical content. It could be that the report *needed* to end in a positive manner since it was delivered at a meeting of the bosses of the federation and it served as a way to reconnect with the audience members who were expected to rectify all the federation shortcomings.

The RGF continued to be the leading organization of Romanian gymnastics, but as we will see, the end of the 1960s brought another center of power that would compete with RGF in shaping the Romanian national women's gymnastics team that participated at international competitions from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Preparing for the Olympics: A View from behind the Scenes, 1950s-1960s

From the mid-1950s on, the Romanian government had a specific nationalist agenda for women gymnasts participating in the Olympics. First, as representatives of Romanian elite sport, women gymnasts were expected to perform at a high level and thus bring home prestigious medals, which, in turn, would ensure international prestige for the obscure socialist nation of Romania. Second, Romanian sport officials paid careful attention to the national image these athletes projected abroad. Romanian gymnasts had to be model citizens, with "correct" moral and ideological profiles. Third, members of the Romanian Federation of Gymnastics, coaches, and Romanian referees used their networking skills to shape a positive attitude towards the Romanian team and Romania itself. They cultivated friendly relationships with international referees who judged gymnastic routines at international competitions. The RGF also used international media to convey positive information about Romanian athletes. A look behind the

scenes of the Olympics shows how Romania relied on international sporting events to construct and promote a specific national image.

Romanians' results at the Helsinki, Melbourne and Rome Olympics

It is widely acknowledged that Romania became a powerhouse in women's gymnastics in the mid-1970s with the astonishing performances of Nadia Comăneci at the Montreal Olympics.²⁷⁹ Since 1976, as international sports fans can attest, Romanian women gymnasts have consistently ranked in the top tier of the global gymnastics hierarchy, dominating competitions such as the Olympics and the World and European Championships. Less well-known, however, is the fact that Romanian gymnasts frequently placed among the top six nations at the Olympics *before* 1976.

At the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland, the Romanian team placed 9th out of 18 nations participating in the women's competition. This was the lowest position Romanian gymnasts would ever occupy during the post-World War II history of the Olympic Games. Four years later, at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics in Australia, Romanian women placed third – out of 9 competing nations – and earned 2 bronze medals (1 for the team and another in the individual competition). Elena Leuştean was the first Romanian gymnast to receive an individual medal at the Olympics – not Nadia Comăneci.

Romania's success continued throughout the 1960s. At the 1960 Rome Olympics, Romania finished 3rd out of 27 countries. The women gymnasts earned another team bronze medal, while the top Romanian gymnast, Sonia Iovan, placed fifth in the individual competition. In Tokyo four years later, the team's production fell off, and Romania finished a disappointing,

²⁷⁹ On Nadia Comăneci's career see, among others, Ioan Chirilă, *Nadia* (Bucureşti: Curtea Veche, 2002) and Nadia Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

though still strong 6th place out of a field of 23 participating countries. Due to the retirement of valuable gymnasts and the lack of highly-qualified replacements, Romanian sports officials assumed that women's gymnastics team would not win any medals in 1968, nor would it qualify among the top teams. Thus, they withdrew the women's team from the Mexico City games. Hoping to build better success during the 1970s, the RGF instead turned its attention toward building contacts with coaches from the Soviet Union and Japan, who were, at that time, the leading powers in women's and men's world gymnastics.

Although the Romanian gymnastics team never won the Olympic gold or silver before 1976, these earlier results were nonetheless important. Ranking high at the Olympics meant making Romania more visible, that is, more noticeable abroad. As the leader of the Romanian delegation to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics noted, "Our country is no longer a part of the anonymous 70 countries that participate at the Olympics. Romania became a top-ranking country in global sports ... We have to make all the efforts to maintain and strengthen the prestige we attained."²⁸⁰ Romania was not unique in its sporting policies, however. It followed the pattern introduced by the Soviet Union and the other countries of the Eastern European communist bloc, which used sport as a battleground with Western nations during the Cold War.²⁸¹

Training athletes to be model citizens abroad

Good results were important for the Romanian government officials, but medals alone were not enough. Decision makers within the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport (CPCS)

²⁸⁰ "Raportul deplasării lotului olimpic al RPR la Olimpiada de la Melbourne 1956," File 345, p. 35, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁸¹ For a recent collection of articles on the topic, see Stephen Wagg and David Andrews (ed.), *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2006).

wanted to promote a "new type of athlete" abroad – one who was, specifically, a model *socialist* citizen who understood Romanian politics, history, and literature. Officials made a considerable effort to train athletes to be well-rounded socialist citizens. According to a report on the training of athletes for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the athletes were required to spend 1.5 hours of every week studying history, geography, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, current international events, music, literature, and English language.²⁸² The aim was, as the report noted, "to complete and refresh athletes' general and political knowledge, and to ensure the minimum level of knowledge necessary for an athlete abroad."²⁸³ The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Culture, Agerpres -- the Romanian press agency --, and the Institute of Physical Culture provided teachers for these lessons. Officials distributed notebooks to athletes and set up a library with study materials in the training camp.

Overall, athletes' free time was carefully supervised in order to ensure a "pleasant and favorable atmosphere" necessary for their Olympic preparations. They were encouraged to visit museums and art exhibits, to attend theater performances and lectures offered by the Romanian-Russian Friendship Institute, and to participate in book review/discussion sessions.²⁸⁴ These activities reflect officials' desire to educate athletes as model socialist citizens – athletes who would make a good impression during their travels abroad.

High-level officials from the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport (CPCS) debated at length the issue of athletes' political education. They were concerned with the legacies of the

²⁸² "Darea de seamă asupra stadiului de pregătire a loturilor olimpice, 1 Ianuarie-20 Septembrie 1956" (25 September, 1956), File 355, p. 14, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸⁴ The sport press largely reported on the visits that Olympic athletes would make at different museums or industrial plants in 1960. See for instance "Sportivi în vizită la muzeul Lenin-Stalin," *Sportul popular*, 3598, 14 April 1960, 1; "Cu lotul olimpic la muncă patriotică," *Sportul popular*, 3595, 9 April 1960, 1-3; "La Grivița Roșie cu olimpicii," *Sport*, 8, April 1960, 6.

former political regime, the lack of general knowledge and life skills displayed by athletes. In the summer of 1956 Gheorghe Bianu, general secretary of the Romanian Olympic Committee (ROC) between 1954 and 1958, noted that "the people are generally good, but their political education is zero."²⁸⁵ A solution to improve political education, proposed by Ticu Simion, was "to find 10-15 people from our Olympic team who are better qualified to share some knowledge with those who are less prepared."²⁸⁶ Despite such amateurish suggestions, the officials agreed about the difficulty of organizing educational training for athletes. Manole Bodnăraș, president of the CPCS between 1952 and 1957 and president of the ROC between 1951 and 1954, was convinced that the education issue deserved attention, but it had to be carefully planned. "It is a very important problem," said Bodnăraș, "to educate without pestering, without overkill."²⁸⁷ These officials understood education as necessary for an adequate behavior while the athletes were traveling abroad. After all, Romania's reputation was at stake. In one official's words, "we need to be preoccupied with athletes' education because otherwise we will be ridiculed abroad."²⁸⁸

However, many athletes were not interested in the political lessons offered and had "unhealthy attitudes towards the problems of political education." Some preferred to read newspapers instead of listening to the lecturer, and others, such as gymnast Elena Mărgărit, complained that "she got bored because she has heard these things tens of times."²⁸⁹ Officials in

²⁸⁵ "Darea de seamă asupra stadiului de pregătire a loturilor olimpice 1 ianuarie-20 septembrie" (25 July 1956), File 355, p. 33, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 34.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁸⁹ "Referat" (25 July 1956), File 355, p. 40, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

charge of the pre-Olympic training camp were frustrated because the athletes showed little interest in the extra-athletic activities offered to them. Gymnasts did not go to the camp's club to read any of the 300 volumes in the library or to listen to the radio. "Only the librarian listens to the radio," one official wrote.²⁹⁰ In July 1956, those in charge of organizing athletes' free time complained that athletes tended to choose "more amusing" types of entertainment: they went to movies (most of them produced in the capitalist countries of the West), and avoided the library. Moreover, only newspapers with crosswords proved popular among the athletes.²⁹¹ Leaders of the Olympic delegation complained about athletes' "cosmopolitan" views, "political disorientation," and ignorance of the scientific, technological, and cultural achievements of Romania and the other socialist countries. One sports official noted that, "athletes know little about our recent history, about these past twelve years" since the communist takeover in 1944.²⁹² At the same time, he noted that, while abroad, gymnasts and other athletes frequently visited historical landmarks, exhibits, museums, but at home visits of this sort did not exist. To improve athletes' knowledge about Romanian socialism, officials from CPCS proposed visits to heavy industry sites or scientific institutes in Bucharest.²⁹³ The intention was "to improve their political education, which in turn would contribute to their patriotic education."²⁹⁴

Archival documents provide a clear record of sport leaders' efforts to present athletes abroad as both very well-trained athletes and cultured citizens who possessed high morals and a

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ "Darea de seamă asupra stadiului de pregătire," 38.

²⁹² "Darea de seamă asupra stadiului de pregătire," 39. Recent studies see the year 1946 as the date for the communist takeover, with 1944-1946 as a transitory period to the communist regime.

²⁹³ Many of these activities would be later put in practice before the 1960 Rome Olympics.

²⁹⁴ "Darea de seamă asupra stadiului de pregătire," 40.

solid knowledge of the socialist regime's noteworthy achievements.²⁹⁵ Athletes' reluctance to take part in these cultural and educational activities suggest they were focused on the athletic side of their Olympic training, and that they were less interested in the ideological aspects that the regime invested in Romania's participation at the Olympiads.

Surveillance of athletes

Closely supervising athletes on their trips abroad – especially at the Olympics – was a key part of sports officials' task to present Romania in a favorable light, controlling Romanians' contacts with other athletes and sports officials from other countries. The various sport Romanian federations each appointed an official to organize and supervise trips abroad. Upon their return, they had to submit a written report that explained, in detail, athletes' performances and individual behavior. In addition, the representatives discussed all the details about transportation, accommodations, and contacts the team made abroad. A literary genre in itself, worthy of a further study, these reports gathered valuable information about the organizational capacities of the host-countries, about the personnel in the Romanian embassies who proved very helpful (or not) in facilitating athletes' visits, and provided detailed discussions of athletes' performances during competitions (both good and bad).

Personal characterizations of each Romanian gymnast constituted a very important theme in these reports. Aside from cataloguing the technical details of the athletes' performances during competitions, the team leader wrote about their overall behavior, unbeknownst to their knowledge. For instance, after participating at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, Marius Marcu, head of the Romanian delegation, noted in his report, "Our gymnasts performed well

²⁹⁵ Also worth mentioning is the fact that in their job contracts, gymnastic coaches had to pledge to educate the athletes "in the spirit of loving their country." See, for instance, Nagy Zoltan, "Plan de muncă pe anul 1954," File 453, p. 112, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

during competitions and had a more constant routine at all apparatuses, as compared to gymnasts from countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia or Japan." Elena Leuștean, Marcu noted, did well, but he thought there was room for improvement, "Leuștean's potential is way higher, but she doesn't work as seriously as she could during practice." Further on, the official complained about the unfriendly atmosphere and animosity that plagued the ranks of the women's gymnastics team, despite coaches' efforts to maintain a more collegial atmosphere among the team members. He called attention to "the elitist attitudes of some gymnasts," which negatively influenced the other Romanian gymnasts, now unable to train in an optimal environment.²⁹⁶ It is clear from these reports that the athletes' every move was under careful surveillance and was recorded in order to correct and prevent any lapses in behavior.

International networking

Leaders of the RGF strategically prepared for gymnasts' participation at the Olympics by making contacts with host-countries in order to build a welcoming environment. Ideally, the RGF hoped a hospitable environment would benefit the Romanian women gymnasts' performances. For example, in 1956, the Federation sent ready-made articles about Romanian sport, to be published at their request by Australian newspapers, as well as prestigious European sport periodicals such as *L'Équipe* in France, or *Gazzeta dello Sport* in Italy.²⁹⁷ These articles, sent via Agerpres, the Romanian press agency, described the overall development of athletic facilities in Romania, offered details about Romanian athletes' training for the Olympic Games, and presented short portraits of the gymnasts who would participate at the Games. Through these publicity campaigns, RGF officials emphasized Romania's gymnastics prowess by

²⁹⁶ "Raportul deplasării lotului olimpic al RPR la Olimpiada de la Melbourne," File 345, p. 23, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁹⁷ "Raportul pentru Jocurile Olimpice din 1956. Divizia economică," File 327, p. 20, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

informing Olympic host nations and other European countries about the potential for Romanian athletes to win Olympic medals. In addition, press releases provided a good opportunity to remind the world that Romanian athletes' performances were very much a product of the superior socialist system.

RGF officials also organized tournaments to gain special attention from the hosts of the Olympic Games. Such was the case with the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Strategically, Romanian planners, together with their Italian counterparts, organized a gymnastics competition in Italy two years before the Games. According to the report submitted after this competition, the Romanians achieved all they had planned for. Emil Ghibu, the chief of the Romanian delegation, wrote that Romanian gymnasts were successful in building friendly relations with the country that was scheduled to host the Olympic Games in 1960. In his words, "it was extremely important that our gymnasts left a very good impression in Rome that would provide a very sympathetic welcome for Romanians at the Olympic Games later."²⁹⁸ In this 1958 tournament, Romanians also trained with the Italian women's gymnastics team, which actually provided the Italians with the "necessary and serious support" required to learn difficult gymnastics routines.

Not only did the Romanians help the Italians and cement relationships, but they also managed to cut costs. It proved to be a very economical trip, since all room, board, and transportation expenses were paid for by their Italian hosts. Moreover, the entire Romanian delegation received 120,000 Italian *lire* that covered the Romanians' per diem allowances. In this way, the Romanian Gymnastics Federation was able to accomplish a variety of goals without spending any money from their own (limited) budget.

²⁹⁸ "Raport asupra deplasării lotului RPR de gimnastică în Italia, 14-25 iunie 1958," File 548, p. 44, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

Gift giving

The Committee for Physical Education and Sport tried to create a favorable environment for Romanian gymnasts and other athletes by sending gifts to the organizers of the Olympic Games and the other persons of interest in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF).²⁹⁹ Romanian officials wanted to give gifts that represented the best of Romanian culture. In 1956, as the Melbourne games approached, Romanian sports officials faced the challenging (and costly) task of sending a large delegation with a vast collection of luggage and gifts. Officials wanted to maximize the amount of luggage space that would be devoted to the transportation of gifts to recipients at the games, placing limits on the amount of luggage that the athletes could carry. The documents that recorded the centralized planning of the trip to Melbourne provided a gold mine of information about the gifts to be taken. The Romanian officials counted on 300 kg of gifts that would be brought with the team to Australia. The treasure trove of presents included folk rugs and embroidered tablecloths, wooden gourds and painted wooden cigarette boxes, small dolls dressed in traditional national costumes, stamp albums, fabrics decorated with national motifs, and silk headscarves imprinted with images from the Romanian capital, Bucharest. Two thirds of the goods were alcoholic: 150 liters of Romanian wine and 50 liters of *țuică*, Romanian plum brandy.³⁰⁰ It is not clear how these goods were distributed.

Romanians offered gifts whenever delegations of various athletes traveled to competitions abroad. (Foreign guests at Romanian tournaments received gifts as well.) Officials

²⁹⁹ Romanian participation at these meetings, as well as Romanian membership in these organizations meant that Romanian officials dealt with the West on Western terms. On the process of cultural adaptation that Soviet officials experienced as members of the International Olympic Committee see Barbara Keys, "The Soviet Union, Global culture, and the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games," paper presented to the Conference on Globalization and Sport in Historical Context, University of California, San Diego, March 2005 (in possession of the author).

³⁰⁰ "Propunere de cadouri pentru Melbourne," File 355, p. 25, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

who documented the competitions abroad often wrote about the gifts and their reception among the recipients. "These gifts," wrote one sport official, "delighted our hosts, who were completely impressed by our offerings."³⁰¹ There were many instances, however, when the Romanian officials complained about the quality and the wrapping of the gifts they had to work with. They blamed the CPCS in particular who handed over the gifts without adequate packaging. These gifts – which included record albums of Romanian music, tablecloths, embroidered blouses and doilies, cigarettes, and bags – were typically crammed into luggage, and, as one official pointed out, "they got wrinkled, so we could not offer them during the official reception. Whether we wrapped them in good or bad paper, they still look like a packet from an unskilled butcher."³⁰²

The shoddy packaging was in stark contrast with that of gifts from other non-Romanian delegations, both Western and Soviet bloc. Although not as valuable as the gifts offered by the Romanian delegation, the other delegations' presents were wrapped in "original, beautiful" paper, and had the national emblem of their respective countries. Although offering presents was not uniquely Romanian, the fact that Romanian officials were eager to uphold quality standards for these gifts, and sometimes even hoped to upstage other countries, shows how these officials tried to build a favorable reputation for Romania and its athletes.

Winning over international referees

Romanian officials hoped that networking with international referees would provide a way to bring home good results. The Romanian Gymnastics Federation had a comprehensive plan to gather data about persons of interest in the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF).

³⁰¹ "Raport asupra delegațiilor șahiști români participanți la Olimpiada de șah din URSS, 1956," File 279, p. 293, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

³⁰² "Raport asupra deplasării echipei de tir a RPR la Copenhaga, Helsinki și Budapesta în perioada 21 iunie -11 iulie 1956," File 345, p. 92, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

First, Romanian bureaucrats in the federation identified those IGF leaders who came from the Eastern European communist bloc. They would be approached first. Lists – that survive in the archives – included the name of the international official, their country of origin, their position in the international organization, the duration of their mandate in the international organization, and what foreign languages they knew.³⁰³ The next step was to identify those coaches and referees who had "personal relationships with officials in the international federation that could potentially influence favorably the Romanians." The lists compiled in 1958 showed a list of five Romanian officials who had "very good, friendly, principled, or comradely" relationships with referees and officials from Hungary, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia. In the West, Romanian officials had contacts with referees in France, Finland, and Italy.³⁰⁴ All these officials, perceived as having a friendly attitude towards the Romanians, were invited to attend various competitions in Romania that preceded the Olympic Games.³⁰⁵

Another piece of information in the lists compiled by the bureaucrats of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation is especially illuminating: the RGF studied which referees had so-called "weaknesses" that could be exploited to Romania's advantage. For instance, in 1960, judges from Finland, Italy, and France were identified as liking "Romanian art," a Hungarian judge was noted to prefer "stamps and insignias," and another was observed to be fond of photographs. In the case of Valeria Verpich, a Hungarian judge, it was noted that she liked "to be flattered," but the document does not reveal how the Romanians might have tried to gain her support, so we can

³⁰³ "Documente necesare în probleme internaționale în vederea Jocurilor Olimpice -1960-Roma," File 384, p. 108, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

³⁰⁴ "Legături personale în cadrul federației internaționale cu influență pozitivă în favoarea noastră," File 384, p. 98, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

³⁰⁵ "Propuneri de invitare în RPR ca arbitri la concursuri internaționale," File 384, p. 101, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

only speculate.³⁰⁶ What these documents reveal, however, is that Romanian sports administrators took active steps to build relationships with international officials and judges who would favor Romanians in international competitions. This was crucial, as a result of the subjective nature of evaluation in gymnastics. The RGF demanded success in the area of networking.

Women gymnasts, as well as sports officials, were vital ambassadors in sportswear. In addition to direct competition, networking was a key activity that accompanied Romanian participation in the Olympic Games. The behind-the-scenes archival record reveals Olympic competition to be a collective, broadly based endeavor, involving athletes, coaches, federation officials, staffers, Romanian referees, and newspaper writers. Their work was visible only once every four years, yet networking and training were continuous. As a result, Romanian gymnastics ranked high at the Olympics throughout the entire postwar period, with only a couple of exceptions.

Conclusion

In the context of the early Cold War, one of the main branches of sport that brought significant results for Romania at the Olympics was women's gymnastics. The 1950s and 1960s represented the beginnings of the Romanian school of gymnastics which brought Romania to the top of the world hierarchy in the mid-1970s. Behind the extraordinary results at the Olympic Games stood an immense collective effort that brought together gymnasts, coaches, referees, sports commentators and officials from the main bodies of sports governance.

³⁰⁶ "Arbitrii streini utilizați în competiții mondiale și jocurile olimpice," File 384, p. 100, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

Chapter 3: Montreal 1976: The Era of Nadia Comăneci

In these days of big-money and ultra-nationalistic sports, gymnasts suffer outside pressures which I feel to be in the interest of anything but the sport itself. Due to the enormous amount of national prestige at stake in major competitions, a "win at any cost" mentality has developed in those who supervise the sporting bodies. The Federations care tremendously about getting good results and they pass on that pressure to the coaches and hence to the gymnasts. I feel that national pride tends to dominate international competitions to such an extent as to be dangerous to the future of gymnastics.

-Nadia Comăneci, 1981³⁰⁷

Applying the Soviet methods of training to women's gymnastics, the Romanians managed to gain a spot in the world of elite gymnastics, dominated at the time by the Soviet Union. The first postwar generation of gymnasts kept Romania in the international headlines in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, by the mid-1960s it seemed that the resources had dried up and the female gymnasts did not make an appearance at the 1968 Mexico Olympics. Did it mean that Romania's quick trip to international gymnastics fame had ended? Where did Nadia Comăneci, the Romanian star of the Montreal Olympics come from?

This chapter starts with a look at the changes in Romania's foreign policy that provided the context for new nationalist sporting policies. It then discusses the problems facing sport officials who witnessed a decline in gymnasts' performances as the first generation of athletes became older and less competitive internationally. Once officials in the Romanian Gymnastics Federation founded a new school of gymnastics in 1969, results at international competitions followed after five years of hard work. And when the first gymnasts of the school competed at their first Olympiad in Montreal in 1976, the outcomes were exceptional. The Romanian School

³⁰⁷ Nadia Comăneci and Graham Buxton Smither, *Nadia. The Autobiography of Nadia Comăneci* (London: Proteus Books, 1981), 50.

of Gymnastics became internationally acclaimed, while its best product -- Nadia Comăneci -- became a global celebrity almost overnight. It seemed that sports officials' ambitions to make Romania a world gymnastics powerhouse had become a reality. The state made numerous attempts to use the newly acquired sports fame to promote its nationalist socialism as successful at home and abroad. For the outside world, Romania was portrayed as a vibrant nation, capable of producing international sports stars. For Romanians, gymnasts' accomplishments were meant to serve as models to follow, as an indubitable proof that the country could provide all the conditions for success for its socialist citizens. However, the Romanian state's intentions to monopolize Nadia Comăneci's image were complicated by Western audiences' desires to know more about the little gymnast deemed "perfect" at the Olympics. Nadia transcended the Romanian state's initial plans, showing that in an increasingly globalized world, the state nationalist intentions could fall short of their aims. A tiny 14-year-old Romanian girl became a world household name, and even though her persona became a "national asset," her image abroad took on a life of its own, outside of the Romanian state's control.

Farewell to Moscow

Romania experienced a foreign policy shift between 1960 and 1965. International influences and domestic factors contributed to Romania's increasing distance from the Soviet orbit. China's ascendancy in international politics and the Sino-Soviet dispute that started in 1960, coupled with Khrushchev's loss of prestige after the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962, allowed Romania to search for a new path in international relations. Domestically, Romania's commitment to modernization via industrialization provided the perfect reason to reject the 1962 Comecon plan, which limited Romania's role in the extraction of raw materials and agricultural goods within a larger economic network of Eastern European communist nations. Beginning in

the early 1960s, Romania had begun signaling to Moscow a new desire to implement its own "national road" to socialism.

Between 1960 and 1965, Romania took the first steps to distance itself from Moscow. First, Romania remained neutral in the Sino-Soviet conflict; second, Romania started diplomatic relations with Albania in 1963, a country that opposed Moscow's lead towards communism.³⁰⁸ Moreover, in 1964 Romania denounced the Comintern's interference in the internal affairs of the Eastern European communist parties and Romanian leaders pleaded for the "sovereign right of each socialist state to elaborate, choose or change the forms and methods of socialist construction."³⁰⁹ Romania continued to defy Moscow when it established diplomatic relationships with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1967, the only socialist state to do so. Romania adopted the same independent stand in 1967 when Romania maintained relationships with Israel after the Six Day War -- despite the Soviet Union's condemnation of Israel. Romania's participation in the Comecon and the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) became merely a formality, so much so that in the summer of 1968 Romania was the only WTO member that refused to send its troops to suppress the Czech revolt against the Soviets. In 1969, Richard Nixon visited Romania, the first American president to do so after 1945, which confirmed Romania's rapprochement with the West.

Internally, the leaders of Romania reasserted national values as the basis of Romanian socialist politics. Concretely, the teaching of Russian in schools became less important and

³⁰⁸ Based on the four ideal types of foreign policy proposed by K. J. Holsti -- isolation, self-reliance, dependence, and nonalignment-diversification, researcher Alina-Alexandra Georgescu concludes that Romania changed its foreign policy from "dependence" to Moscow into "diversification," because in the bipolar world a real "self-reliance" was impossible for Romania. See Alina-Alexandra Georgescu, "Romanian Foreign Policy: From Dependence to Diversification," *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, 3:1 (2003), 77-105.

³⁰⁹ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej cited in R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century -- and After* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 313.

history textbooks downplayed the relationships between the Russians and the Romanians over time, going as far as to expose the seizing of Romanian territory by the Soviets during the Second World War. In the field of high culture, Romanian intellectuals participated actively in the creation of cultural products that searched for the meaning of Romanian nationhood and exalted national uniqueness as a bedrock of Romanian socialism.³¹⁰

The shift in the direction of Romanian foreign policy affected sport as well. Romania intensified athletic exchanges with the West and especially with the US after 1965. Romanian swimmers and basketball players enrolled in American universities on athletic scholarships, and the Romanian government established cultural agreements with Western democracies, as was the case with the "Agreement concerning the collaboration in the areas of physical culture, sports and youth between Romania and France," established in 1967.³¹¹ In the same year, the newly created *Consiliul Național pentru Cultură Fizică și Sport* (The National Council for Physical Education and Sport) replaced the former Soviet-style administrative body in charge of the development of sports. Not long after, at Onești a new experimental school of gymnastics, entirely Romanian-made, started to produce gymnastics champions that would bring Romania to the top of the world of elite women's gymnastics competition.

The renewed Romanian School of Gymnastics

Romanian gymnastics in decline?

Until 1976 Romanian women gymnasts had not repeated the performances they had achieved at the 1956 and 1960 Olympics. The system that produced star gymnasts such as Elena

³¹⁰ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

³¹¹ Alexe Nicu, ed., *Enciclopedia Educației Fizice și Sportului din România*, Vol. 2, (București: Aramis, 2002), 236.

Leustean or Sonia Iovan, was not able to keep up with the increasing in technical performances that kept Soviet gymnasts at the top of elite world gymnastics. There were several factors that led to the decline of women's gymnastics after the Rome Olympics; and as early as 1958, the secretary general of the RGF, Francisc Lovi, pointed to the need to rebuild the national team. In his view, bringing new, younger gymnasts, "even with a lower technical training," would create a more competitive basis for recruitment in the national team. Lovi was concerned by the fact that several members of the team considered themselves irreplaceable, or "members by right." As the Romanian expression went, they were "senators for life."³¹²

After Romania placed 6th at the team competition at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, inflammatory accusations were heard in the press about the way athletes and coaches approached the training for such an important international competition. As Lovi mentioned six years earlier, *Sportul popular* maintained that "older athletes" such as Iovan and Leuștean were no longer competitive. Instead, the coaches needed to recruit younger talents, following the example of Czechoslovakia whose oldest gymnast, champion Vera Ceaslavska, was twenty-two years old, while half of the Romanian team was over twenty-nine.³¹³ Not only were the Romanian gymnasts older, but they were also overly-confident and "self-sufficient," because they knew they were guaranteed a secure place on the national team. On the other hand, coaches were blamed for deceiving the public about the level of preparedness of the national team. *Sportul popular* accused coaches Maria Ionescu and Caius Jianu for the false reassurance given to the public before the Olympics. Thus, the press and the public were led to believe that Romanian

³¹² Francisc Lovi, "Raport asupra deplasării lotului RPR de gimnastică din Italia, 14-25 iunie 1958," File 548, p. 44, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

³¹³ Romeo Vilara, *L'equipe olympique de la Roumanie vous salue aux Jeux Olympiques de Tokyo 1964, supplement du "Bulletin olympique roumain,"* (București, 1964), 41-42.

gymnasts would even have a chance at gold medals, when in fact the team's performances were artificially inflated. Prior to the Tokyo Olympics, the RGF officials and coaches planned competitions in which Romanian gymnasts met with less-competitive, weaker teams, intentionally avoiding world-class adversaries. Additionally, Ionescu and Jianu's self-assured attitude silenced any suggestions coming from other gymnastics specialists. This approach, coupled with the egotistical attitudes of the athletes themselves, "made our team blind to their own deficiencies," and led to a disappointing 6th place in the team competition in Tokyo.³¹⁴

Sport journalists yearned for the days of the 1956 and 1960 Olympics when Romanian women's gymnastics were on the Olympic podium. Sport commentator Constantin Macovei noted that "we forgot about the bronze medals from Melbourne and Rome and we are even okay with less than that."³¹⁵ Later, in 1968, he wrote that the top Romanian gymnasts were still not capable of contending for any Olympic medals in the face of strong competitors from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. "Simple arithmetic tells us that, theoretically, our team doesn't stand a chance to place among the top four gymnastics teams."³¹⁶ At most, Romanians could hope for a fifth to eighth place, but even that would not be guaranteed, given the strength of other teams coming from Hungary, France, Bulgaria, Sweden, Poland and Italy. Constantin Macovei regretted the decision of RGF to keep the gymnastics team in the dark concerning their absence from the Mexico Olympics. He argued that it could negatively affect their training. Additionally, Macovei questioned the overall agenda of RGF officials who seemed to want only medals and not the chance to compete with the world

³¹⁴ "Puncte de vedere: Gimnasticii noastre -- o infuzie de tinerețe!" *Sportul popular*, 4562, 24 November 1964, 4.

³¹⁵ Constantin Macovei, "Gimnastica: pronosticuri pentru Olimpiadă," *Sport*, 24, December 1967, 9.

³¹⁶ Constantin Macovei, "Sub semnul Cercurilor olimpice: O întrebare ce-și așteaptă încă răspunsul," *Sportul popular*, 223, 25 June 1968, 2.

gymnastics' elite. His remarks, although singular in the Romanian press at the time, actually pointed to the tensions between the constant demand for medals coming from sports officials (especially the CNEFS and RGF), and the desire of gymnasts and their coaches to be able to compete internationally, even without medals. Ultimately, the sports officials prevailed, and did not send the Romanian gymnastics team to the Mexico Olympics because, in their view, the costs of preparation and transportation were too high and "no medals for gymnasts" would not justify such high expenses.

The new Romanian brand of gymnastics

In 1969, however, there were positive signs announcing the "rebirth" of the Romanian School of Gymnastics. The Ministry of Education took the initiative to increase its previous efforts to expand mass sport by creating special programs of gymnastics in elementary, middle and high-schools. Thus, a national gymnastics competition held in the early summer of 1969 brought together young talented gymnasts from schools all over Romania, which made RGF officials hopeful for a brighter future for the women's gymnastics in Romania. Federal coach and later vice president of RGF, Maria Simionescu, declared that, "the elite gymnastics from the time of Berta Corobeanu and Lenuta Leuşteanu will be born again [...] I 'discovered' at this competition at least a dozen future champions."³¹⁷ Time proved her right.

In fact in 1969, with the help of the Ministry of Education, CNEFS, RGF, and local authorities, Maria Simionescu had a decisive role in creating the experimental school of gymnastics that produced champions for the Montreal Olympics. The Ministry of Education chose the high-school from the small town of Oneşti as a location to gather all school-aged gymnasts with the potential to become members of the national team. The local high school

³¹⁷ Horia Cristea, "Nota 10 in vacanța fetițelor din Călărași," *Sportul*, 7, April 1969, 3.

became "Liceul de gimnastică de la Onești" ("Onești Gymnastics School ") and turned into the centralized site for the education and training of young gymnasts selected for the national team. Maria Simionescu and her husband Gheorghe Simionescu assumed the high-school directorship in its first years, as well as managing the Olympic Center for Athletic Training affiliated with the school.³¹⁸

The school served a double purpose for the student-athletes enrolled. First, it provided schooling for students in classrooms ranging from 12 to 20 members each.³¹⁹ Second, it provided high-intensity training with the help of top-notch gymnastics coaches. Officially, this is how a usual day looked for the gymnasts trained at Onești: 6-8AM, training session, 8AM-12PM, classes, 12-1PM, lunch, 1-2PM, rest, 2-4PM, homework, 4-9PM, training session, 9-10PM, dinner, homework and rest.³²⁰ However, Nadia Comăneeci recalls a different schedule: "Our gym lesson was from eight to twelve o'clock in the morning for six days of the week, with academic lessons during the afternoon."³²¹ Additional training was added when there were upcoming competitions. What is clear is that training took precedence over schooling, and teachers always provided special dispensations for missed classes due to competitions in Romania or abroad. Nadia recounts, "the classroom teachers were always flexible and would make allowances for us, both during training and after competitions, when we were still recovering. One of the best things about every competition was being let off homework."³²²

³¹⁸ Alexe Nicu, ed., *Enciclopedia Educației Fizice și Sportului din România*, Vol. 2, (București: Aramis, 2002), 128; see also the webpage of "Liceul cu program sportiv Nadia Comăneeci" <http://nadia.dtech.ro/istoric.html> (accessed 15 February 2008).

³¹⁹ Sever Noran, "Școala grației," *Sport*, 22, November 1969, 6.

³²⁰ Dumitru Dimitriu, *Nadia Comăneeci și echipa de aur*, (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1976), 73.

³²¹ Comăneeci and Buxton Smither, *Nadia*, 35.

³²² *Ibid.*, 36.

The experimental nature of the school attracted coaches from different parts of the country who came to Onești to train the most promising female gymnasts, and in some cases they brought their own students. Thus, Florica Dobre came from Craiova, while Maria Raicu and Norbert Kuhn arrived in Onești from Timisoara. The Gorgoi couple moved from Cluj, the Bibire couple from Bacau, Marta Karolyi came from Petrosani and Bela Karolyi from Vulcan. Petre Miclaus and Valentin Munteanu left the capital Bucharest for the much smaller town. Some of the trainers even left their university positions in order to coach in a high-school. Asked why they chose to leave everything behind, many responded, "Passion. Yes, passion brought together our wish to bring back the successes from the Melbourne Olympics, our love for young talents, and our desire to be as useful as possible as gymnastics specialists *where* it was necessary."³²³ One journalist reporting about the Onești Gymnastics School concluded that, for all the coaches working at Onești, home was where the gymnastics were, thus "ubi gymnastica ibi patria." Coaches and gymnasts alike began to consider Onești their new home, fostering friendships and keeping a close eye on their Olympic goals.

The Onești experimental school promoted a new style for training gymnasts. It focused on early specialization in gymnastics as a revolutionary method that changed women's gymnastics in the 1970s. This meant that coaches recruited young children, ages five or six, so that by the age of thirteen or fourteen they would be able to compete at the same level (or even higher) as other world-class gymnasts. "We were coaching gymnastics in a very different way than what [we] learned in our formal training at the university," coach Bela Karolyi noted in his autobiography. He continued, "It was a new type of sport, based on maximum physical training.

³²³ Noran, "Școala grației," 7.

We were training ten times more than any other team, and we were ten times better.”³²⁴ Maria Simionescu was convinced that early specialization in gymnastics was necessary "for a smoother, gradual, more harmonious growth of gymnasts which ensured a continuity of over ten years to practice elite gymnastics."³²⁵

The creation of the Onești Gymnastics School had its critics, however. Just as in the early 1950s when the Soviet-style of training was not embraced by all Romanian gymnastics specialists, the same happened with the new experimental methods. Many coaches continued their previous methods of training, alluding to the fact that the performances of the new Onești gymnasts such as Nadia Comăneci would surely disappear in the future, because Nadia “was an exception.”³²⁶ Also, it seemed that professional envy made other sport centers view the new Onești School unfavorably. To show their dissatisfaction at losing one of their main gymnastics coaches to Onești, for example, the Dinamo club in Bucharest simply refused to find a replacement for coach Miclaus who had left. The press commented on the actions of Dinamo as a form of reprisal. "In order to punish Miclaus who asked to be temporarily transferred to the Onești Gymnastics School, Dinamo sports club chose to eliminate his position entirely."³²⁷ Additionally, Bela Karolyi, the main coach at Onești, made numerous references to the hostility of the Dinamo club towards the new school at Onești. It is safe to assume then that, besides being largely acclaimed as a "temple for gymnastics," the Onești School had its denigrators.

Since the conditions created at the Onești School were quite unique, it is not surprising

³²⁴ Bela Karolyi and Nancy Ann Richardson, *Fără teamă. Putere, pasiune, politică în gimnastică* (București: Editura Olimp, 1995), 52.

³²⁵ Maria Simionescu quoted in Mircea Patrichi, "Trei generații," *Sport*, 6, March 1972, 17.

³²⁶ Dumitru Dimitriu, *Nadia Comăneci și echipa de aur* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1976), 27-28.

³²⁷ Noran, "Școala grației," *Sport*, 22, November 1969, 7.

that other gymnastics centers resented the fact that their own gymnasts could not train in similar environments. For instance, according to one source, "Brandușa Avram and Brandușa Fluture [who came from another town] were only one step away from being enrolled at Onești Gymnastics School. If the heating system had functioned properly and not been cold in the winter and hot in the summertime, if the suppliers were more careful to deliver athletic equipment, etc, etc... then the two gymnasts from Rădăuți would not have failed to pass the high standards of the entrance exam for the Onești School."³²⁸ At the end of the 1960s, Onești had become the top center, benefiting from the help of local party authorities, the Ministry of Education, RGF and CNEFS. Onești's mayor, Valerian Ghineț, provided constant support to the Onești School, and Andrei Erdely, the director of the Onești Industrial Construction Company, quickly became a steady presence at the training sessions and competitions. The little gymnasts saw Erdely like a father figure and they often received gifts from him, among the most savored being chocolate and candy.³²⁹ But overall, the Onești School of Gymnastics became successful as a collective enterprise, with heavy burdens placed on athletes and their coaches.

In 1971, two years after the opening of the Onești School, Maria Simionescu predicted that the first results would become visible in a few years, when the youngest students started participating in official competitions. By then, the public would be able to appreciate the results of "the strict discipline, new pedagogical methods and exceptional conditions of training" with which the Onești School provided its gymnasts. Simionescu proved right in her predictions, especially when she mentioned the then nine-year-old Nadia Comăneci, who would later become the star of the Montreal Olympics. This was also the first mention of Nadia in the Romanian

³²⁸ "Sportul de masă -- cheia succeselor: Suceava," *Sport*, 1, January 1972, 8.

³²⁹ Dimitriu, *Nadia Comăneci*, 46-47.

press. The caption of her 1971 picture in the article read: "Nadia Comăneeci's perseverance and talent presage future rise to gymnastics podiums."³³⁰ Sure enough, starting with the 1975 World Championships, Nadia Comăneeci would become the best known "product" of the Onești School both in Romania and abroad.

The Onești School hosted two different generations of gymnasts. High-school students Anca Grigoraș, Paula Ioan and Elisabeta Turcu became part of the national team for the 1972 Munich Olympics. Their objective was to return to the elite of the world's gymnasts after their 5th place earned at the 1970 World Championship in Ljubljana.³³¹ And although the team was not considered to be in the running for an Olympic medal, their participation at Munich marked a "turning point," after Romania's absence from the 1968 Olympics.

A second generation of gymnasts produced at the Onești School was waiting for the 1976 Olympics. In 1971, while only 11, many of the young Romanian gymnasts at Onești were able to outperform the current world champion, the Russian Ludmila Turishceva. Among the new gymnasts, Nadia Comăneeci quickly became known as the most promising talent. In 1972, the press wrote how "This delicate and especially shy little girl captures the audience when she flies on the uneven bars or when she twists her body in acrobatic torrents on the floor routine. Her talent, amplified by her work ethic, makes her a certain candidate for the next Olympic Games."³³² Indeed, Nadia Comăneeci together with her classmates became the "golden generation" of the Montreal Olympics.

The explosion of Romanian gymnastics at Montreal

³³⁰ Mircea Patrichi, "Laboratorul grației din Cetatea Chimiei," *Sport*, 10, May 1971, 10-11.

³³¹ Constantin Macovei, "Olimpiada-- moment de răscruce pentru gimnastica noastră," *Sport*, 16 August 1972, 3.

³³² Mircea Patrichi, "Start in 'Epoca de Aur' a junioarelor," *Sportul*, 22, November 1972, 12.

The new beginnings of international fame

The new school of Romanian gymnastics founded at Onești did not produce an Olympic medal at the Munich Games in 1972. The Romanian team placed only 6th in the team competition, while the highest placed Romanian gymnast in the individual all-around competition was Elena Ceampelea who ranked a disappointing 22nd. In fact, the Onești School, founded in 1969, did not have enough time to show the results of the early training system by 1972. However, the first world-class results appeared in 1975, when Nadia Comăneci and her teammates took over the international arenas at the European Gymnastics Championships held in the tiny Norwegian town of Skien.

The 1975 Skien Championships represented the "dress rehearsal" for what was to be a Romanian triumph at the Montreal Olympics a year later. Cliff Temple, a British sports commentator for *The Sunday Times*, noted that at the 1975 Championships, "Romanian gymnastics was undergoing a metamorphosis," because the Romanian team was a combination of "older" gymnasts (like Alina Goreac who was twenty-three years of age) and a "wave of youngsters, nearly half Alina's age, led by Nadia."³³³ For the first time, Western experts admired "the courageous feats" of the Romanians and the "most unbelievable stunts" that Nadia Comăneci performed. The innovations brought by Nadia in her uneven bar routines, made many wonder whether Nadia, at 13, was truly aware of the risks involved:

'Does Nadia really know how neckbreaking is her forward somersault with straddled legs from the outside support on the high bar of the asymmetric bars?' worried one. 'At Skien she swung it so high and far out that everyone was afraid she would miss the bars.' But she didn't.³³⁴

³³³ Cliff Temple, *Nadia Comăneci. The Enchanting Story of Little Miss Perfect* (London: Everest Books Ltd, 1977), 32.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Gymnastics commentators both in Romania and abroad agreed that Romanian gymnasts' performances would surely not go unnoticed at the Montreal Olympics. Nadia Comăneci alone collected four golds and one silver medal and amazed the public with a new and daring dismount from the uneven bars. As a result, many noticed an increased visibility of Romanian gymnastics abroad. The United Press International (UPI) polled European sports editors and voted the Romanian Nadia Comăneci as the 1975 Sportswoman of the Year. Additionally, the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF) also formally gave Nadia's dismount the title "the Comăneci dismount", and gave another of Nadia's innovative moves the title "the Comăneci salto." Such titles were high gymnastics honors that recognized the imprint of a particular gymnast on the development of gymnastics technique.³³⁵ Naturally, at Montreal the experts and the public eagerly awaited the performances of Romanian gymnasts and of Nadia in particular.

Expectations ran high for teams coming from the Soviet Union (the constant Olympic champions) and from Romania. The 1972 Munich Olympics had produced a star Soviet gymnast, the little Olga Korbut, "an 84-pound elf from Grodno." Despite her "peasant looks" and her not-so-perfect technique, as *Los Angeles Times* characterized her, Korbut "emerged as the greatest gymnast of all time in public opinion, although she wasn't even the best on her team."³³⁶ Her theatricals (she openly cried for her mistakes during competitions) earned her the public's sympathy, which translated into sudden fame and the title of team captain for the Montreal Olympics. All these honors were thus granted to a gymnast whose routines and marks were poorer than those of her teammates, Lyudmila Toursicheva and Nelli Kim. As a result, the

³³⁵ "Romanian, 15, Gets a 10.0; At Uneven Bars: A Perfect Gymnast," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 1976, E5. See also Nadia Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 1, 15.

³³⁶ Richard Hoffer, "Olga and Nadia. These Gymnasts Took What Was Considered a Minor Sport and Transformed It Into a Nielsen Bonanza," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1984, 30.

gymnast to beat at Montreal became Olga Korbut, and the Romanian coaches and gymnasts were definitely prepared to take on the challenge. As the *Los Angeles Times* wrote on the opening day of the Montreal meet, "Olga Korbut, the darling of the 1972 games in Munich, will be back...The focus, however, will be on 14-year-old Nadia Comăneci, an 86-pound Romanian whose acrobatics, experts report, are stunning."³³⁷ So high were the expectations for the Russian and Romanian gymnasts' performances at Montreal that even the rehearsals sold out.³³⁸ As for the competition itself, the tickets disappeared far in advance, which helped scalpers secure nearly \$200 per ticket -- ten times more than the regular price for a ticket for the finals.³³⁹ And indeed, the competition itself did not disappoint.

Montreal: The "coming out party" for Romanian gymnastics

Held between the 18th and 23rd of July 1976, the Olympic gymnastics competitions brought "world recognition to the Romanian school of gymnastics," as the main Romanian sports newspaper put it on July 24th.³⁴⁰ Overall, the Romanians won seven medals: 3 gold, 2 silver, and 2 bronze -- "an excellent balance-sheet, unique in the history of Romanian gymnastics participation at the Olympic Games."³⁴¹ Romania placed second in the team competition, while Nadia Comăneci gained first place in the individual all-around competitions, accumulating no fewer than 7 perfect scores.³⁴² The two top performers of the Romanians were Nadia Comăneci

³³⁷ James Brown, "Viewing Points: XXI Olympiad Begins Today," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 July 1976, B2.

³³⁸ Bill Shirley, "The Nadia & Olga Show," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1976, E1.

³³⁹ Romeo Vilara, *Montreal '76: Olimpiada Nadiei Comăneci* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977), 129.

³⁴⁰ Aurel Neagu and Romeo Vilara, "Consacrarea mondială a gimnasticii românești," *Sportul*, 8327, 24 July 1976, 1.

³⁴¹ Aurel Neagu and Romeo Vilara, "Comentariul zilei: In plină Olimpiadă," *Sportul*, 8327, 24 July 1976, 1.

³⁴² Kurt W. Treptow, *Romanian Gymnastics* (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1996), 57-58.

and Teodora Ungureanu, although only the first became instantaneously a worldwide celebrity.

But who was Nadia Comăneci? Born on November 12, 1961 in Onești, Nadia was the daughter of Elena Comăneci, a homemaker, and of Gheorghe Comăneci, a mechanic who repaired trucks and other machinery in the industrial town of Onești. Asked why they chose the name Nadia -- not a typical Romanian name, but of Slavonic origins (probably Russian) --, Gheorghe Comăneci recalled that they named their daughter after a character from a movie both parents were watching at the cinema when Elena Comăneci felt the baby's first movements.³⁴³ Nadia "discovered" gymnastics at around age 5 when attending kindergarten. Coach Marcel Duncan selected and trained Nadia for two years at the "Flacăra" ("The Spark") Sports Association, until Bela Karolyi brought Nadia to the Onești School of Gymnastics.

Western journalists and audiences reveled at Nadia's performances. Her perfect scores of 10 -- awarded for the first time in the history of the modern Olympics -- brought her to the covers of Western magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Both the domestic and international press described Nadia's performances as "perfect" or "close to perfect." Thus, Bill Shirley, the sports editor for the *Los Angeles Times* opened his commentary about Nadia's gymnastics routines in the Forum arena by saying, "Well, nobody's perfect, but Nadia Comăneci, the saucy little 14-year-old Romanian gymnasts, comes as close as anybody."³⁴⁴ Sports experts in the US became enamored with the little "Romanian marvel" that "dazzled the audience," and dubbed her as "the new queen of gymnastics," "the prima ballerina of gymnastics," "the wunderkind of her sport," whose "dazzling acrobatic feats" brought "a fairyland aura" into the gymnastics arena, making her the "darling of Montreal and of maybe 800

³⁴³ Ioan Chirilă, *Nadia* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977), 9.

³⁴⁴ Bill Shirley, "It's another Perfect Night for Comăneci," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 July 1976, D1.

million television addicts."³⁴⁵ Television definitely contributed to Nadia's worldwide celebrity, in the same way in which it had made Olga Korbut known to a world audience at the Munich Olympics four years earlier.

Nadia's celebrity was based on her perfect 10s, her acrobatic skills, her apparent calm and lack of emotion when competing. Her top scores took Olympic computer technology by surprise. The "Swiss timing" computer screens were not programmed to display a score of "10.00." Instead, every time a competitor earned the highest score, the scoreboards could only display a "1.00," to the amusement of audiences. Nadia's routines featured riskier elements, especially at the uneven bars, where her "Comăneci dismount" -- "a dismount off the uneven parallel bars in which she let go of the high bar in a forward motion and performed a half twist that turned into a back somersault" -- was deemed "madness" by American gymnasts and journalists.³⁴⁶ Nadia's acrobatics made the *Los Angeles Times* sports writer Jim Murray to comment ironically that she "probably sleeps hanging down and could probably somersault [off] a ledge a pigeon would fall off of."³⁴⁷ Her tricks electrified audiences, Murray continued, as she was able to bring "18,000 people screaming to their feet as she flew through the air in a blaze of Sukuharas (sic!) or flips like an imp out of a blanket, or something shot out of a cannon."³⁴⁸ Not only did Nadia's scores and technique impress journalists and spectators, but her power of concentration brought her an air of mystery. TV and radio reporters were awed by her

³⁴⁵ Jim Murray, "Comăneci Olympics," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1976, F1; Peter Bonventre, "Quest for the Gold," *Newsweek*, 19 July, 1976, 64; "US Basketball Team Breaks Fast, 106-86," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 1976, E1; "Romanian Gets her 6th and 7th Ten," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July, 1976, D1; Bill Shirley, "Korbut Has Settled into Less-Demanding Routine," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 September 1983, E16.

³⁴⁶ Cheryl Bentsen, "Gymnasts are Better Now because the Coaches Are," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 1976, E8.

³⁴⁷ Jim Murray, "Comăneci's Olympics," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1976, F1; "Gymnastics: Rough and Rumble," *Time*, 19 July 1976, 56.

³⁴⁸ Jim Murray, "Comăneci's Olympics," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1976, F9.

accomplishments, "Incredible! Imagine, to be only 14, and winning gold medals at the Olympics. Gosh. I had trouble just being 14," one radio host said.³⁴⁹ Awed but also puzzled, commentators often were left to wonder who exactly the person inside the little girl's body really was.³⁵⁰

Albeit "perfect," Nadia's performances were accompanied by an "impenetrable" personality that made some commentators dub her "aloof, mysterious, and untouchable."³⁵¹ Her "stoic," "robotic perfection," earned her the unofficial title of "ice princess." Some argued that Nadia's shy demeanor and monosyllabic answers to reporters' questions during press conferences at Montreal failed to charm audiences as Olga Korbut had. Some sports commentators and readers criticized her for being "too serious" while performing. Thus, American readers of *Time* magazine complained that, "She's *too* perfect! Not once did Nadia cry or giggle or show emotion."³⁵² Nadia was deemed a "tragic" figure because she was "seemingly unable to glory in her accomplishments."³⁵³ Some regretted the show put up by Olga Korbut at the Munich Olympics, "You can have that 'perfect' robot. I prefer the more emotional, fragile and human Olga. No perfect score can ever light up a stadium like the smile of Olga Korbut."³⁵⁴ Finally, a reader of *Sports Illustrated* magazine decried the worldwide attention given to Nadia in the August 2, 1976 article "Nadia Awed Ya." While reader Cathie Boren from Virginia Beach acknowledged that Nadia was a "perfect gymnast technically," she lacked "the glow, the

³⁴⁹ Paul Henniger, " 'Thrill, Agony' Live this Time," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1976, B2.

³⁵⁰ Bert Rotfeld's commentary on the *Sports Legends: Nadia Comăneci*, VHS, produced in 1993.

³⁵¹ Richard Hoffer, "Olga and Nadia. These Gymnasts Took What Was Considered a Minor Sport and Transformed It Into a Nielsen Bonanza," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1984, 31.

³⁵² Anita Gonzales, Houston, "Letters to the Editors," *Time*, 23 August 1976, 4.

³⁵³ Paula Dover, San Francisco, "Letters to the Editors," *Time*, 23 August 1976, 4.

³⁵⁴ Janice Chlopowicz, Tucson, "Letters to the Editors," *Time*, 23 August 1976, 4.

exuberance" of Olga Korbut's artistry. Boren wrote, "And gymnastics *is* an art. I would not want to look at many paintings that were technically perfect but lacked expression."³⁵⁵

Comments of this sort pointed to some fans' ambivalence about the changing styles of gymnastics ushered in by Nadia. Since the general public was accustomed to and preferred the more expressive, balletic gymnastics that characterized competitions prior to the 1970s, Nadia's style was too edgy for some fans. But, for others, Nadia became the star of the Olympics, "the honor [of greatest athlete in the world] clearly belongs to Nadia Comăneci of Romania" wrote Michael Dusenberry from Los Angeles to the editors of the *Los Angeles Times*.³⁵⁶

Both Nadia's coach and Nadia herself responded to these criticisms by placing a strong emphasis on gymnasts' need to maximize their concentration during competition. At one of the many press conferences in Montreal, Bela Karolyi answered that, "it is her character to be serious."³⁵⁷ Nadia also noted that, "I know how to smile, I know how to laugh, I know how to play. But I know how to do these things only after I have finished my mission."³⁵⁸ For a 14-year-old girl, the entire media spectacle surrounding her gymnastics performances was hard to grasp, and no wonder that she preferred the grueling hours of training to the "worst of (her) ordeals in Montreal -- the press conference."³⁵⁹ Her reaction to the immense media attention directed towards her could be summed up in two words, "frightening and baffling." Nadia explained that she felt at times panicky about the numbers of journalists and photo-reporters

³⁵⁵ Cathie Boren, Virginia Beach, "19th Hole -- The Readers Take Over: Nadia and Company," *Sports Illustrated*, 16 August 1976, 72.

³⁵⁶ Michael Dusenberry, Los Angeles, "Viewpoint. Letters -- The Olympics," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 1976, D3.

³⁵⁷ Temple, *Nadia Comăneci*, 50.

³⁵⁸ "Gymnastics: Rough and Rumble," *Time*, 19 July 1976, 56.

³⁵⁹ Comăneci and Buxton Smither, *Nadia*, 109.

shouting and flashing their cameras at her, all at the same time. She was uncomfortable with the fact that reporters seemed not to buy her simple answers, and wanted juicier details about her personal life. At a later date, Nadia confessed that at the time of Montreal Olympics she only felt comfortable sharing the part of her who was "the young gymnast seeking perfection," and not the "shy and very introspective" part that she wanted to keep private.³⁶⁰ However, the Olympics made Nadia a public person and both Western media and the Romanian state tried to utilize Nadia's image for various ends.

Because of how the media covered her astounding feats, Nadia became, almost overnight, the most sought-after athlete at the Olympics. A true global celebrity, her name became forever associated with the Montreal Olympics, in the same way as commentators acknowledged that the Munich Olympics belonged to Mark Spitz, the 1968 Olympics to Bob Beamon, or the 1936 Berlin Olympics to Jesse Owens, to list just a few. In one American commentator's words, Nadia Comănechi was "the most famous collection of syllables to come out of Romania."³⁶¹ Indeed, for Western audiences, after Montreal Nadia Comănechi became synonymous with Romania. As a product of the Romanian school of gymnastics, Nadia accomplished more with her dazzling acrobatics than an army of diplomats. Her "unsmiling excellence" impressed judges and enchanted the public, and her impact on the gymnastics world would prove long-lasting.

The Western journalists' and public's fascination with Nadia continued well after Montreal. Every little detail about Nadia was considered worthy of attention. For instance, upon her return to Romania after the Olympics, the American readers got the chance to see Nadia in a different light. There she was, just as an ordinary 14-year-old child, posing with one of her

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 46.

³⁶¹ Murray, "Comănechi's Olympics," F9.

favorite stuffed animals from her large collection of toys.³⁶² At the same time, Nadia's appearances at subsequent competitions were always mentioned in the press. For example, a short notice in the *Los Angeles Times* informed readers in October 1976 that the "Romanian queen of Olympic gymnastics [...] found herself in an unusual position, [...]sprawled on the mat in front of a (French) audience of 6,000."³⁶³ In this case her fall was due to a collapse of the uneven bars while performing. As ordinary as this would have been in a regular competition, it was not the case when Nadia was involved, and every little bit of information was released to the Western public. The same happened after the tragic earthquake that shook Romania on March 4th, 1977. Newspapers reported that "Nadia was unhurt," and that she "was safe at her home in Onești," a town 180 miles away from the capital where the most damage occurred.³⁶⁴ Her first participation in a gymnastic competition in the year following the Olympics was also recorded when the *New York Times* reported how Nadia performed in Transylvania on March 26, 1977, in the city of Cluj in a benefit show for the victims of the earthquake.³⁶⁵

After her perfect scores at Montreal, Western audiences expected Nadia to remain perfect at all times. Citing Maria Simionescu, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote how the crowds started pressuring Nadia, when they cried "oh, Nadia," or "boo" if "she wobbled a little." The spectators expected flawless performances, but coach and international referee Maria Simionescu contended that Nadia was just human, not a gymnastics machine, and that the crowds' negative

³⁶² Photo Standalone -- No Title, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1976, 2. The caption read "Gymnast and Friend -- Nadia Comăneci, the 14-year-old star of the Montreal Olympics, relaxes at home in Onești, Romania, with one of the stuffed animals from her wide collection."

³⁶³ "Comăneci Takes a Fall," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 October 1976, C3.

³⁶⁴ "The Newswire -- Knicks Ready to Put Their Future in Willis Reed's hands," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March, 1977, E4.

³⁶⁵ "Nadia Comăneci Performs First Time This Year," *New York Times*, 27 March 1977, I76.

reactions hurt Nadia's feelings.³⁶⁶ After all, Nadia Comăneci was not the emotionless gymnast that Western commentators portrayed her to be. Nadia's evolution post-Montreal was largely covered by the press, especially during the 1977-1979 period, when puberty transformed Nadia from a "14-year-old elf" into a "gymnast who had put on some weight and grown taller" since Montreal.³⁶⁷ By the time of Moscow Olympics in 1980, the Western press was already saturated with commentaries about the physical changes that Nadia had experienced.³⁶⁸

Nadia Comăneci and Romanians gymnastics' immediate impact on world gymnastics

Experts agreed that Nadia's legacy was profound. Not only did she transform the sport of women's gymnastics by introducing riskier, more acrobatic elements, but her influence transcended the sports arenas. She became a model for little girls everywhere; she inspired future generations of gymnasts and contributed to the growth in popularity of women's gymnastics in the US, as well as the popularity of the Olympics on American TV. The main product of Romanian gymnastics in 1976, Nadia Comăneci "was a trend setter in the riskier routines."³⁶⁹ The combination of Nadia's new techniques with advances in equipment and

³⁶⁶ "Morning Briefing -- Eagles Have Momentum ...but They'd Rather Not," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 November, 1976, D2.

³⁶⁷ "Nadia Comăneci Performs First Time This Year," I76.

³⁶⁸ For instance, Nadia changed from 4 feet 11 inches and 86 pounds in July 1976 to 5 feet 2 inches and 101 pounds in October 1977, according to "Morning Briefing," *Los Angeles Times*, 12. October 1977, F2. Other article cited Nadia's weight at 98 pounds also in October 1977: "Morning Briefing," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 October 1977, I2. "Nadia's alarming weight" made reporters of the *Los Angeles Times* to comment on the gymnast indulgence of candy and her "falling in love with a Romanian folk singer." See "Morning Briefing: At 16, Gymnast Comăneci Discovers an Older Interest," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 October 1978, E2. Jim Murray wrote that Nadia's body transformations, widely despised by her coaches, would have made "the delight of the boys from Bucharest." For Murray, Nadia no longer looked "like the boy next door"; rather her new womanly shapes accomplished the "normal ripening process" that every female teenager was supposed to go through. See Jim Murray, "Growing in Reverse," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 November 1978, D1. Speculations about puberty-delaying drugs used by athletes in Eastern Europe (specifically in the Soviet Union) were published in November 1978: "Communist Gymnasts Stay Small: Use of Puberty-Delaying Drug Hinted," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 November 1978, F1.

³⁶⁹ Cheryl Bentsen, "It's the End of a Love Affair," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 1976, F1.

coaching allowed women gymnastics to become a dynamic sport where newly introduced elements transformed the classical style of gymnastics into a more acrobatic, spectacular style.³⁷⁰

As a global sports celebrity, Nadia inspired many to pursue the sport of gymnastics. In the US, gyms thrived as a result of the Olympics. While not promising parents that their kids would become “the next Nadia Comăneci,” gymnastic clubs proliferated across the US and expanded concerns for physical fitness in fun and non-competitive settings. One set of statistics pointed out that by 1978, almost 40% of all private gyms across the US offered some sort of gymnastics programs.³⁷¹ For example, an article published in the summer of 1979 featured a series of gyms in the state of California whose mission was to “provide your youngster with a warm, safe environment, a small pupil-teacher ratio and some fun and worthwhile experiences in developing poise, body awareness, self-confidence and a positive self-image.” Gymnastics for young children was thus thought to be beneficial for the harmonious physical and mental/psychological development of the “youngest citizens of our nation.”³⁷²

Gymnastics was no longer an activity just for kids, however. A UPI report from Pittsburgh discussed at length how “adults in the US (were) starting to flip over gymnastics,” as a result of a combination of factors, among which were the “widespread publicity gymnastics received” during the Olympics,” the Title IX federal ruling that allowed women “to taste gymnastics” in schools and to pursue it after graduation, and lastly, “the physical fitness craze sweeping the United States.”³⁷³ For example, the University of Pittsburgh offered a non-credit

³⁷⁰ Cheryl Bentsen, “Gymnasts Are Better Now Because the Coaches Are,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 1976, E8.

³⁷¹ “No Longer Just for Kids. Adults in the US Starting to Flip Over Gymnastics,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1978, L1

³⁷² Betty Ansell, “Striking the Right Balance. Where the Kids Can Get Involved in Physical Fitness,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 1979, H4.

³⁷³ “No Longer Just for Kids,” L1, L4-5.

course entitled “Fitness through Gymnastics” three times each year. The demand for it was so high that school officials had to turn students away every semester. Among the many benefits for adults brought by gymnastics the UPI report noted lack of boredom in training (as opposed to weight lifting, jogging or swimming), as well as the fact that gymnastics developed a high degree of body control, strength, flexibility, and coordination, and that it cost relatively little. The only drawback to adult gymnastics was “the expectation some participants have of becoming as proficient as Romania’s Nadia Comăneci,” whose level was “probably unattainable.”³⁷⁴

The increased popularity of gymnastics also gave an impetus to US private initiatives to produce elite level gymnasts. Some believed that it was a sad irony that “the US can put a man on the moon safely enough, but it can’t get a girl on the uneven bars without misadventure.”³⁷⁵ By the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, US newspapers reported at length about the new gymnastics clubs, some of them in the form of live-in academies, which were meant to produce elite gymnasts who would “demonstrate the inherent strength of the (American) national fiber.” By winning silver and gold medals at international competitions, Americans could also play the “politics of sport” that equated numbers of medals with national vigor. And the way the Americans planned to produce elite gymnasts was, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, by looking at and adapting Romanian training methods,

In the next few years we will find out whether it’s possible for the American way to produce world champions in gymnastics or if it’s necessary to do it the Romanian way. [...] And since the American system doesn’t provide for national institutes to carve and polish the finest routines on the balance beam and the uneven bars – which is seen as a telling advantage – we find our own ways of borrowing from the Romanian system.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Ibid., L5.

³⁷⁵ Richard Hoffer, “The US as a Disadvantaged Nation. In Such Outposts as Eugene, Ore., and Milford, Conn., America Is Struggling to Get Even on the Uneven Bars,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 1979, F1.

³⁷⁶ Steve Jacobson, “US Grinds Out Its Own Nadia,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 December 1979, B1.

The Romanian school of gymnastics was recognized as capable of producing international results and thus became a model to follow in the West. The US wanted to “grind out its own Nadia,” and the gym academies started to take gymnastics very seriously, in the hope that their seniors would graduate with an Olympic medal of their own. For instance, the SCATS gymnastics academy in Huntington Beach, California, hosted American gymnasts coming from all over the United States to “tumble to visions of gold and silver.” In 1979 the girls attending the SCATS gym were already “working five or six hours at a stretch” and returning every day to the “punishing routines” to reach a total of 30 or more hours each week. When asked why they do it, the girls --from five year-olds to teenagers -- readily mentioned the names of Cathy Rigby (the best known American elite gymnast), Olga Korbut and Nadia Comăneci.³⁷⁷ By the time of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, the Southern California gym academy produced gymnasts such as Kathy Johnson and Marie Roethlisberger who brought the US some of its first international medals.³⁷⁸

Another measure of Romania’s international success can be found in the athletic exchanges that followed the Montreal Olympics. On the one hand, American, Canadian, French or Japanese gymnastics officials arranged for the Romanian team to tour their countries, as a way of popularizing gymnastics and enchanting their audiences with performances that would recreate the Olympics magic. Romanian gymnasts were invited to numerous gymnastics meets, since the organizers were convinced that Nadia’s appearance would guarantee an instant sellout of tickets because “the crowds would pour in to see Nadia solely because of her athletic

³⁷⁷ Lorraine Bennett, “They Tumble to Visions of Gold and Silver,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 January 1979, C1.

³⁷⁸ Mike Hiserman, “Gold is the Goal of Scats Gymnasts,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 1984, B15, 18.

skills.”³⁷⁹ Romanians often used these tours for their own ends. The gymnasts and coaches could test new elements they had added to their routines. Also, the competitions provided much-needed international experience for new gymnasts added to the team. At the same time, officials from the RFG could earn extra revenue in the form of hard currency that was used to supplement the state budget allocated to gymnastics.

On the other hand, athletes from abroad visited Romania and participated at training camps alongside Romanian gymnasts. While reports about these exchanges failed to hit the pages of Romanian newspapers, major American periodicals informed their readers about these endeavors. For instance, a year after the Montreal Olympics, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote about Marisa O’Neal, “a promising 7-year-old gymnast” who had the chance to train for three weeks at a gymnastics sports camp in Romania. O’Neal was lucky enough to meet Nadia, and she reported that, as compared to Montreal, Nadia was “taller,” “more mature,” with shorter hair and “a figure a bit fuller.” Contrary to how the Western press depicted Nadia a year before, a “star-struck” O’Neal maintained that Nadia displayed a smile like the one she saw at the Olympics.³⁸⁰

Little Marisa O’Neal’s gymnastics training camp was not unique. In 1985 *The New York Times* wrote a lengthy piece about a “Rumanian Friendship Tour” that made 11-year old Kim Foster of Elmsford exclaim, “I loved it! It was a great experience!” Her reaction came as a result of the new acrobatic elements she learned from Romanian coaches and gymnasts, the friendships she formed with Romanian girls, and also from meeting (now retired) Nadia Comăneci. The “Friendship Tour” was initiated by Robert Winter, a gymnastics coach at a small elementary school in Elmsford, NY. Arranged by the New York offices of Carpați, the Romanian National

³⁷⁹ Tim Weigel, “Era of the Outrageous: a Shortcut to Wealth,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 March 1977, D6.

³⁸⁰ “Morning Briefing: Comăneci Is Growing Up But Remains under Wraps,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 1977, D2.

Tourist Service, the training camp was approved by the RGF “on a trial basis.”

Winter admitted that his interest in Romania was sparked by the perfect score Nadia Comăneci had obtained at the Montreal Olympics, when he “began to wonder how Romania does it, what its big secret” was. For a long time Winter had been “fascinated by the mystique of Romania.” He wanted to discover more than “the Carpathians and the legend of Count Dracula.” The children's parents were not so enthusiastic when the coach announced the trip to Romania, “They said ‘Send my daughter to Romania -- are you crazy?’ he recalled. ‘They thought there were armed guards on every corner and that the kids were going to be sent to the Gulag Archipelago’.”³⁸¹ The “Friendship Tour,” however, changed these misconceptions, so that Winter was able to plan two more trips to Romania for almost 50 children over the next twelve months. Additionally, the American coaches and children who made the trip to Romania learnt a great deal about the Romanian training system. They remarked that Romanian gymnasts were highly disciplined and their trainers were very serious about routines. American kids were also impressed by how in four days of training in Romania they learnt “what would have taken three years to learn ” in the US. And all this effective training was possible despite the fact that they were working in a Romanian “plain gym” without the impressive facilities they were used to back home. Mindy Wacks, a 13-year-old gymnast who participated in the “Friendship Tour,” observed that Romanian girls were “the nicest people that you would want to meet anywhere” and was amazed to notice that some of the 8-year-old Romanian gymnasts in training could easily have made the Olympic team, if they had been six years older. Wacks and her coaches left Romania with very good impressions about the quality of gymnastics training and the friendliness of Romanians.

³⁸¹ Gary Kriss, “A Rumanian ‘Friendship Tour’,” *New York Times*, 26 May 1985, WC10.

Romanian-American sports exchanges, whether they were generated at the top level or by private individuals, demonstrate the international recognition given the Romanian gymnastics system. At the same time, these athletic connections between Romania and the West forged relationships that made Romania better known abroad. Trips to Romania made by elementary school coaches disseminated more knowledge about Romanians and their new school of gymnastics than any official publicity campaign could have done. Upon his return to the US, Robert Winter, for instance, made a film about his trips to Romania and distributed it to interested schools and organizations. Knowledge about Romanian gymnastics could be found not only through what the Romanian officials published or what US newspapers reported, but also from coaches and little American gymnasts who trained in Romania alongside their new Romanian friends.

Romanian gymnastics embodied by Nadia Comăneci also inspired the first major American Olympic champion, Mary Lou Retton. On multiple occasions, the Olympic champion from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, credited Nadia for her beginnings in gymnastics.³⁸² Mary Lou Retton and her sister Shari were taking dance classes at a Fairmont, WV, studio, but thought that “they had gone as far as they could” with their acrobatic endeavors. When they watched Nadia’s performances at the Montreal Olympics, both sisters were inspired to tackle a different challenge – gymnastics. While Shari Retton chose to join West Virginia University’s gymnastics team to participate in the NCAA championships, Mary Lou Retton took a different route and joined the Houston gymnastics academy. Mary Lou Retton admitted that “Nadia was definitely my role model. I remember being just in awe of her and thinking ‘I want to be like Nadia’.”³⁸³

³⁸² Mary Lou Retton interviewing Nadia Comăneci on *Sports Legends: Nadia Comăneci*, VHS, produced in 1993; “Nadia’s Inspiration Turns Sisters into Gymnastics Whiz Kids,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 1982, B17.

³⁸³ Laurel Brubaker Calkins, “‘10’ Again,” *People*, 15 July 1996, 3.

Thus Nadia, and implicitly Romanian gymnastics, influenced Retton's career and her subsequent success on the world scene at the 1984 Olympics. As multiple reports in Romania and abroad pointed out, scores of young girls perceived Nadia as a role model and joined, for shorter or longer periods of time, gymnastics clubs while dreaming of Olympic medals.

Nadia as a global celebrity

Nadia was a global celebrity and the Olympics and sports writers were fascinated by the tiny Romanian gymnast. Right after Montreal, books about Nadia invaded bookstores to the delight of a public hungry of information, who thus managed to find out more about the "mysterious" Romanian girl "who stole the show" in Montreal. Titles such as *Nadia Comăneci, the Enchanting Story of Little Miss Perfect, Montreal '76, Nadia Comăneci's Olympics, Nadia Comăneci and the Golden Team*, or simply *Nadia* popularized the image of Nadia as an international celebrity as well as described the Romanian training system.³⁸⁴ Nadia's name became a constant in almost all Western newspaper articles published after 1976 that dealt with the development of gymnastics as an Olympic sport. To Romanian and Western audiences it became clear that Romania, as a country, and Nadia, as an individual, would be forever associated with elite gymnastics and the Olympics.

Contributing to this celebrity were also the numerous international awards Nadia was presented with after the Montreal Olympics. For instance, at the end of 1976, Nadia was named "Female Athlete of the Year" by the Associated Press, and she also received the BBC trophy for

³⁸⁴ See, among others, Temple, *Nadia Comăneci. The Enchanting Story of Little Miss Perfect* (London: Everest Books Ltd, 1977); Romeo Vilara, *Montreal '76, Olimpiada Nadiei Comăneci* (București: Editura Sport Turism, 1977); Ioan Chirilă, *Nadia* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977); Thomas Brown, *Nadia Comăneci* (Mankato, Minn: Creative Education Children's Press, 1977); Gloria D. Miklowitz, *The Gold-Medal Olympic Gymnast! Nadia Comăneci* (New York: Tempo Books, 1977). Westerners' infatuation with Nadia continues to this day. One of the most recent books is a short biography published in 2007 by a sports journalist in Athens, Ohio. See David Bruce, *Nadia Comăneci. Perfect 10* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2007).

the "World's Best Athlete."³⁸⁵ Also, all major press agencies in the world designated Nadia as the "Female Athlete of the 1976 Year."³⁸⁶ These awards kept Nadia and implicitly Romanian gymnastics in the news long after the Montreal Olympics were over, and over the years reminded world audiences about the Romanian successes of 1976. Thus in 1993, Nadia Comăneci was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame, which represents an organization that celebrates "the athletic and artistic excellence" of the most accomplished gymnasts throughout the world.³⁸⁷ Nadia's teammate at Montreal, Teodora Ungureanu, was also inducted in 2001, in recognition of her performances at the Montreal Olympiad and other international competitions. Upon her official retirement from gymnastics in 1984, Nadia received the highest award from the International Olympic Committee, followed by a second "Olympic order" in 2004 for her charity work for the Special Olympics. Finally, in 2001 Comăneci received the title of Sportswoman of the Century at the World Sports Awards ceremony, and her name continues to be associated with perfection in gymnastics.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s a truly global audience watched and was hungry for any type of information about Nadia Comăneci and the Romanian school of gymnastics. The Romanian gymnast became a global sports star, but, at the same time, she became extremely important for the Romanian socialist state. Various Romanian state and non-state actors tried to use the gymnastics results obtained at Montreal to promote Romania's image as a successful socialist state both internally and abroad. Romanians thus tried to claim Nadia as the true, authentic product of a successful sports system.

³⁸⁵ Frank Taylor, "Nadia Comăneci a primit așară trofeul BBC decernat celui mai bun sportiv al lumii în 1976," *Sportul*, 8429, 16 December 1976, 1; "Morning Briefing -- Names in the News," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 January 1977, E 16A.

³⁸⁶ Ioan Chirilă, ed., *Nadia. Fotoalbum* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977), 1.

³⁸⁷ See the website of International Gymnastics Hall of Fame available at <http://www.ighof.com/index.html> (accessed on 14 April 2009).

The Romanian state steps in

Romanian gymnastics and Nadia Comăneci as "national assets"

Romanians realized very soon that they could easily cash in on the gymnastics team's accomplishments at Montreal. In a way, the Romanian state wanted to shape what happened in Montreal and to control the image that it could project about the Romanian sports system. This was evident from the first days of the Games. After the first three perfect scores earned by Nadia, the Romanian delegation at the Olympics arranged press conferences so that the media and the public could find out more about the Romanian athlete and her abilities. Nadia was free to answer journalists' questions, even without the help of an interpreter if the questions were in French, and her coach and the leader of the Romanian delegation at the games also answered questions. The press did not seem to find out very much about the 14-year-old whose main hobby was practicing gymnastics, which left little time for anything else. What was telling about the state's intentions was the ambiance provided by the "proud Romanian officials" so that journalists could be comfortable at the press conferences. Reporters received "silk tablecloths" and "Romanian cognac (Zarea, 84 proof)," which many found "superb, and went back for seconds."³⁸⁸ As discussed earlier, the gifts to reporters were a Romanian tradition that Romanian Olympic delegations had started in the 1950s. New, however, were the other national symbols that decorated the rooms for press conferences. Thus, Nadia found herself sitting "beneath a portrait of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Romanian president," in a room decorated with the Romanian and the Communist Party flags and Romanian carpets and tapestries. The message was very clear: Nadia and the gymnastics style she displayed were Romanian and the entire world needed

³⁸⁸ Bill Shirley, "Nadia Homesick. It's All Work, No Fun," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1976, F 1, 8.

to see it. Even when a reporter suggested that Nadia's style borrowed from Olga Korbut's "showmanship on the bars and beam," Bela Karolyi, the Romanian coach, replied in haste that, as a rule, showmanship as a concept did not apply to Nadia, and that Nadia's style "is the Romanian style. We are not copying anybody."³⁸⁹ Karolyi and the other officials were eager to show that the performances came from a carefully designed sport system that originated in Romania and could prove to be the model for the future development of gymnastics.

The state nationalist agenda was also visible when the women's team returned home after the Olympics. On July 27, at 3:24PM, the team was welcomed at the Bucharest airport by a large cohort of reporters and photographers ready to record the first words and moves of the Montreal heroines, so the very next day all major newspapers in Romania wrote at length about the arrival of the gymnasts. Everybody was excited to see the little girls who made Romania a gymnastics powerhouse in the world. Amidst hundreds of flowers, banners, flags, people, reporters and curious fans, officials from the National Council for Physical Education and Sports (CNEFS) and the Ministry of Education delivered their official speeches welcoming home the gymnasts who "brought glory to the fatherland."³⁹⁰ The day after the ceremonies in Bucharest, the team traveled home to Onești, where local officials organized a huge welcoming party, so that ten thousand people celebrated the little girls, their families and the coaches. Even the Western press reported how Nadia's hometown displayed photographs of Nadia in "countless shop windows," and how "the little town at the foot of the Carpathian mountains, Onești, has flipped over its 14-year-old heroine, gymnast Nadia Comăneci."³⁹¹ The ceremonies tried to

³⁸⁹ Ibid., F 8.

³⁹⁰ Dimitriu, *Nadia Comăneci*, 244-248.

³⁹¹ "Olympic Notebook," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1976, C5.

claim Nadia at the local and national level, and their organizers contributed overall to the general efforts of the state to nationalize Nadia's image, making her a true Romanian heroine.³⁹²

The peak of the state's appropriation of Nadia took place in August 1976. At the Palace of Sports and Culture in Bucharest, the major Romanian sporting hall, party officials organized a ceremony to decorate all the athletes, coaches and sports officials who brought home Olympic medals. The festivities included a presidential speech and an award ceremony where athletes received various state and party distinctions. The event ended with an athletic exhibit of the Romanian athletes who had become Olympic champions in Montreal. The highlight of the entire ceremony was the appearance of Nadia Comăneci and her teammate Teodora Ungureanu to receive their awards and perform for the public. As sport commentator Ioan Chirila wrote for the *Sportul* newspaper: "The spectators, still breathless, wanted to convince themselves that Nadia Comăneci and Teodora Ungureanu were real and not just dream images transmitted via satellite" from the Montreal Olympics. Nicolae Ceaușescu, the president of Romania, presented Nadia with the most prestigious title of the country: the Hero of Socialist Labor. At 14 years old, Nadia became the youngest person to hold this title. Before, the only women who had received this award were party activists or "heroine mothers" for the "labor" of bearing more than 10 children for the state, as promoted by Ceaușescu's pro-natalist policies.³⁹³ While praising Nadia and her teammates' accomplishments at the Olympics, President Ceaușescu said:

First of all, I want to warmly congratulate Nadia Comăneci. She demonstrated

³⁹² Interestingly enough, the published pictures from the welcoming ceremonies in Onești seemed to show that huge portraits of Nadia replaced the usual portraits of Nicolae Ceaușescu, in an effort to show the local patriotism of the citizens of Onești, who were very proud of one of their own. See Dimitriu, *Nadia Comăneci*, 253 and in the photo-album *Nadia Comăneci* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977).

³⁹³ Gail Kligman, "The Politics of Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania: A Case Study in Political Culture," *East European Politics and Societies*, 6 (1992): 377. For a detailed introduction to the politics of reproduction in Romania see Gail Kligman, *the Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

wonderfully the high quality of Romanian gymnastics, as well as the fact that a free Romanian young person, in charge of her own destiny, living in a socialist country, can aspire to the top level in sports and in every professional activity [...] Aside from exhibiting the highest artistic and acrobatic technique, Nadia and the entire Romanian team showed confidence, determination, courage, which are essential qualities of all gymnasts, as well as of all Romanian youth.³⁹⁴

Although a party propaganda message, Ceaușescu's speech emphasized that the accomplishments of Romanian women gymnasts were a model for everyone. Nadia's successes were seen as emblematic of what the socialist regime could produce and thus represented an ideal of personal and social growth for all Romanians. Nadia and her teammates officially became national heroines, their status legitimized at the highest level by the leaders of the country. Following the award ceremony, the gymnasts from Montreal dressed in folk costumes and performed various gymnastics routines, to the delight of Party officials and the public present in the largest indoor sports arena in the Romanian capital. The gymnasts' bodies, in a sense, became nationalized and displayed for internal consumption.

The awards made national heroines and heroes from the Montreal gymnasts and their coaches.³⁹⁵ The decorations were not only symbols of high regard and status in the socialist state, but also carried certain benefits. These awards were accompanied by prizes in money, tax deductions and free transportation anywhere in the country, apartments in the city, or hunting privileges, among other things.³⁹⁶ But together with the benefits came obligations, too.

For a period of time, Nadia was expected to receive foreign delegations that visited

³⁹⁴ “Cuvântarea tovarășului Nicolae Ceaușescu,” *Sport*, 8346, 20 August 1976, 1.

³⁹⁵ Besides the members of the Romanian national gymnastics team and their coaches, also receiving distinctions were the medical doctors of the team, high officials from CNEFS and RGF, and other athletes who brought home medals from Montreal. See Nicolae Ceaușescu, “Decret prezidențial privind conferirea de distincții ale Republicii Socialiste România unor sportivi, antrenori și activiști din domeniul educației fizice și sportului,” *Sportul*, 8346, 20 August 1976, 1-2.

³⁹⁶ Karolyi and Richardson, *Fără teamă*, 76.

Romania. Her training in Onești was frequently interrupted by delegations coming to see the place that had created the global athletic star. Both coach Bela Karolyi and Nadia Comăneci described their despair and resentment at the price they had to pay for their fame: "Almost every five minutes, the door of my gym hall would open with a new delegation from this or that country," Bela Karolyi writes. "They were accompanied by high officials from the government and the RGF, and we had to stop our training, to align the girls and to introduce them to every delegation." Bela Karolyi, known for his short temper, soon complained, "I thought I was going crazy. Visitors, reporters, TV crews were pouring in non-stop." The little girls and their families, who became famous overnight, were forced to participate in various events, a situation that disturbed their usual routines of training and that would soon have consequences on their preparedness for other international competitions. Comăneci disliked her new status and felt trapped by the attention that surrounded her: "I was considered a national treasure because I made my government's rule and way of life look good, and state officials were determined to protect that at all costs."³⁹⁷

Evidence of the intrusion into gymnasts' daily lives were the numerous photographs taken immediately after 1976, collected and later distributed to a public eager to know more and more about the gymnastics stars. A 168-page photo-album published in 1977 under the title *Nadia Comăneci* gathered together pictures taken up to, during and after the Montreal Olympics.³⁹⁸ The pictures, taken by the Romanian press agency, Agerpress, and four other sports reporters, encapsulated Nadia's trajectory starting with her first international successes at the European Championships in Skein, Norway in 1975. While the album focuses on Nadia, there are other pictures that show Nadia's family, coaches, teammates and also industrial snapshots of the small

³⁹⁷ Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, 64.

³⁹⁸ Chirilă, ed., *Nadia. Fotoalbum*.

town of Onești. The majority of the pictures in the album represent Nadia during competitions, with Nadia performing the acrobatic moves that delighted audiences. Other photographs were taken during training sessions at the Onești School of Gymnastics. In some cases, the pictures were staged, with gymnasts awkwardly smiling at the camera while sitting on a balance beam. Also staged were the pictures with gymnasts in the classrooms and on the outside school grounds. With these types of photographs, the album editors wanted to portray the gymnasts as real people, ordinary schoolgirls engaged in everyday activities, away from the spotlight of international competitions. Thus, the editors tried to satisfy the public's curiosity about the private side of Nadia and her teammates: to show how she spent her free time and what her school was like. In the same way, the photos taken at Nadia's home were an attempt to "domesticate" the greatest gymnast of all time and to place her in a setting that looked familiar to Romanian readers. Staged photos showed Nadia on the living room sofa with her many stuffed animals and dolls, playing with Teodora Ungureanu, talking to her coaches, showing her collection of stamps or her many trophies and medals. For these photographs Nadia was made to wear different outfits. She appears in a warm-up sports suit, or in her official Olympic costume, as well as in a folk costume. Despite the attempts to show Nadia in a regular apartment that most readers would be familiar with, the outfits, medals and other athletic awards that Nadia displayed set her apart from ordinary Romanians. She was not an ordinary little girl after all.

Winning Olympic gold medals was not the end of Nadia's "patriotic duties." Officials at the Romanian Gymnastics Federation organized exhibition tours, banking on the Olympic reputation of Romanian gymnasts. Officially, these tours were marketed as a way to show the training skills of the Olympic gymnasts to different audiences in diverse countries such as the US, Greece, France, or Japan. For instance, in October 1976, the Romanian team traveled to

France and performed in two small cities on the French Riviera, while the *Sportul* newspaper dubbed the trip as "excellent propaganda for Romanian women's gymnastics."³⁹⁹ At the same time, though, these tours abroad brought in hard currency, since the shows were sold out and all the expenses of the Romanian delegation were paid for by the hosts. With large sports arenas filled up with a public willing to pay between \$6-\$10 per ticket (almost 5 times higher for the equivalent in 2008, taking into account the inflation rate⁴⁰⁰), the profit for exhibition organizers and, implicitly the Romania Federation of Gymnastics, was a sure thing.⁴⁰¹ After all, it was revenue derived from exploiting Nadia's image and her skills. Sometimes, though, the announced tours were cancelled at the last minute, without any explanation. In two instances, in March 1977 and later in December 1978, the Romanians were a no-show for their planned exhibition tours in the US.⁴⁰² In 1978 Frank Bare, the executive director of the US Gymnastics Federation commented that the Americans were "shocked at this rude and inexplicable action," and planned to take any available action against the Romanian Federation.⁴⁰³ There seem to have been no consequences, however, and the American hosts of the 1979 World Championships at Fort Worth did not seem to hold grudges either.

The extent of state intrusion into the lives of gymnasts and their coaches became even more evident during the European Championships held in Prague in 1977. This time the

³⁹⁹ "Concursurile demonstrative din Franța, excelentă propagandă pentru gimnastica feminină din țara noastră," *Sportul*, 8394, 28 October 1976, 1, 4.

⁴⁰⁰ According to Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, *Annual Inflation Rates in the United States, 1775-2008, and United Kingdom, 1265-2007*, Measuring Worth, 2009. URL <http://www.measuringworth.com/inflation/> (accessed 10 April 2009).

⁴⁰¹ Loretta Kuklinski Huerta, "Fifty-Four Hours," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1978, H20.

⁴⁰² "The Newswire," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 1977, E4; "The Newswire," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 1977, D4; "Nadia's Tour Canceled," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1978, A1. Romanians' no-show at the US exhibition tours coincided with Nadia's problems with weight gain due to the onset of puberty.

⁴⁰³ "The Newswire," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 November 1978, E4.

intervention came from the highest person in the state, the president Nicolae Ceaușescu himself. But what happened? After a day of competitions, Nadia Comăneci was already the all-around European champion when judging controversies erupted during finals. The European Championships were broadcast live for the Romanian public and, at a moment when Nadia Comăneci had won the gold medal for the vault event, her performance was downgraded twice on the protest of the Soviet delegation. The Soviet complaint resulted in a reversed decision that placed the Soviet gymnast Nelli Kim in first place after a 20-minute deliberation made by the jury of appeal headed by the former Soviet champion Juri Titov, who was also the president of the International Gymnastics Federation. When the final decision was made public, the Romanian delegation of gymnasts was ordered to walk out of the competition. As both Nadia Comăneci and Bela Karolyi remember, the decision came straight from Bucharest, from Nicolae Ceaușescu who was watching the athletic competition live on TV. Karolyi noted that the president had made the decision because he needed "to save the Romanian team from the biggest injustice ever seen in the world of gymnastics."⁴⁰⁴ Nadia also noted that the withdrawal resulted from the lack of fair play at an international competition and the desire of Romanian officials to avoid "any further insult" to the national team.⁴⁰⁵

The Romanian sports newspapers commented at length on the incident. For instance, *Sport* magazine noted that the Romanian delegation withdrew from the European Championships because of the "numerous injustices and behind-the-scenes maneuvering" meant to stop Nadia Comăneci and Teodora Ungureanu from their brave momentum towards the gold medals."⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ Karolyi and Richardson, *Fără teamă*, 85.

⁴⁰⁵ Comăneci and Buxton Smither, *Nadia*, 61.

⁴⁰⁶ "Un nou și strălucit success al sportului românesc," *Sport*, 5, May 1977, 10.

Despite errors in judging the routines, both coach Karolyi and gymnast Comănesci regretted the decision to walk away from the competition, considering it an unnecessary political interference in a sport where everyone agreed that subjective judging was part of the game. However, the Romanian sport commentators focused on the "scandalous manner of judging the Romanians at the European Championships," and wholeheartedly approved the walkout: "It was a dignified decision, entirely approved by Romanian public opinion, who always will condemn injustice on the sport fields, the behind-the-scenes maneuvers, and also the attempts against fair-play and athletic honor."⁴⁰⁷ The *Los Angeles Times* also reported the Prague incident, making it sound more like a turf war between the Soviets and the Romanians.⁴⁰⁸

The direct intervention of the Romanian state in an international competition showed the extent to which sport mattered for the socialist regime. Thus, women gymnasts were Romanian heroes and their reputation needed to be safeguarded and their performances properly appreciated. The walkout at the 1977 Prague Championships also signified that the battle for supremacy in European gymnastics was now between the Romanians and the Soviets. It was clear at this point that the Romanians were threatening the previous Soviet monopoly over women's elite gymnastics. The walkout also fit into the larger foreign policy of Ceaușescu's regime to defy Moscow, in an attempt to provide Romania with a visible identity set apart from the other communist bloc countries, a sort of "socialist Romanianism," as scholar Vladimir Tismaneanu called it.⁴⁰⁹ After all, the walkout represented an independent move, similar to the

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ "Romanians Pull Out of Czech Gym Meet," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 1977, E10.

⁴⁰⁹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 221. For a look at Ceaușescu's directions in foreign policy see, among others, Thomas Kunze, *Nicolae Ceaușescu. O biografie* (București: Editura Vremea, 2002); Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Cultul lui Ceaușescu* (București: Editura Polirom, 2003); Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule* (București: Civic Academy Foundation, 1998).

Romanians' 1984 defiance of the Soviet boycott of the Los Angeles Games, when Romania was the only Eastern European communist country to participate in the Olympics.⁴¹⁰ The Romanian participation at the 1984 Games should be seen in a larger context however. Ceaușescu's defiance of Moscow was strongly supported by the Americans. To secure Romania's participation, American diplomats enticed Ceaușescu with trade incentives, including the renewal of the Most Favored Nation status and the payment of two thirds of the transportation costs of bringing the Romanian Olympic team to Los Angeles.⁴¹¹ Romania's participation at the 1984 Games was illustrative of Reagan's policy of "differentiation," that divided the Communist world into two camps: "good and bad communists." Because Romania took a different foreign policy position than Moscow, Ceaușescu was now regarded as a "good Communist."⁴¹²

State efforts to control the Romanian national team went even further. In 1978 the RGF officials decided to move the main members of the team to Bucharest, away from their coaches, Martha and Bela Karolyi, in an attempt to reduce the friction between Nadia and her coaches. Some commented that this friction was a result of Karolyi's drastic training regimen and Nadia's growing independence.⁴¹³ Officially, though, the move to Bucharest was motivated by the desire to make Bela Karolyi start a new school of gymnastics at Deva, a center that would surpass Onești's facilities and that would become the official Olympic Center for training women gymnasts. With this move, some officials from the RGF who did not like Bela Karolyi's

⁴¹⁰ On the Romanian decision to participate at the 1984 LA Games see Gabanyi, *Cultul lui Ceaușescu*, 212-214.

⁴¹¹ Harold E. Wilson, Jr., "The Golden Opportunity: Romania's Political Manipulation of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 3 (1994), 90.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴¹³ See Karolyi and Richardson, *Fără teamă*, 85-89; Comăneci and Buxton Smither, *Nadia*, 95-96; Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, 64-65.

personality, made sure that Karolyi was kept away from the spotlight. The move also made sure that sports officials in Bucharest had easy access to Nadia and some of her teammates whenever they needed to be present at official party receptions and meetings with foreign dignitaries. For Nadia, the move to Bucharest also meant a change to a more relaxed atmosphere, away from the strict dieting and training routines imposed previously by Karolyi in Onești and now at Deva. However, soon after, Nadia and some of her teammates lost their competitive edge. The RGF officials realized that gold medals at the next international competitions would be hard to attain, especially at a time when the highest party officials were pushing for more. Finally, Nadia was allowed to return to train with Karolyi at the new school of gymnastics at Deva. Shortly thereafter, she joined the national team for the World Championships held in 1978 in Strasbourg, France. Although not in top form (she collected only two individual medals), Nadia contributed to the team silver medal effort. After the Bucharest intermezzo, Nadia regained her position as a leader of the national team, contributing new medals for the Romanians at the 1979 Fort Worth World Championships and later at the 1980 Moscow Olympiad.

Nadia Comăneci outside of the state's control

Nadia's retirement from gymnastics in 1984 represented yet another occasion to appropriate her for national purposes and to glorify her as a national symbol. The farewell ceremony for Nadia was a celebration of her successes as a gymnast who represented Romania at international competitions in the 1970s and early 1980s. Her retirement party was meant to fix Nadia's place in the pantheon of national heroes, "dignifying her achievements with a political stamp of approval," as the *Los Angeles Times* noted in July 1984.⁴¹⁴ At the same time, however,

⁴¹⁴ Richard Hoffer, "Olga and Nadia. These Gymnasts Took What Was Considered a Minor Sport and Transformed It Into a Nielsen Bonanza," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1984, 31.

the ceremony organized by the RGF showed that Nadia transcended the place assigned to her by the state. Nadia was not only a Romanian hero. The presence of Juan Antonio Samaranch, the president of the International Olympic Committee, proved it. Samaranch arrived in Bucharest in order to present Nadia with the highest Olympic award for her "important contribution to the Olympic movement."⁴¹⁵ Interviewed by the Romanian press about Nadia's legacy in gymnastics, Samaranch stressed that, "Nadia represented a unique case in the world of gymnastics. Romania in fact created modern gymnastics through Nadia and the Romanian national team."⁴¹⁶ This represented a huge recognition of Nadia's achievements and of the Romanian School of Gymnastics contributions to the development of elite gymnastics. At the same time, this statement symbolized that Nadia's image transcended national boundaries. Nadia had become a global celebrity, and her legacy was now out of the Romanian state's control.

The ineffectiveness of the Romanian state to monopolize Nadia's image was also proved by certain video materials distributed in the West. First, there was a TV segment broadcast by CBS. A Romanian-American production team put together the documentary "Nadia -- From Romania with Love," and aired it during the 1976 Thanksgiving week holiday. The critics did not receive it enthusiastically, because "it lacked substance at its core." There were no chats with Nadia, or if she or her coach talked, there was no translation available. The footage of Nadia at diverse competitions was "static and unimaginative," and critics wondered whether this approach was somehow imposed by the Romanian side of the production crew.⁴¹⁷ It turned out that indeed the Romanian government's intention with this documentary was to use Nadia as "a 'peg' for

⁴¹⁵ Constantin Macovei, "O mare campioană se retrage din arenă. Nadia Comăneci la ultima ei apariție sportivă," *Sportul*, 10697, 7 May 1984, 1.

⁴¹⁶ Marius Popescu, "România a creat, de fapt, gimnastica modernă. Interviu cu Juan Antonio Samaranch, Președintele Comitetului Internațional Olimpic," *Sportul*, 10697, 7 May 1984, 4.

⁴¹⁷ Lee Margulies, "'Nadia' Fails to Get Off Ground," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1976, E14.

carrying propaganda on Romanian tourism and industrial progress."⁴¹⁸ If, apparently, the Romanian state succeeded in controlling Nadia's image in this documentary, the American audiences apparently did not buy into the Romanian propaganda. American TV viewers were not "enchanted" by this "Nadia."⁴¹⁹

What caught the attention of the public, however, was the defection to the US of a top Romanian producer, Dumitru Udrescu, then the head of the Romanian Television film and documentary division, who was responsible for the "Nadia" special.⁴²⁰ This was something else that the Romanian state could not control. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Udrescu explained his decision to defect because of the constant "years of pressure to make his professional work conform to the ideological needs of the Romanian government."⁴²¹ Udrescu was the first of a series of Romanians to defect to the West who were directly linked to Nadia. After Udrescu's defection in 1976, Nadia's coaches and choreographer left Romania for the US in March 1981.⁴²² And it all culminated with Nadia's own defection in November 1989. All those who defected explained that the Romanian state's intense interference in and surveillance of their professional work, and the government's obsessive concern with Romanian prestige abroad, provided them with strong reasons to leave Romanian and start a new life in the US.

The Romanian state could not control video productions from abroad. This was the case

⁴¹⁸ Dumitru Udrescu cited in Bruce Keppel, "Top Romanian TV Figure Defects to US. Coauthor of Nadia Comăneci Special Cites Politics for Move," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 1976, 26.

⁴¹⁹ Lee Margulies, "'Nadia' Fails to Get Off Ground," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1976, E14.

⁴²⁰ Udrescu was soon granted political asylum in the US. See Bruce Keppel, "Asylum OK'd for TV Figure," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 1977, B22.

⁴²¹ Dumitru Udrescu cited in Keppel, "Top Romanian TV Figure," 26.

⁴²² See among others, "Nadia's Trainer Defects to the US. Bela Karoly and Two Others Leave Romanian Team in N.Y.," *Los Angeles Times* 8 April 1981, E12; Penny Spar, "Hopes to Bring Family from Romania. Nadia Comăneci's Coach, in US, Seeks another Star," 13 December 1981, 3; Karolyi and Richardson, *Fără teamă*, 130-140.

with the 1984 feature film entitled "Nadia."⁴²³ Its content was largely based on Nadia's memoir published in 1981 by Graham Buxton Smither in the UK.⁴²⁴ The movie, an entirely American production, was released as part of a general campaign to popularize the Los Angeles Olympic Games.⁴²⁵ It focused on Nadia's ascension from a preschooler to a young woman, on her ambition to succeed and her struggles after gaining world fame at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. At the same time, the movie depicted the friction between Nadia's coach, Bela Karolyi, and the president of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation, Grigore Vieru.⁴²⁶ The movie, produced without any input from Romania, showed that Nadia's image had taken on a life of its own, away from the controlling tendencies of the Romanian state.

Finally, Nadia's presence at the Los Angeles Olympiad, after her retirement from official gymnastics competitions, was yet another endorsement of her position as a global sport celebrity. Nadia was considered as "truly one of the most famous names in all sport," when she was invited to help as a consultant to the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) for the gymnastics competition.⁴²⁷ Her presence in California in the summer of 1984 was extensively reported in the local media, which described the former 14-year wunderkind of Montreal as "the grand dame of international gymnastics."⁴²⁸ Nadia had transcended the initial limits imposed by

⁴²³ *Nadia*, Tribune Entertainment Company, 1984.

⁴²⁴ Comănesci and Buxton Smither, *Nadia*.

⁴²⁵ Mary Lou Hopkins, "Orange County on View: Olympic Gymnasts Turn Out for 'Nadia' Premiere Benefit," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 July 1984, C1, 2, 7.

⁴²⁶ The frictions between Karolyi and Vieru were a major theme of Bela Karolyi's autobiography published in 1995 in Romania and in 1996 in the US. See Karolyi and Richardson, *Fără teamă*.

⁴²⁷ Kenneth Reich, "Romanian Gymnast L.A. Guest: Nadia Comănesci, Legend of '76, Coming to Games," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1984, A1, 25.

⁴²⁸ Patt Morrison, "Nadia the Tourist Meets Up with a Dolphin, a President and Superman," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 1984, H 28.

the Romanian state. Besides her recognition by international sports and media organizations, Nadia became a "one-name household word," who changed television ratings in the US and influenced young parents around the world to name their infant daughters "Nadia." Even the longest-lasting American soap opera "The Young and the Restless" became associated with Nadia. Its theme song became known as "Nadia's theme" after the Romanian gymnast used it for her floor performance in Montreal, and vinyl records were sold in the US under the new title.⁴²⁹ Generally speaking, up to this date, Westerners know more about Nadia than where Romania could be found on the map. Nadia's fame definitely transcended anything that Romanian officials in charge of elite sports could ever have imagined.

Conclusion

While the Romanian state had a precise nationalist agenda with its development of the Romanian School of Gymnastics, Nadia's celebrity complicated its aims. In fact, Nadia became a global celebrity, and her image superceded state control. Moreover, Nadia herself together with some Romanian professionals associated with her defected to the West. She transcended the rigid boundaries imposed by a nationalist state and, in an increasingly global world, her image became a larger-than-life enterprise that Romanian state officials could neither manipulate nor control. But what did the sports officials do once Nadia retired from gymnastics and could no longer bring in more Olympic medals? How did they manage to fill the void of her absence from the national team? Would Romanian gymnastics find itself in a crisis after being, literally, on top of the elite sports world? The next chapter addresses these questions.

⁴²⁹ See Jon-Michael Reed, "The Soaps," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 September 1982, J14. Also, the information about the vinyl records was provided by Naoko Shibusawa, Associate Professor of American History at Brown University in an informal conversation we had at the April 2005 "Gender across Borders" conference.

Chapter 4: Romanian Women's Gymnastics and Global Competition after Nadia

The Rotterdam triumph . . . got by the Romanians, is an unprecedented exploit in the history of world championships, and gives one more proof of the leading position securely taken by the Romanian gymnastics school. It did not fall into oblivion or decline after superchamp Nadia Comaneci's withdrawal. On the contrary, it has found new sources and solutions to carry the torch still further onto brighter peaks.

Ovidiu Ioanițoiaia, 1987⁴³⁰

As sports commentator Ovidiu Ioanițoiaia remarked after the 1987 World Gymnastics Championships in Rotterdam, Netherlands, the famed Romanian school of gymnastics did not lapse into decline and decay after the heyday of its superstar Nadia Comăneeci. Rather, the Romanian system went on to produce a new world-class of champions during the 1980s, never falling on difficult times, as some experts predicted. Nadia's retirement from competition and Bela Karolyi's defection to the United States in 1981 did not, in fact, force Romania to scramble to build a new women's gymnastics team. During all the European championships, World championships, and the Olympic Games throughout the decade, Romanian women won even more medals and secured more first places than they had in the 1970s; the women's gymnasts of the 1980s were a new – and even better – generation of champions and emblems of Romanian socialist success. Nadia's glory at Montreal proved to be the *beginning* of global gymnastics glory for Romania, not the high-water mark of the Romanian system.

What specific factors made it possible for the Romanian state to sustain its success in promoting elite women's gymnastics? Constantin Macovei, one of the leading Romanian gymnastics commentators of the 1970s and 1980s, suggested that Romanian coaches and

⁴³⁰ Ovidiu Ioanițoiaia, "The New Stars of World Gymnastics," *Romania Today*, February 1988, 40. *Romania Today* was a monthly English-language publication produced by the Romanian government and distributed abroad. I warmly thank Prof. Keith Hitchins for sharing copies of these magazines with me.

officials from the RGF had two overlapping goals in the sport of elite gymnastics. On the one hand, they were constantly preoccupied with ways of ensuring veteran gymnasts' "everyday successes" at international competitions. At the same time, sports officials labored to build the next crop of champions: the "training . . . of new talented sportswomen, apt to enter big competitions at any time."⁴³¹ Taking care of both the present and the future of elite gymnastics proved to be a successful strategy for both the short- and long-term, ensuring Romanians' top rankings in the elite women's gymnastics competitions of the 1980s.

However, as this chapter argues, the Romanian state still viewed the progression of women's gymnastics in the 1980s through the prism of Nadia's earlier achievements. After an explosive international success during the 1970s, journalists and party officials wanted to sustain Nadia's glory in the pages of the world's newspapers for as long as they could. While Nadia surely inspired new athletes to pursue the sport of gymnastics, the press continued to invoke Nadia's memory whenever they covered the new Romanian women's gymnastics stars of the 1980s. However, in the second half of the 1980s, these memories receded somewhat and the press's references to Nadia noticeably declined, finally offering more space for discussions of the accomplishments of the new generation of gymnasts. Moreover, in a larger context, the workings of the Romanian school of gymnastics and its exceptional results in the 1980s allowed Romania to achieve lasting super-power status in the Cold War arena of sports. This forced the United States and the Soviet Union to recognize that, in the ongoing context of the Cold War, the sports arena featured more than merely two superpowers.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the last years of Nadia's competitive career and the workings of the Romanian school of gymnastics after her retirement. It provides details

⁴³¹ Constantin Macovei, "Romanian Gymnasts Dominated the European Championships," *Romania Today*, August 1983, 58.

about the training regimen, the selection process, and the strategies employed by both the Onești and Deva Schools of gymnastics for continuing women's successes in global competitions. The chapter also follows changes in Romanian press coverage of elite gymnastics both in Romania and around the world through the mid-1980s. Finally, the chapter uncovers new insights about the Romanian gymnastics stars of the 1980s, analyzing their interviews with the press and articles written about individual gymnasts. This analysis illuminates how women gymnasts perceived their own performances as opposed to the meanings assigned to them by the press – and the socialist state. Moreover, it discusses the obvious (and not-so-obvious) reasons why young girls and their coaches spent seemingly endless hours in training. As we will see, they were driven by more than the glory of winning precious Olympic gold.

Romanian gymnastics during the 1980s

The years 1979-1981 were the last two years of Nadia Comăneci's participation at major competitions. Also, this short period of time destabilized the media image of the "perfect" Nadia, and thus should have made it possible for other members of the national team to become more visible in the press. However, throughout the first half of the 1980s, images of Nadia loomed large over all reports about gymnastics in the press.

The end of Nadia's competitive career

Nadia's last appearances in international events were less than perfect when compared to her headline-stealing performances of 1976. Nevertheless, Nadia's huge contributions to team victories were habitually praised. Such was the case when Nadia injured herself during the World Championships at Fort Worth, Texas, in 1979: she developed an infection in her left wrist and, after having a minor surgery, she was unable to perform in the team competition, despite

being the leader of the team -- both in age and prestige. However, at a key moment, when one of her teammates fell from the balance beam, she was called on to perform despite her injury, because her performance meant winning the team gold for the first time against the Soviet Union. Coach Bela Karolyi recalled telling Nadia:

Nadia, did you ever think that you had any obligations to your team members? I have to tell you that you do have obligations, 'cause all of these little guys carried all the hard parts of your victories. These are the ones who built your scores for so many years. These are the ones who have never been recognized for that. These are the silent soldiers who carried the hard part of your glory... Did you ever think that you owed me or Marta anything for what has happened over the years? If you truly feel that for all our work and consideration you owe us something, then walk up right now and do a beautiful thing...do your beam routine.⁴³²

Despite the pain in her arm, she stepped once again into her familiar role as national hero. Nadia performed a modified routine that did not put too much strain on her left wrist, and won the gold for the team. Long hours of practice and numerous repetitions of the same movements, the coach's authority and overcoming of pain and injury became the building blocs of success in gymnastics.⁴³³

The episode speaks to the almost-choreographed roles of various parties in these decisive moments in the recent history of the Romanian women's gymnastics team. The Romanian press, in their usual propagandistic manner, characterized the entire affair as proof that the best Romanian athlete displayed her familiar high-degree of self-sacrifice and patriotism, framed as a natural product of her socialist upbringing. In her memoir, for example, Nadia recollects that she

⁴³² Nadia Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 88-89; see also Bela Karolyi and Nancy Ann Richardson, *Fără teamă. Putere, pasiune, politică în gimnastică* (București: Editura Olimp, 1995), 109.

⁴³³ In an auto-ethnographic account about the experiences of six gymnasts, Natalie Barker-Ruchti points to how coaches and gymnasts follow a typical model of gymnastics that constitutes a form of social control involving tireless repetitions, long hours of practice, dealing with pain and injury and, above all, the coach's authority that makes gymnasts internalize high expectations of self-sacrifice. See Natalie Barker-Ruchti, "'They Must Be Working Hard': An (Auto-)Ethnographic Account of Women's Artistic Gymnastics," *Cultural Studies -- Critical Methodologies*, 8:3 (2008), 372-380.

would have supported her teammates "no matter what," and that it was not such a sacrifice as the Romanian press implied in 1979. She noted she would compete even when injured; she did not believe she "sacrificed her health." As far as her decision to answer "yes" to the coach's call, Nadia remained ambivalent, however. On the one hand, she wondered whether it was her "sense of team obligation" and the "desire to fulfill (the) coach's expectation" that made her perform while injured, or on the other hand she considered whether it was her decision to compete after all, since she always followed her coach's orders.⁴³⁴

As far as Bela Karolyi was concerned, he was ready to put Nadia into the competition because he desperately wanted the victory. Karolyi wanted to win at all costs, even if that meant relying on an injured gymnast and further risking Nadia's health.⁴³⁵ He deliberately used a "guilt-trip" tactic, reminding her of coaches' and teammates' hard work. It was their labor that directly contributed, in Karolyi's view, to Nadia's stardom. Karolyi reminded her of the other gymnasts who grew up silently in Nadia's shadow, and now deserved success. But to do so, they would need Nadia's help – injured or not. Karolyi's words underlined an important feature of Nadia's international success during the 1970s. Besides Nadia, who received nearly the entirety of the media spotlight, she had *teammates*, very talented and accomplished athletes, who never received the attention and rewards given to the "perfect Nadia." Building Nadia Comăneci into an international star was, in the end, a collective enterprise.

Commenting on the 1979 World Championships in Fort Worth, sportswriter Victor

⁴³⁴ Comăneci, *Letters*, 90.

⁴³⁵ Bela Karolyi's desire to win is well-known in gymnastics circles. Bela Karolyi noted, "I believe in playing with your heart, with every fiber of your body, fairly, squarely, by the rules -- but TO WIN. And I believe that any man's finest moment is when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the floor but VICTORIOUS." See Lorne Adrian (ed.), *The Most Important Thing I Know about the Spirit of Sport: 101 Inspiring Messages from Athletes, Coaches, Sportswriters, and Commentators* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1999), 116.

Nemțeanu, writing for *Romania Today*, explained how Nadia's teammates -- Emilia Eberle, Melita Ruhn, Dumitrița Turner, Rodica Dunca and Marilena Vlădărău -- proved to be a tightly-knit, close team that performed at their full potential and finished as world champions, despite the injury to their famed leader. Their performances, he wrote, "confirmed the remarkable standard of the Romanian school of gymnastics, its originality and value," even though they were the youngest team competing at Fort Worth.⁴³⁶ The results obtained by the women's gymnastics squad in this pre-Olympic year competition inspired sport journalists in Romania to rank 5 of these gymnasts among Romania's top 10 athletes of the year. They placed Nadia in first position; she was seconded by Emilia Eberle, Dumitrița Turner, who received the 4th position, Melitta Ruhn 5th, and Teodora Ungureanu 9th.⁴³⁷ Maybe these prestigious positions as the top Romanian athletes of the year were finally a much-needed and long-awaited recognition of their value, talent, and hard work, as Karolyi would have liked.

The 1980 Olympics in Moscow illustrated how Nadia's ability and prestige were not fixed, unchanging commodities. While no longer the gifted child of the 1976 Olympics, Nadia the young woman was still the vaunted star of the Romanian team. However, she was battling through yet another injury. She would not be perfect in Moscow. In the first days of the Olympics, Nadia lost the all-around title because of her supposed lack of concentration on the uneven bars. A combination of high-pitched and thundering sounds from Khachaturyan's *Dance of Swords*, which accompanied a Soviet gymnast's floor exercise, startled Nadia who reportedly lost her composure and fell from the bars – landing at a disappointing 9.50 final mark, which was

⁴³⁶ Victor Nemțeanu, "Fort Worth: Romanian Gymnasts Win Again," *Romania Today*, February 1980, 6

⁴³⁷ Mihai Matei, "The Best and Their Hopes," *Romania Today*, March 1980, 48.

insufficient to capture once again the all-around Olympic champion title.⁴³⁸ Some Romanian journalists blamed Nadia's evident shortcomings and errors on the behavior of the noisy Soviet fans, who, in a very rowdy fashion, boisterously encouraged the Soviet gymnast during her floor routine and broke Nadia's legendary iron-like concentration.⁴³⁹

Nadia, however, maintained that her Moscow struggles were her own fault. She commented later, "After my fall on the bars, I've heard that many of my fellow Romanians wanted to blame the Russians or the flashes of cameras for my mistake. Neither had anything to do with it. I just lost my concentration and fell."⁴⁴⁰ By assuming responsibility for her performance, Nadia shifted the focus from the nationalist undertones of her performances to her own agency and goals in gymnastics.

The Moscow Olympics also reflected other, more structural changes in the national Romanian team. Unlike the national team at Montreal, where all members came from the Onești school, the Moscow Olympic team consisted of gymnasts coming from all over the country. Thus, Melitta Ruhn came from Sibiu, Rodica Dunca from Baia Mare, Dumitrița Turner from Onești, and Emilia Eberle from Arad. Nadia represented the new Deva School of Gymnastics.⁴⁴¹ As a whole, their results in Moscow were quite impressive, despite the United States boycott of the games. Romanian gymnasts collected seven medals. The national team earned second place after the Soviets, and Nadia Comăneci received the silver for her individual all-around performance. She added two more gold medals during her balance beam and floor

⁴³⁸ Ioan Chirilă, "The Gold of Los Angeles," *Romania Today*, November 1980, 42.

⁴³⁹ Gheorghe Mitroi, "Olimpiada '80: Jurnal Sentimental," in *Almanahul Scânteia* (București: Casa Scânteii, 1981), 409.

⁴⁴⁰ Comăneci, *Letters*, 100.

⁴⁴¹ Chirilă, "The Gold of Los Angeles," 42.

apparatuses finals. Emilia Eberle won a silver medal on the uneven bars, while Melitta Ruhn collected two bronze medals for her vault and uneven bars. As the Olympic runner-up, the Romanian team, "earned the spectators' sympathy and the experts' respect." The Romanian team was able to accumulate 7 medals (2 gold, 3 silvers and 2 bronzes), thereby "harvesting in Moscow the results of their sustained, dedicated, patient work."⁴⁴²

However, as the women's gymnastics team returned to Romania after the Moscow Games, party officials had already concluded that Romanian athletes did not perform well and their results were labeled as "insufficient." For instance, journalist Gheorghe Mitroi noted for *Scânteia Almanah* in 1981 that the Romanian gymnastics team regressed from their previous performances at Montreal and Fort Worth. They lacked, in his view, "homogeneity," as well as "new and difficult elements in their routines, and committed numerous errors."⁴⁴³ In a book published in 1992, Ioan Drăgan -- one of the medical doctors who accompanied the Romanian teams at eight Olympiads from 1964 to 1992 -- confirmed what some publications argued immediately after Moscow Games. Drăgan pointed how the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, after analyzing the Romanian participation at the 1980 Olympics, regarded the Romanian performances as "unsatisfactory," largely because the other socialist countries, including the Soviets, Bulgarians, and East Germans took the lion's share of the medals.⁴⁴⁴

After Nadia's last international event -- the University Games held in Bucharest during the summer of 1981 -- Nadia's name continued to be featured regularly in the sports press. Sports officials and journalists wanted to underline the connection between the former

⁴⁴² Ovidiu Ioanițoaia, "Romanian Athletes at the 1980 Olympics," *Romania Today*, 51.

⁴⁴³ Gheorghe Mitroi, "Olimpiada '80: Jurnal Sentimental," *Almanahul Scânteia* (București: Casa Scântei, 1981), 409.

⁴⁴⁴ Ioan Drăgan, *Martor la 8 olimpiade de vara* (București: Editura Porus, 1992), 46.

gymnastics star and the new generation of gymnasts. In fact, in the early 1980s, the development of Romanian gymnastics was seen entirely through the prism of Nadia's past successes. When discussing the new gymnasts, the new core of the national team, the press actually "brought Nadia back from her retirement." In the summer of 1981, for example, RGF officials organized a photo opportunity at Bucharest Airport to welcome the new gymnasts then returning from the European Women's Championships in Madrid. Rodica Dunca and Cristina Grigora Grigoraş were greeted by Nadia Comăneci, while the reporters' flashes captured the precise moment when the two generations of gymnasts met at the airport.⁴⁴⁵ By staging and publishing these photographs, Federation officials wanted to underline the continuity as well as the bright new future of the Romanian School of gymnastics at a key historical moment: the end of Nadia's career. Officials also used Nadia's celebrity to popularize the new gymnasts who had replaced Nadia in international competitions, while at the same time reminding the audiences at home and abroad that the new gymnasts were following Nadia's tradition, "walking in her footsteps."⁴⁴⁶

Despite her retirement from competition, the Romanian press continued their reports about Nadia throughout the early 1980s. For instance, a brief notice published in the fall of 1982 in *Romania News*, a Romanian weekly aimed at foreign English-speaking audiences, informed readers that Nadia debuted as a referee at a Deva gymnastics meet featuring Romania and Great Britain. At the same time, the paper reported, Nadia was a third-year student at the Institute of Physical Education and Sport in Bucharest, studying to become a certified gymnastics coach.⁴⁴⁷

After finishing her studies, the press mentioned Nadia's first job as a gymnastics coach at the

⁴⁴⁵ Photograph depicting Nadia embracing Rodica Dunca and Cristina Grigoraş, in *Romania Today*, June 1981, 7.

⁴⁴⁶ Oftentimes the press would report about the new gymnastics hopefuls using constant references to Nadia. See for instance Lucian Oprea, "Nadia Comăneci's Followers," *Romanian News*, 27 July 1984, n.p.; and "Pe urmele Nadiei," *Sport*, 4, April 1986, 18.

⁴⁴⁷ "Sport," *Romanian News*, 14 October 1982, 16.

Onești Gymnastics School, where she was involved in the training of junior gymnasts.⁴⁴⁸ On national holidays, Nadia's photos and quotes appeared in the press. Sometimes, state officials required her to participate in national parades or she was frequently required by party leaders to read messages of peace that reinforced the Romanian state's foreign policy.⁴⁴⁹ The press seemed unable to let go of their former "darling" and informed readers periodically about Nadia's new life, post-Olympic glory. At the same time that these notices appeared in the press, Nadia herself resented the control over her life and her lack of freedom to travel, as she would later recount in her 2004 autobiography.⁴⁵⁰

The year 1981 represented an important landmark in the history of Romanian women's gymnastics. Nadia's last international appearance as a gymnast occurred in 1981 during the eleventh World Students Games, held in Bucharest during July. With five gold medals, Nadia nicely ended her career and solidified her enduring legacy with the Romanian sports press; the newspapers had a field day writing once again about how "Nadia Comăneci was the number one gymnast of this competition," and that "her talent could not be equaled by any other world gymnast."⁴⁵¹ The same year witnessed a change in the coaching staff of the Romanian national team, as a consequence of Bela and Martha Karolyi's defection to the West during an exhibition

⁴⁴⁸ Dimitrie Callimachi, "Panoramic sportiv: județul Bacău," *Sport*, March 1986, 3.

⁴⁴⁹ See the photo by Aurel Neagu displaying Nadia on top of a human pyramid during the 23 August 1984 parade which accompanied the article, "Fierbinte omagiu partidului, patriei, tovarășului Nicolae Ceaușescu," *Sport*, August 1984, 3. Nadia's picture depicting her reading the peace proclamation addressed to "worldwide athletes" was published together with the following article "Apelul de pace adresat sportivilor din întreaga lume de către sportivii români participanți la 'Ștafeta Păcii'," *Sport*, April 1982, 2.

⁴⁵⁰ Nadia mentioned that the Romanian government "kept her on a long leash." She noted that her lack of freedom dated as far back as 1981, "At that time, I didn't realize that a long leash was still a leash or that it might tighten until I felt strangled." Comăneci, *Letters*, 113. See also p. 115-130 for a detailed description of her lack of freedoms during the 1980s.

⁴⁵¹ Constantin Macovei, "Întreceri de ridicat nivel tehnic, bilanț românesc record la gimnastică," *Sport*, August 1981, 5.

tour in the US.⁴⁵² Adrian Goreac replaced the Karolyis as the head coach of the national team training at Deva, assisted by Maria Cosma and Octavian Belu, and later Adrian Stan. Despite these major changes, the Romanian School of Gymnastics produced more gymnastics stars and impressive international successes in the coming years.

*The "Romanian capital of elite gymnastics"*⁴⁵³

The Deva School no.7, transformed in 1978 by Bela Karolyi into a central location to train members of the gymnastics national team, continued to generate remarkable performers, keeping Romania at the top of international gymnastics during the 1980s. "Good results in gymnastics," *Romania Today* noted, "were not only a matter of circumstances or good luck." In fact, the secret of the school's success was the continuation -- and the refinement -- of Karolyi's philosophy and methods. For coaches who trained gymnasts, "the secret is persevering, intensive training, daily sessions to improve every detail so that the most difficult exercises are perfectly assimilated and can be performed with . . . ease and grace."⁴⁵⁴

Deva benefited from the exploding popularity of gymnastics among Romanian parents and children, and also from the large number of youth who were already learning the sport at local training clubs or sports schools across the country. The spread of gymnastics centers in Romania made it much easier for Deva coaches to discover the most gifted young girls in gymnastics, who, under expert supervision, had real chances to become the next European, World, and Olympic champions. As a result of this system, journalist Constantin Dragomir,

⁴⁵² On Karolyis' decision to defect see Karolyi and Nancy Ann Richardson, *Fără teamă*, 130-147.

⁴⁵³ Expression used to designate the Deva School No.7. See Gheorghe Mitroi, "Amintiri despre...viitorul gimnasticii," *Almanahul Scânteia* (București: Casa Scânteii, 1988), 354.

⁴⁵⁴ Bela Karolyi quoted in George L. Borgescu, "Romanian Gymnastics -- A School of Champions," *Romania Today*, July 1979, 31.

reporting in 1988 about the results of the Deva School of Gymnastics, noted that Romania's results at international gymnastics competitions do not appear to be "thundering surprises"; they were rather expected outcomes of a "beautiful and impressive tradition." By the late 1980s, the Romanian School of Gymnastics had become a "living tradition" – the celebrated emblem of Romanian socialism's greatest achievements at home and on the world stage.⁴⁵⁵

Reports about the Deva School often appeared in the Romanian press. And, without fail, all reports about gymnastics at Deva evoked the precedent of Nadia. Thus, reporting from Deva, a *Romania Today* writer noted how all the girls who were enrolled in the Deva school had one role model: Nadia Comăneci. Interviewed in 1980, Cecilia Szok, Daniela Silivaș, and Adriana Trocan – then second-graders -- insisted that they hoped "to be like Nadia, to become like Nadia," or to get as far as Nadia, and to become members of the Romanian national team of gymnasts at the Olympics.⁴⁵⁶ The Deva School hosted 300 students who, according to journalist Horia Alexandrescu, "were walking in Nadia's footsteps."⁴⁵⁷

But not all children training at Deva would later become gymnastics stars. Of course, sport officials only allowed the very best gymnasts to join the national team. While Deva constantly created highly qualified gymnasts, the products of coaches such as Ion Carpinisan and Vasilica Grecu who were coaching the youngest students at the school, RGF officials often recruited new gymnasts from other sport clubs.⁴⁵⁸ In 1988, the secretary of the RGF Maria

⁴⁵⁵ Constantin Dragomir, "Vârsta de aur a gimnasticii românești," *Almanahul Săptămâna*, (București: Casa Scânteii, 1988), 235

⁴⁵⁶"Top-Mark Girls," *Romania Today*, June 1980, 29.

⁴⁵⁷ Horia Alexandrescu, "La Deva, 300 de fetițe calcă pe urmele Nadiei," *Almanahul Cutezătorii*, (București: Casa Scânteii, 1982), 172.

⁴⁵⁸ Coaches such as Ion Cărpinișan and Vasilica Grecu's basic rule of training for the little gymnasts was "developing of force while speeding up," thus trying to make sure that Deva students were making significant progress towards being considered for the selection in the national team. See "Top-Mark Girls," *Romania Today*,

Login noted that the federation and the coaches usually retained for the national gymnastics team the girls who brought medals from previous international competitions. At the same time, though, they also brought in a selection of new (and unknown) gymnasts. They imagined that this strategy would maintain a high level of competition among the individual members of the national team.⁴⁵⁹

After each major national competition, the most promising gymnasts would be brought to Deva as part of the national team.⁴⁶⁰ This way, the coaches in charge of the national team had plenty of new talents to choose from. As Octavian Belu pointed out, coaches needed "at least 2-3 valuable gymnasts to replace the ones who would choose to retire or abandon gymnastics, especially after finishing high-school in pursuit of other professional opportunities."⁴⁶¹ The new gymnasts promoted to the team were coming from different sporting centers in Romania, as was the case with Camelia Voinea and Eugenia Golea. They came from Bucharest after being seen performing at competitions such as "The Romanian Cup," or the Romanian national championships for juniors, as well as the Balkan Championships, as occurred in 1984.⁴⁶²

Usually, new gymnastics talent was "discovered" at *national* competitions and propelled to the main two national centers that trained athletes for the global stage.⁴⁶³ Coaches at Deva encouraged an "open selection" process whereby other coaches from different clubs would bring gymnasts to the school for veritable auditions, even if the gymnasts did not participate in the

June 1980, 29.

⁴⁵⁹ Constantin Lupu, "Quiet! Gymnasts at Work!," *Romanian News*, 11 March 1988, 16.

⁴⁶⁰ Octavian Belu, interview with the author, 21 December 2005 (recorded).

⁴⁶¹ Belu interview.

⁴⁶² Constantin Macovei, "Un 'nou val' în gimnastica noastră feminină," *Sport*, December 1984, 17.

⁴⁶³ Constantin Macovei, "În gimnastica noastră, în prim-plan o nouă generație de talente," *Stadion*, October 1985, 11.

national competition because of various reasons (e.g., injuries). Sometimes the gymnasts remained at Deva to train with the members of the national team, while other gymnasts returned to their home clubs with a new training schedule that echoed the Deva training regimen.⁴⁶⁴ By the 1980s, the Romanian school of gymnastics was structured to deliberately oversupply the national team with talented, well-trained young women.

In order to further ensure a "fresh supply" of young gymnasts, the state established the Onești School of Gymnastics in 1984 as a school that specifically prepared members of the national junior team. The institution functioned as a wellspring of talent for the Romanian senior team. Every young gymnast's dream was to be selected by the coaches of the Onești School for juniors (up to 14 years of age) or the Deva School for seniors, which would bring them one step closer to being part of the national team. The young girls who studied at Onești were overwhelmingly urban, coming from cities throughout Romania: Bucharest, Constanta, Focsani, Sibiu, Bacau, Baia Mare, and Ploiesti. Onești and Deva thus became carefully coordinated factories of gymnastics, led by expert manager-coaches and producing athlete-laborers that would secure future medals for the Romanian state.⁴⁶⁵

Because the national team had an oversupply of competitive gymnasts, the federation could send different groups of gymnasts abroad to compete at the many international competitions, thus providing numerous gymnasts with the necessary international experience – and chances to audition for the opportunity to compete at the largest and most important competitions such as the Olympic Games.⁴⁶⁶ For instance, *Sport* magazine described in 1984

⁴⁶⁴ Belu interview.

⁴⁶⁵ Constantin Macovei, "Zorii performanței: O nouă generație de gimnaste la început de drum," *Sport*, March 1985, 18.

⁴⁶⁶ For instance Daniela Silivaș would compete at the Chunichi Cup in Japan, while Gabriela Potorac and Cristina Bontaș would participate at the Balkan Gymnastics Championships in Burgas, Bulgaria, during the fall of 1988. See

how ten members of the national team, all enrolled at the Deva school of gymnastics, trained together for hours in the gymnastics hall under the careful eyes of their coaches: Adrian Goreac, Maria Cosma and Octavian Belu. Their hope was to be selected for the six places in the Olympic team for the Los Angeles Olympiad. Also, before the Seoul Olympics in 1988, at Deva there were twelve gymnasts who were selected to be part of the national team and who were training together under the careful supervision of coaches Adrian Goreac, Maria Cosma, Octavian Belu and, newly added Adrian Stoica. The most internationally known were Aurelia Dobre, Daniela Silivaş, Eugenia Golea, Camelia Voinea and Celestina Popa, while the newcomers Gabriela Potorac, Augustina Badea, Mirela Sidon, Gabriela Gheorghe, Eugenia Popa or Lăcrămioara Filip were trying to polish their skills in the hope that they would also be selected for the major competition ahead.⁴⁶⁷ In the end, only six were chosen to compete at the Seoul Olympics.

Ultimately, little would be known about the many young women who did not make the Olympic team: such as Mirela Barbălată or Camelia Renciu, who were left behind in 1984, or Augustina Badea, Gabriela Gheorghe, or Lăcrămioara Filip, who did not make the team in 1988. Their performances were very solid, but still not good enough to be selected as Olympic-level gymnasts. Paradoxically, if they had represented any other country, they might have had a better chance to make it to the Olympics because the selection process for the Romanian Olympic team was exceedingly competitive. One Romanian reporter noted after the 1987 World Championships at Rotterdam that "the fight for world supremacy is fought within the Romanian

"The Value of Romanian Gymnastics is Reconfirmed," *Romanian News*, 18 November 1988, 12.

⁴⁶⁷ Constantin Macovei, "La Deva, gimnastele noastre fruntau pregătesc viitoare mari performanțe," *Sport*, July 1988, 12; Ovidiu Ioanițoaia, "Aurelia Dobre: voi căuta să răspund, prin rezultate, grijii și căldurii care mi se arată," *Sport*, January 1988, 6.

gymnastics school itself -- where it is, practically, more difficult to stand out than in international competitions."⁴⁶⁸ By the late 1980s, the Romanian school of gymnastics was highly competitive because it had a large backlog of world-class gymnasts, which made it harder for athletes to stand out. In Romania, the real competition was for selection; winning a gold, silver, or bronze medal would have been easier by comparison.

Due to their talent and training, many gymnasts were very close to making the Romanian national team and thereby representing Romania at major international competitions. However, none of them ever had the chance to become household names during the 1980s. They never received any real recognition for their effort, service, and hard work. For them, they never realized their dreams in the world of Romanian gymnastics, never even receiving the consolation prize: a professional career associated with gymnastics. Some gymnasts, such as Teodora Ungureanu (former member of the 1976 Olympic team), discovered a new career and celebrity at the circus, where she could capitalize on the skills she learned from gymnastics.⁴⁶⁹ Some did manage to continue their careers as local gymnastics coaches or physical education teachers.⁴⁷⁰ Yet the majority departed the world of sports entirely for other careers. One can only speculate about their feelings after unceremoniously retiring from gymnastics.

Keys to success

Romanian journalists often compared gymnasts' training with the painstaking process of polishing precious stones. One reporter asked rhetorically how many hours of hard work, how

⁴⁶⁸ "In the World Gymnastics Championship, the Romanian Team First Again," *Romanian News*, 30 October 1987, 13

⁴⁶⁹ Mugur Popovici, "'Gimnastica ne-a deschis drumul spre circ,' mărturisesc componentele unei cunoscute trupe acrobatică," *Sportul ilustrat*, January 1990, 20.

⁴⁷⁰ Mariana Constantin, also former member of the 1976 Olympic team, became gymnastics coach at the Petrolul Ploiești club. See Constantin Macovei, "Acolo de unde și-au luat zborul trei campioane," *Sportul*, 26 May 1984, 6.

many obsessive repetitions of the same movement, and how many kilograms of perspiration are involved in crafting and perfecting only one gymnastics routine, so that in the end the exercise would resemble a "well-rounded, shiny, perfectly polished ruby, that retains at the same time its primary qualities?"⁴⁷¹ These polished gems needed to be crisp, clear, and razor sharp. Reporting from the Deva training center about gymnasts' preparation for the Los Angeles Olympics, sports expert Constantin Macovei informed *Sportul* newspaper readers how the ten young women vying for a place on the Olympic team were listening obediently to their coaches' orders and "repeated certain gymnastics moves tens and tens of times, trying to improve their precision each time."⁴⁷² To keep track of all gymnasts' performances, coaches noted rigorously and thoroughly in their notebooks all the details of training sessions in order to discern what might be done to improve the athletes' level of performance. Many gymnasts recounted how coaches insisted that even if girls were to wake up in the middle of the night, they must be prepared to immediately remember and perfectly execute their gymnastics routines. Being able to control each movement of their bodies was of the essence for success in elite gymnastics.

To be in top form for the Olympics, the RGF laid down a very rigorous training regimen so that gymnasts would specifically reach their peak performance levels during the Games. The first phase of the program started during the winter holidays which were spent at a mountain resort (Sângeorz Băi in 1988, for instance), where the focus was on strengthening gymnasts' bodies for the upcoming season of competition. Winter training was scheduled every year, but was especially demanding during Olympic years. In the winter of 1984, the gymnasts spent their

⁴⁷¹ Constantin Ismăileanu, "Sărbătoarea gimnasticii," *Revista Flacăra*, 6 May 1988, 22. Among other articles describing the efforts of Romanian gymnastics team, see also Constantin Macovei, "Medaliile gimnasticii se pregătesc cu multe eforturi și nestinsă pasiune," *Sport*, April 1981, 12.

⁴⁷² Constantin Macovei, "Gimnastele noastre de frunte pregătesc noi starturi internaționale," *Sport*, June 1984, 12.

training at a mountain resort in the Bucegi Mountains, where gymnasts were required to run daily around 25-30 km (approx. 15-18 miles).⁴⁷³ As spring approached, during vacation from school (a vacation not granted to any other school children), national team members competed at the Romanian International Gymnastics Championship, and finally, during the summer months preceding the Olympics, the gymnasts navigated "a series of team and individual tests, including also the masters' national championship."⁴⁷⁴ All the scheduled training sessions, tests, and competitions at home and abroad were intended to help gymnasts reach their top form as the Olympics began (and to expel the undeserving).

In an interview with *Flacăra* magazine, Adrian Goreac, the head coach of the Romanian national team, explained that the International Gymnastics Championships, held at the end of April 1988, were viewed as a stage of Olympic preparation. "We didn't plan on achieving the maximum fitness level now," he noted, "We still have to make some of our exercises perfect, we have to introduce new elements, surprise-elements, in the same way that everyone does right now."⁴⁷⁵ At the same time, these lesser competitions represented an opportunity to test the new generation of young women's gymnasts with the hope of promoting junior gymnasts to the national team, especially as veterans retired.

Discovering talent, rigorous training, hard work, and the cultivation of a competitive ethos among teammates were key ingredients of the Romanian school of gymnastics' successes at competitions. However, while competing against each other, national team members displayed another quality that would not be usually expected in such a feisty environment. On

⁴⁷³ Constantin Macovei, "Primele reprize de antrenamente intense ale gimnastelor fruntaşe," *Sportul*, 13 January 1984, 1-2.

⁴⁷⁴ Constantin Lupu, "Quiet! Gymnasts at Work!" *Romanian News*, 11 March 1988, 16.

⁴⁷⁵ Adrian Goreac cited by Ismăileanu, "Sarbatorea gimnasticii," 22.

numerous occasions, the gymnasts mentioned that teamwork and friendship were essential to their individual successes in sports. Bela Karolyi always noted that "without Teodora Ungureanu, Nadia would not have obtained such good results." "They stimulated and helped each other a lot," he said.⁴⁷⁶ Later on, Aurelia Dobre credited her success at the Rotterdam World Championships in 1987 to the work of the entire team. "The evolution of every girl from the national team is stimulated by the value of her teammates," Dobre observed, stressing that "it could have been any other Romanian gymnast who won the gold medal in the individual overall competition, especially when knowing that all your other colleagues put forward their best performances." What coach Adrian Goreac taught the members of the national team was that "gymnasts grow together; they help each other, and need to encourage each other to succeed."⁴⁷⁷

Romanian coaches and gymnasts agreed that competitiveness did not undermine friendships.⁴⁷⁸ For instance, gymnast Eugenia Popa, member of the national team between 1989 and 1991 and later a gymnastics coach in Ireland, explained that Romanian gymnasts were friends and rivals at the same time: "when we trained, we were both (friends and rivals). We were very competitive, but we were friends at the end of the day. We lived together so we had to be friends. And even if you don't like somebody, you have to have respect."⁴⁷⁹ However, this concept proved impossible to apply when Popa coached in Ireland. In her view, Irish children that practiced gymnastics were used to seeing their endeavors not as work, but rather as play, and

⁴⁷⁶ Bela Karolyi quoted in Dumitru Graur, "Bela si Marta, Nadia și Teodora, profesori și eleve la școala perfecțiunii în gimnastică," *Almanahul Flacăra*, (București: Casa Scânteii, 1977), 341.

⁴⁷⁷ Aurelia Dobre, "Echipa, ca un singur om," *Revista Flacăra*, 15 April 1988, 23.

⁴⁷⁸ About Aurelia Dobre and Daniela Silivaș's friendship, see Mitroi, "Amintiri despre..viitorul gimnasticii," 356.

⁴⁷⁹ John Crumlish, "Interview: Eugenia Popa (Romania)," *International Gymnast Magazine Online*, 23 October 2008, http://www.intlgyrnast.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=657:interview-eugenia-popa-romania&catid=3:interviews&Itemid=56 (accessed 23 May 2009).

they just wanted to be nice. And "you don't have to be nice in gymnastics," she said, "you have to be tough, and build up your strength, mentally and physically."⁴⁸⁰ Popa, and other Romanian gymnasts, acknowledged that elite gymnastics was hard work, and not play.

Usually within the national team, young gymnasts looked up to older ones. For the younger girls, it was a mixture of admiration, respect, intimidation, and competitiveness that translated into a strong desire to achieve the same level of performances as their older, more accomplished counterparts. This is what Eugenia Popa noted when she managed to defeat multiple champion Daniela Silivaş at the national championships: "It was quite an achievement when I went to the Romanian Championships and came in first on the bars. I beat Daniela Silivaş, which was a big achievement for me."⁴⁸¹ The volatile mix of admiration, respect, friendship, and competitiveness among the members of the national team -- an atmosphere conscientiously cultivated by coaches -- combined to help the gymnasts to function and succeed as a group.

Coaches assumed a leading role in the lives of gymnasts. Because the Deva and Oneşti schools were also boarding schools, coaches coordinated their expectations with gymnasts' parents, school teachers, and choreographers. As coach Maria Simionescu and others put it, "the coach fulfilled the role of surrogate parents."⁴⁸² For many years, gymnasts spent more time with coaches than with their own parents and trainers became mentors and role models for the gymnasts. Often gymnasts were away from their families from January 1st until Christmas time, and thus coaches were indeed their second parents. "Here, as a coach," Octavian Belu explained,

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Maria Simionescu, "Secretul marilor performanţe : Munca si învăţatura," *Almanahul Magazin* (Bucureşti: Casa Scânteii, 1981), 151.

"I know what happens to my gymnast -- I know how she sleeps, what she eats."⁴⁸³ In fact coaches knew their gymnasts better than the parents knew their daughters. Describing his experiences at the Deva gymnastics school, Octavian Belu mentioned that his profession meant everything to him: "I left everything behind and gave it all twenty-four/seven." And he continued, "Sometimes there was nothing but gymnastics for me, and I was capable of sleeping in the gym, so I could be there for each training moment, to solve problems in the very short time we had in-between competitions, but the satisfaction was immense." Belu was indeed a very passionate and dedicated coach for whom material comforts did not matter much. "I didn't complain because nobody made me stay at Deva to live in a dorm room. I liked it, because I always learned something new."⁴⁸⁴ Coaching for Belu and other trainers did not leave any time for vacations or even family time. For them, family meant the national team of gymnasts.

While Federation officials set objectives for the Olympics in terms of the number of medals the team ought to win, the coaches controlled the strategies for achieving the desired results. In an interview with *Flacăra* magazine, Octavian Belu stressed that the key for Romanians' successes at the LA Olympics was the coaches' planning "to present top-rated exercises at all apparatuses." Also, coaches began preparations for the 1984 Games immediately after the Moscow Olympics, and the gymnasts "worked very hard but didn't complain at all." In simple words Belu summarized the keys for success: "work, being earnest, tenacity, and love for our country."⁴⁸⁵ Other coaches referenced their own versions of Belu's formula: for example, coach Maria Simionescu argued there were three basic tenets of elite Romanian gymnastics. In

⁴⁸³ Jane Perlez, "Romanian Coach Keeps Up the Fight," *New York Times*, 13 July 1995, B 19.

⁴⁸⁴ Belu interview.

⁴⁸⁵ Octavian Belu, "Sunt bucurosi că ne-am facut datoria," *Revista Flacăra*, 10 August 1984, 20.

her view, high performances would be achieved "first by work, second by work, and third by talent." To these three elements she added: "a rigorous early selection, and careful and continuous training until the competition day."⁴⁸⁶

Besides these essential practical ingredients for athletic success, the national team coaches tried to tailor specific performances to the tastes of the audience. Just as Nadia's floor routine in 1976 used the theme song from the popular American soap opera, *The Young and the Restless* -- very familiar to North American audiences -- the women gymnasts' routines for the LA Olympics in 1984 were carefully choreographed. Both the techniques employed and the visual and sonic presentation of the gymnasts had to be carefully planned, as coaches were keenly aware of "playing to the American public." Coach Maria Cosma declared that "the skillfulness and the strength of Romanian gymnasts can win over the American public," and thus these things needed special attention during preparations for the Olympics.⁴⁸⁷

Participating at the Olympics was thus an impressive enterprise and every little aspect needed to be taken care of in detail. While athletes represented the Romanian socialist system, coaches and officials carefully used other cultural frames to better ensure competitive success on the floor of the performance hall. And sure enough, the results did not disappoint.

Major victories of the 1980s

The image of Nadia and early successes during the 1980s

As I mentioned above, Romanian gymnastics continued to be a world power in elite gymnastics throughout the 1980s. In fact, the Romanian women's team broke the Soviet

⁴⁸⁶ Simionescu, "Secretul marilor performanțe: Munca și învățătura," 151.

⁴⁸⁷ Maria Cosma cited in Constantin Macovei, "Între New York și Los Angeles, obiective noi pentru gimnastele noastre," *Sportul*, 31 March 1984, 3.

monopoly on gold medals at the Olympics and World Championships. If many in the press still regarded the Montreal Olympics as the peak of Romanian gymnastics, the results of the 1980s falsified this assertion. Competitions that brought numerous titles to the Romanians in the 1980s include the World Championships held in Budapest, Hungary, in 1983; the Los Angeles Summer Olympics in 1984; the World Championships in Rotterdam, in 1987; and the last Olympic Games of the 1980s, in Seoul, in 1988.

The Romanian press had to concede quickly that "a new, successful generation has emerged in Romanian gymnastics."⁴⁸⁸ After taking more than half of the medals of the Euro Championships in Gothenburg, Sweden, Romanian gymnasts demonstrated their superpower abilities at the World Championships in Budapest, Hungary. Ecaterina Szabo and her teammates -- Lavinia Agache, Laura Cutina, Mirela Barbălată, Mihaela Stanuleț and Camelia Renciu -- representing four sports clubs (Deva, Sibiu, Onești, and Dinamo Bucharest) finished second as a team, and took home a string of 8 medals. They put Romania first among 41 participating countries.⁴⁸⁹ What sports journalists pointed out was the fact that Romanian gymnasts were able to compete at a very high level on all the apparatuses, thus winning medals in all events -- proving their "self-abnegation and passion" for gymnastics (and national glory). In addition, Romanian gymnasts were prepared by a "group of ambitious, enthusiastic, mature and competent coaches: Adrian Goreac, Maria Cosma and Octavian Belu."⁴⁹⁰

The press was soon eager to talk about a "natural evolution" from Nadia Comăneci to new stars: especially Ecaterina Szabo and Lavinia Agache. This was an "evolution of value, skill

⁴⁸⁸ "Sport -- Miscellanea," *Romanian News*, 13 May 1983, 16.

⁴⁸⁹ Constantin Macovei, "Romanian Gymnasts at the Top," *Romania Today*, January 1984, 58.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*.

and talent," a proof of the "vitality" of the Romanian school of gymnastics, which had an "inexhaustible source of talents."⁴⁹¹ This surely made the public and sports officials confident that participation at the Los Angeles Games in 1984 would bring even more medals (and international prestige) to the Romanian socialist state.

Sportswriter Constantin Macovei was convinced that at the 1983 World Championships the Romanian team was not less accomplished or successful than their Soviet counterparts who won the team gold medal. In a way, Macovei argued, the two teams' almost equal value was meant to set the stage for an exciting rematch in Los Angeles.⁴⁹² However, the Soviet boycott of the "American" Olympics in 1984 did not permit another Romanian-Soviet face-off. Instead, the LA Olympics would be dominated by an alternative duel of sorts: between the surging Americans and the ever-dominant Romanians.

At the 1984 Olympics, the Romanian women gymnasts "climbed the highest step on the Olympic victory rostrum." For the Romanian team, this was "the first Olympic title in the history of Romanian gymnastics."⁴⁹³ The Romanian team claimed the gold, "the only trophy missing from an already impressive case."⁴⁹⁴ The apparatuses finals brought also another first for the Romanian women's gymnasts. During the balance beam final, the gold medal went to two Romanians: Ecaterina Szabo and Simona Paucă, who managed to dominate the most difficult event of the competition, known as "the bridge of sighs." After finishing second in the all-around competition after the American star gymnast Mary Lou Retton, Szabo managed to win

⁴⁹¹ "Romania's Team -- World Vice-Champion. The Natural Course of Gymnastics," *Romania News*, 27 December 1983, 16.

⁴⁹² Constantin Macovei, "Aurul și celelalte 7 medalii de la Budapesta confirmă gimnastica feminină românească, din nou in elita mondială," *Sport*, November 1983, 3.

⁴⁹³ Mircea Bonda, "Romanians in the 1984 Olympic Games," *Romania Today*, 9, September 1984, 58.

⁴⁹⁴ Cătălin Mihai, "The School of Grace," *Romanian News*, 28 December 1984, 24.

3 out of 4 possible gold medals during the last day of competition. The Romanian gymnasts' performances at the LA Olympics represented the most impressive success of Romanian gymnastics, higher than their results at the Montreal or Moscow Olympics. Indeed, Ecaterina Szabo, with 4 golds, became a more awarded Olympic gymnast than Nadia.

The Romanian success in the City of Angels was, according to *Sport* magazine, a "performance without precedent in the history of Romanian gymnastics."⁴⁹⁵ Despite the obvious accomplishments of this post-Nadia generation of gymnasts, sport journalists were instructed to always mention Nadia as a key source of inspiration for these achievements. Thus after the 1984 Los Angeles games, writing for a foreign audience in the *Romanian News* magazine, sports journalist Cătălin Mihai noted how after Nadia, "the most brilliant gymnast of all times," everybody "witnessed with joy how Romanian gymnastics has continued its ascending path opened by the fairy queen of Montreal in 1976."⁴⁹⁶ Moreover, Ioan Drăgan, the medical doctor who accompanied the Olympic delegation to Los Angeles, revealed in 1991 how journalists were supposed to conform to certain guidelines when writing about the new gymnastics stars. Some writers made serious mistakes. For instance, Drăgan mentions that journalist Aurel Neagu -- who was sent as a correspondent for *Sportul* -- wrote that "Ecaterina Szabo's four gold medals surpassed the medals won by Nadia." After this major faux pas, Neagu lost his right to sign his own articles "for a serious period of time," a decision coming directly from the wife of the Romanian president: Elena Ceausescu herself.⁴⁹⁷ In this period of dramatic change in the sports world of gymnastics, the regime nonetheless reasserted its control over what information could

⁴⁹⁵ "Serile de aur din Pauley Pavilion," *Sport*, August 1984, 7.

⁴⁹⁶ Cătălin Mihai, "The School of Grace," *Romanian News*, 28 December 1984, 24.

⁴⁹⁷ Ioan Drăgan, *Martor la 8 olimpiade de vară* (București: Editura Porus, 1992), 52.

reach newspapers' readership. Quite anachronistically, the Romanian state remained wedded to a near-obsession with Nadia Comăneci's legacies in elite gymnastics in an era now dominated by new, more accomplished Romanian athletes.

Changing coverage of women's gymnastics during the second half of the 1980s

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Nadia's name did not appear so frequently in sports periodicals. Journalists only occasionally mentioned her name when presenting historical overviews of the famed Romanian school of gymnastics. Specifically, they were no longer forced to integrate Nadia's past into discussions of current national team members and their performances. It seemed that the Nadia era had finally receded into the increasingly distant past and, instead, journalists were finding room to lavish praise on the new stars of Romanian gymnastics and their commanding performances.

The 1987 World Championships in Rotterdam brought the Romanians impressive results: twelve scores of 10, as well as the title of team world champion. Aurelia Dobre won the all-around absolute champion title. The national team returned to Romania with a staggering total of 5 gold medals, 1 silver, and 4 bronze.⁴⁹⁸ These results made the international press "let off a stream of superlatives and overflowing imagination to portray the absolutely fantastic evolution of the Romanian girls."⁴⁹⁹

The Romanian press seemed once again to revel freely in the gymnasts' successes and did so by citing foreign press commentaries. Journalist Ovidiu Ioanițoaia quoted the Berlin newspaper *Deutsches Sportecho* about the Romanian gymnasts who "came, saw and

⁴⁹⁸ Dragomir, "Vârsta de aur a gimnasticii românești," 235.

⁴⁹⁹ Ovidiu Ioanițoaia, "The New Stars of World Gymnastics," *Romania Today*, February 1988, 40.

conquered."⁵⁰⁰ Also, their brand of gymnastics was a "happy blend of art, science and sports," according to the Dutch newspaper *Volkskrant*. Moreover, the Soviet press agency TASS noted that "the Romanian team has never been so strong."⁵⁰¹

Not only European sources were cited, but journalists integrated Asian sources as well. Thus, according to New China Press Agency, Romania had launched a "new start of world gymnastics." The same source reported that Aurelia Dobre, the all-around world champion, gave a stellar performance the likes of which the world had not been seen since the days of Czech gymnast Vera Ceaslavska in 1966. With her title of world champion, Dobre "interrupted the string of victories of the Soviet gymnasts, 22 times winners of the overall world title."⁵⁰² Dobre and the entire Romanian team displayed "weapons such as mastery, mobilization, dedication, and cold blood" in their confrontation with the Soviets. These tools accompanied their "gracefulness, artistry of performances which seemed to turn the impossible into possible and defy the laws of gravity."⁵⁰³

If at the LA Olympics the press focused on the Romanian-American rivalry in gymnastics, in the absence of the Soviet team, at the Seoul Olympics in 1988, the Romanian-Soviet duel was brought back to the front pages of Romanian newspapers and sports periodicals. Again, however, the Romanians placed second in "the sparkling contest" between Romanian and Soviet women gymnasts.⁵⁰⁴ In the overall individual contest, the new star of the Romanian

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ovidiu Ioanițoaia, "Fetele noastre de aur," *Sport*, November 1987, 6.

⁵⁰² "In the World Gymnastics Championship, the Romanian Team First Again-- Echoes in the International Press," *Romanian News*, 30 October 1987, 13.

⁵⁰³ Ioanițoaia, "The New Stars of World Gymnastics," 41-42.

⁵⁰⁴ Vasile Pușcașu, "Romanian Sportsmen in the 24th Olympiad," *Romania Today*, November 1988, 58.)

team, Daniela Silivaş, won second place, barely losing to the Soviet Elena Shushunova. However, in the apparatuses finals, Silivaş managed to become an Olympic champion 3 times over, earning 3 gold medals: the balance beam, uneven parallel bars, and floor. Also, she placed third in the vault competition.⁵⁰⁵ Like Ecaterina Szabo in Los Angeles four years earlier, Silivaş dethroned the all-around Olympic champion and brought Romanian gymnasts to the forefront of the global Olympic hierarchy once again. After their excellent performances, Romanians shared the podium with the other two Cold War super powers -- the Soviet Union and the United States. Throughout the 1980s, the audiences who filled the gymnastics halls at international competitions watched *three* rival superpowers locked in heated competition for global supremacy.

The new Romanian gymnastics stars

The new women gymnasts who won medals at international competitions after Nadia Comăneci ultimately became household names in Romania. Their performances were described in laudatory terms by the press, their pictures appeared in sports newspapers, and interviews with these athletes were frequently printed in the press. The series of new "golden" gymnasts of the 1980s -- Cristina Grigoraş, Ecaterina Szabo, Simona Paucă, Aurelia Dobre, and Daniela Silivaş - - demonstrated the viability of the Romanian school of gymnastics and its resources to produce international stars and national symbols.

Following Nadia's footsteps

Mostly in the first years of the 1980s, all Romanian women gymnasts were placed in the so-called "Nadia constellation." References to Nadia were plentiful, proof that new gymnasts

⁵⁰⁵ "The Games of the 24th Olympiad," *Romanian News*, 30 September 1988, 12.

were initially seen through the prism of Nadia's earlier success. Gymnasts themselves played a significant role in maintaining Nadia's stature in Romanian sports culture. In interviews with the press, for example, young athletes often spoke about Nadia Comăneci as their inspiration to pursue the sport. Such was the case with Daniela Silivaş, named by the International Gymnastics Federation as the best gymnast in 1988 and considered one of the "great 10 Olympians" of the Seoul Games.⁵⁰⁶ "After I saw her as an Olympic champion with all those marks of 10, I decided to be a gymnast," Silivaş noted in 1986. She continued, "Not only to pretend that I'm a gymnast ...but rather to be a true gymnast!"⁵⁰⁷ Silivaş echoed the majority of little girls who saw Nadia as a role model. All the little girls who jumped into gymnastics after Nadia wanted to emulate her. As Cristina Grigoraş, a member of the national team and European champion in the early 1980s, mentioned to a reporter in 1981: "What I want is to continue the series of great successes inaugurated by Nadia Comăneci."⁵⁰⁸ In a 1985 interview, Daniela Silivaş was asked how she compared her performances with those of Nadia. She noted shyly, "How can I tell you? I don't think any girl has the guts to say she is like Nadia. I, for one, don't dare saying it [sic], although honestly, I dream to be like her in a year or two . . . Nadia had everything: talent, work ethic, ambition and courage...she didn't lack anything."⁵⁰⁹ The Romanian media heralded Nadia as an ultimate idol of the sports world, and the gymnasts internalized much of this iconic image. However, women gymnasts of the 1980s had to achieve results that matched the accomplishments of Nadia -- and even surpass her, as many did.

⁵⁰⁶ Cătălin Mihai, "Silivaş and the Beautiful Old Traditions," *Romanian Today*, February 1989, 60.

⁵⁰⁷ Horia Alexandrescu, "Daniela Silivaş, o nouă stea din constelația Nadiei," *Almanahul Săptămâna* (București: Casa Scânteii, 1986), 176.

⁵⁰⁸ Constantin Macovei, "Cristina Grigoraş, a New Hopeful of Romanian Gymnastics," *Romania Today*, August 1981, 57.

⁵⁰⁹ Alexandrescu, 177.

New stars' voices

The new gymnasts were often introduced to Romanian readers after winning at international competitions. Their standard presentations consisted of dry, short biographical sketches with information about their age, hometown origins, height and weight, and a summary of their results at the various competitions. Despite the numerous gymnasts that were part of the Romanian national team during the 1980s, only a handful received more than brief attention from the Romanian sports press. Among these there were Ecaterina Szabo, Cristina Grigoraș, Simona Paucă, Aurelia Dobre, and Daniela Silivaș.

Even before becoming an Olympic champion in 1984, Ecaterina Szabo was portrayed to the Romanian public as a future star of the national team. Her athletic abilities brought her first to Onești, as a junior gymnast, and then to the Deva training center as a member of the Olympic team. Constantin Macovei praised Szabo for her talent, easy adaptability to tough training, discipline, ambition, tenacity, and a will to win.⁵¹⁰ Sports journalists enjoyed writing about Szabo's beginnings in gymnastics as a way to show that talented new girl athletes could be found anywhere in Romania.

Born in 1967, Szabo's beginnings in gymnastics seemed accidental. As the press reported, she was randomly discovered by a gymnastics scout who was driving through her native village of Zagon, in Covasna County, as she was playing outside her house, doing cartwheels on the sidewalk. Reportedly impressed by Szabo's agility, the coach convinced her family to enroll their child at the Onești gymnastics school. There, she was in the same group of gymnasts that would form the core of the Olympic team at the Los Angeles Olympics: Cristina

⁵¹⁰ Constantin Macovei, "Ecaterina Szabo in Nadia Comăneci's Footsteps," *Romania Today*, November 1982, 60.

Grigoraș, Lavinia Agache, and Mihaela Riciu.⁵¹¹

Another colorful story that made the pages of the Romanian newspapers described how Simona Paucă, regarded as the second most successful Romanian gymnast at the 1984 Olympics in the US, became an elite woman gymnast. Paucă initially disliked gymnastics, yet admired Nadia Comăneci. Paucă became a gymnast only as a result of her father's determination to make her into a champion. After he enrolled Simona at a Bucharest sports center, he built a balance beam in his apartment living room, so that little Simona could "continue practicing and improve the exercises that she learnt at the training center."⁵¹² It seemed that the father's ambition and Simona's talent and hard work paid off finally when she was selected for the national team and moved to Deva in the fall of 1982 to continue her training. Representing Romania at the 1984 Games, Paucă ultimately earned a bronze medal in the overall individual competition, and shared the gold medal with Ecatarina Szabo in the balance beam final.

Cristina Grigoraș, who participated at the Moscow *and* Los Angeles Olympics, came to the full attention of the press only after she won the European championship of 1981. She was featured on the cover page of *Sport* in its May 1981 issue: "Cristina Grigoraș, a new star in the world gymnastics' firmament." As a "young and exceptionally talented" gymnast, Grigoraș was characterized as a "complete athlete, able to face at any time all the rigors of international competitions."⁵¹³ Cristina Grigoraș's 1981 interview in *Romania Today* was somehow atypical when compared to other gymnasts' interviews. Her tone was unusually assertive, not at all modest -- a refreshing but singular instance in the landscape of the 1980s Romanian press. In her

⁵¹¹ Constantin Macovei, "Ecatarina Szabo, de pe acum o stea a gimnasticii internaționale," *Sport*, May 1982, 6.

⁵¹² Constantin Firănescu, "Simona Paucă -- o strălucită afirmare in arena mondială," *Sport*, October 1984, 5.

⁵¹³ Constantin Macovei, "Europenele feminine de la Madrid, o nouă confirmare a valorii ridicate a scolii romanesti de gimnastică," *Sport*, May 1981, 4.

remarks to *Romania Today*, Grigoraș made sure to mention the name of her first coach who had been ignored previously by the press. Thus, she mentioned that before arriving at Onești, she trained in Satu Mare where she was initially discovered by coach Iuliana Foldmeri. It was she who persuaded Grigoraș's father to send her to Onești, "where the best conditions were provided for the training of champions."⁵¹⁴ She also spoke openly about her body shape, claiming that initially the coaches suggested that her physique was not a major asset, since "her legs were too long" and that she would have "to work hard, to correct my defects, to improve my posture, and to gradually make the expected progress."⁵¹⁵ However, Grigoraș was convinced that her good results in the vault jump -- the highest mark and the champion title at the European Championships in Madrid in 1981 -- were linked precisely to her leaner, longer physique. Finally, an unprecedented fact for a gymnast who was supposed to be an example of modesty, Grigoraș addressed her fans assuring them that she "will work even harder and better to improve my skills and score top results at future contests."⁵¹⁶ Talking directly to the fans was uncommon among Romanian gymnasts and unfortunately, this type of assertive voice among gymnasts will not be found again until the 1990s in the Romanian press.

The press generally praised gymnasts after competitions. Few criticisms could be seen in the press. However, the only time when the press did not rave about Ecaterina Szabo's results was in 1985 when discussing her routines at the Montreal World Championships. While acknowledging her efforts to secure the Romanian team's second-place as well as her two other

⁵¹⁴ Macovei, "Cristina Grigoraș, a New Hopeful of Romanian Gymnastics," 57.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57. Modesty was a quality often noted by journalists writing about members of the Romanian national gymnastics team. With their "modesty and naturalness" on the podium and at press conferences, the Romanian women were always winning over the international public and the journalists themselves, as Ioanițoaia wrote in "The New Stars of World Gymnastics," 42.

silver medals for the vault and beam apparatuses, Szabo was criticized for her earlier unexpected fall off the balance beam. Journalist Constantin Macovei noted that Szabo "could still have a say in the world gymnastics and could still aspire to great successes, if she will adjust her training schedule and participate less in competitions, so she could put to good use her talent and possibilities."⁵¹⁷ Macovei found a subtle way to pass judgment not on Szabo herself, but on the RGF officials who were the ones to demand that Szabo participate in numerous competitions abroad, disregarding the sequential Deva training regimen.

The Romanian press of the 1980s offered little space for gymnasts to voice their own opinions about training, performances, or anything else. Very often their interviews in the press touched mostly on the amount of work involved in their performances, or on their pride in contributing to the greater glory of the Romanian school of gymnastics. For instance, the would-be 1988 Olympic champion Daniela Silivaş shared with reporter Horia Alexandrescu in 1986 that "it's awesome to be a gymnast, but you have no idea how hard it is, for instance, how hard you have to work for the simple things, such as a correct poise, a pirouette, not to mention risky elements. I learned them all, little by little, and they became harder and harder, otherwise you cannot do it."⁵¹⁸ After becoming world champion in 1985, Silivaş was basically drafted into the national pantheon of women's gymnasts. She was pleased to be considered one of the best gymnasts of Romania: "I am honored by the fact that my name stands next to those of other great gymnasts in my country, world champions in past years," Silivaş told *Romania Today*.⁵¹⁹ And after the Seoul Olympics, Silivaş stated that, "I am happy! Together with my colleagues I have

⁵¹⁷ Constantin Macovei, "Echipa feminină de gimnastică a României, vicecampioană mondială," *Sport*, November 1985, 11.

⁵¹⁸ Horia Alexandrescu, "Daniela Silivaş, o noua stea din constelatia Nadiei," *Almanahul Săptămâna* (Bucureşti: Casa Scânteii, 1986), 177.

⁵¹⁹ Cătălin Mihai, "A New Star of World Gymnastics," *Romania Today*, February 1986, 13.

succeeded in showing the world that the Romanian school of gymnastics was not just a passing phenomenon, that it has the power to create new generations of high class performance."⁵²⁰ This declaration echoed what Ecaterina Szabo said after winning at the 1984 Olympics: "I'm happy I have scored these outstanding successes for my country, proving the value of the Romanian school of gymnastics. It was a strong competition, with many highly difficult exercises, in which our team clearly showed it was the best in the world."⁵²¹ These types of comments were rather dry and repetitive, without offering much insight into how these gymnasts actually felt about their work. The main message the press conveyed was that gymnasts' patriotism was the sole motivation for their hard work and that the remarkable international results confirmed the world-class value of the now-established Romanian school of gymnastics.

In the beginning of their careers, Romanian women gymnasts did not perceive the titles they won at various international competitions as "big deals." Thus, they were often baffled by the sudden attention they got from the media, public, RGF, and party officials. For instance, in 1988 Aurelia Dobre confessed to *Flacara* magazine that she felt confused when asked if she felt the "burden" of her recent title of world champion:

I was confused because people treat us as if we are older than we really are, assuming that a world champion knows everything. In fact, I began to understand the significance of this title only afterwards, from the way everybody welcomed us and talked to us. During the competition we didn't do anything different from what we usually did at the training sessions.⁵²²

This declaration reiterated previous commentaries made by Nadia Comăneci or Ecaterina Szabo after their Olympic victories. This shows the specific isolated lifestyle of gymnasts living

⁵²⁰ "The Games of the 24th Olympiad," *Romanian News*, 30 September 1988, 12.

⁵²¹ Lucian Oprea, "Romania's Anthem Played Twenty Times: 20 Gold, 16 Silver, 17 Bronze Medals Were Collected by the Romanian Sportspeople at the 1984 Summer Olympiad," *Romanian News*, 17 August 1984, 16.

⁵²² Aurelia Dobre, "Echipa, ca un singur om," *Flacăra*, 15 April 1988, 23.

and training at Deva before becoming international gymnastics stars. Their entire lives gravitated around their exhausting training sessions and competitions. And for the gymnasts, the ensuing results had little to do with the state's politics. The state assigned precise political connotations to Romanian victories at the Olympics, but gymnasts themselves did not feel the "burden" of their results until they were welcomed home as heroines. The way gymnasts themselves perceived their own performances says much about how in fact the gymnasts were simply children involved in a game that was directed and controlled by adults. The adults made the rules and assigned specific meanings to the end result of children's work.

Even after achieving European, World or Olympic titles and being declared "national heroines," the gymnasts very much remained children and behaved like children. For instance, upon her return from the Los Angeles Olympics, Simona Paucă was more concerned about what her friends would say about her performances, rather than what the gymnastics success meant for socialist Romania. "I cannot wait to see what my friends and my schoolmates will say," she said. "They promised me that they'd watch the Games on TV."⁵²³ The same applied to her teammate, Ecaterina Szabo, who was labeled as "the new star of world gymnastics."⁵²⁴ Asked what she wanted to do after she finished competing at the Olympics, Szabo replied, "We want to go to Disneyland."⁵²⁵ These statements were a succinct reminder to the Romanian public that the heroines they worshipped during the summer Olympics were in fact children, whose work was elevated by party officials to "national duty."

⁵²³ Hristache Naum and Geo Raetchi, "Delegația olimpică a României s-a înapoiat ieri de la Los Angeles," *Sportul*, 15 August 1984, 24.

⁵²⁴ Dan Gârleșteanu, "O altă seară de neuitat și patru medalii de aur pentru gimnastele noastre," *Sport*, 7 August 1984, 3; Aurel Neagu, "Noua stea a gimnasticii mondiale este tot o româncă," *Sport*, 7 August 1984, 3.

⁵²⁵ Neagu, "Noua stea a gimnasticii mondiale," 3.

The "joy back home"

Discussing the new performances of Romanian gymnasts at international competitions, the press mentioned socialist patriotism as the main drive for gymnasts to compete and win against other countries "with a strong athletic tradition." For sports reporter Ovidiu Ioanițoiaia, the results obtained at the 1984 LA Olympics showed the "exceptional qualities of the Romanian girls who showed courage and determination, imagination and self-control, and, above all, love for our country."⁵²⁶ After all, journalists argued, all the sustained efforts, immense sacrifices, and hard work, were the gymnasts' way of being thankful for the "excellent conditions" that the Party and the State provided for them.⁵²⁷

The newspapers' propagandistic tone was sometimes offset by declarations of the gymnasts themselves. Instead of thinking first of the preconditions "the socialism regime" provided for high performances, gymnasts were more concerned about ordinary Romanians – especially family and friends -- watching their work on TV. Theirs was a more personal brand of patriotism. For instance, the following episode from the Seoul Olympics in 1988 is relevant. Daniela Silivaș, the top-ranked Romanian gymnast, found herself in a difficult position after being defeated by Soviet Elena Shushunova in the all-around individual competition. Nevertheless, in the next phase of the competition, Silivaș proved her resilience and earned 3 gold medals and 1 bronze in the apparatuses finals, surpassing Shushunova. Silivaș's statement upon her return to Romania showed that it was not the socialist regime that drove her to achieve this comeback. Instead, her team's and coaches' support, together with a hope to please Romanians back home, provided the stamina for Silivaș to continue her fight for the gold:

⁵²⁶ Ovidiu Ioanițoiaia, "Fetele noastre de aur," *Revista Flacăra*, 3 August 1984, 24.

⁵²⁷ "Din Los Angeles un cântec pentru toată lumea: 'Trei culori cunosc pe lume,'" *Almanahul Flacăra* (București: Casa Scânteii, 1985) 134.

I have always believed in victory. And after the first part of the contest, when everybody thought me a loser, I wiped my tears on the sleeve and said to myself that she who counts the medals last counts the most. I felt my colleagues, my coaches very close and, aware of my task, I couldn't help thinking of home. And if my victories brought joy back home I am the more happy (sic!) about it.⁵²⁸

Silivaş was confident in her athletic abilities and, after her initial failure, she came back strong with the help of her teammates' and mentors' encouragement. Her desire to bring joy to Romanian audiences watching the Olympics via the TV sets fit with the other Romanian athletes' descriptions of their patriotism. Medical doctor Ioan Drăgan, commenting after the fall of the socialist regime, stated that it wasn't for the political regime that Romanian athletes "fought" at the Olympics. They competed "out of a pure patriotism, out of national pride, and for this they deserve all our unfettered admiration and respect."⁵²⁹ In the same vein, the main coach of the Romanian gymnastics team for 25 years, Octavian Belu mentioned that his best satisfaction as a coach didn't come from the number of medals or titles his gymnasts won, but rather from the acknowledgement of ordinary people, "because you created for them a moment to be happy about. The fact that I shake their hands on the street, that I exchange words with ordinary Romanians kept my morale going, and they are the ones who helped me when it was hard. Thinking of them gave me the energy I needed to overcome the most difficult moments of my career."⁵³⁰ Romanian "banal nationalism" cannot be taken out of the picture when talking about the performances of Romanian athletes at Olympics. Not only gymnasts and coaches alluded to making "Romanians happy" with their victories at the Olympics. Romanian sports fans, too, enjoyed watching little girls earning gold, silver and bronze medals while "fighting" with Cold

⁵²⁸ Catalin Mihai, "Silivaş and the beautiful old traditions," *Romanian Today*, February 1989, 60.

⁵²⁹ Drăgan, *Martor la 8 olimpiade de vară*, 111-112.

⁵³⁰ Belu interview.

War superpowers. It gave them a sense of pride and a sense of belonging in the group of privileged sport power-houses, a seduction of power, otherwise unattainable in other areas of the Cold War conflict.⁵³¹

Conclusion

Since the earliest successes of the Romanian women gymnasts at international competitions during the 1950s, the press continued to use the expression "Romanian school of gymnastics" when commenting on subsequent Romanian gymnasts' work and accomplishments. But what did journalists mean? It was only in the 1980s when journalists finally wrote about the specific meanings of this term. Journalist Aurelian Breceanu, saw the "Romanian school of gymnastics" as a collective endeavor: produced by the socialist regime in Romania, as well as the youthful energy of everyday Romanians. It was, as Breceanu said, a result of the

special competitiveness of Romanian gymnastics in international arenas, made possible by the qualities and talents of Romanian youth, by the remarkable progress in the science of training athletes, by the new conception about the role of sport in our socialist society, and by the improved facilities provided by our party and our state for the coaches, specialists and young people who want to practice elite sports.⁵³²

Beginning with Elena Leuştean and Sonia Iovan in the 1950s and 1960s, continuing with Nadia Comăneci in the 1970s, and with Ecaterina Szabo, Daniela Silivaş and their teammates during the 1980s, the Romanian School of gymnastics was able to bring "a new and always fresh air to the gymnastics world." And because of it, "gymnastics attracted millions of children and

⁵³¹ For a discussion about how the rewriting of history and the directions of the Romanian foreign policy during Ceauşescu's regime were meant to provide Romanians with the same sense of patriotism, see Lucian Boia, "Destinul mare al unei țări mici," *Miturile comunismului românesc*, vol. 2, Lucian Boia ed. (Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 1997), 19-30.

⁵³² Aurelian Breceanu, "' Şcoala românească', o realitate in sportul mondial," *Sportul*, 23 August 1984, 4.

their parents from all over the world."⁵³³ The legacy of the Romanian school of gymnastics, specialists argued, was that it constituted a model for gymnasts from other countries to follow. "It is the number one model in the world," Marius Popescu wrote in *Sportul* in 1984.⁵³⁴ If Nadia Comăneci revolutionized gymnastics and made known globally the Romanian brand of gymnastics, the gymnasts of the 1980s expanded Romania's preeminence in the top tier of Cold War-era elite sports. The system that produced Nadia was actually expanded and refined by new coaches of the national team -- Adrian Goreac, Octavian Belu, Maria Cosma and Adrian Stan. The Romanian school also continued to generate world-class gymnasts that would later surpass the performances which made Nadia famous.

During the last decade of the Cold War, Romania had truly become a global superpower in the competitive, winner-take-all realm of elite sports.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Marius Popescu, "'Școala românească!' -- spun străinii, adică discipline ale sportului nostru urcate la înălțimea modelului," *Sportul*, 30 October 1984, 1.

Conclusion: Notes on Women's Gymnastics in Romania before and after 1989

Such a refusal to train would have been risky, almost unimaginable, under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. But with democratic reform in Romania has come the freedom of dissent.

Jere Longman, journalist, 1994⁵³⁵

As historians and other scholars have noted, the sudden collapse of socialism in December 1989 brought sweeping cultural, economic, social, and political changes to Romania and the rest of the Eastern Bloc.⁵³⁶ In Romania, the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu abruptly disintegrated amidst the rapid eruption of popular outrage following the Timișoara crisis, and the socialist foundations of the economy quickly gave way to a freewheeling Western-style capitalism.⁵³⁷ Despite these upheavals, the Romanian School of Gymnastics continued to produce major victories at international competitions in the 1990s-early 2000s. Even as the political and economic foundations of Romania changed so dramatically, Romanian women gymnasts remained an ongoing, familiar presence on the Olympic, World, and European

⁵³⁵ Jere Longman, "The Cost of Freedom: Romanian Gymnasts Stage Training Slowdown," *New York Times*, 28 September 1994, B15.

⁵³⁶ The toppling of the socialist regime in Romania started in December 1989 in the Western city of Timișoara. A series of studies, written both in Romania and the West, appeared in recent years that examine the many facets of post-Socialist change in Eastern Europe. I will only refer to a few. For a recent ethnographic account of the lives of miners, the elite of Romanian industry before 1989, see David A. Kideckel, *Getting By in Postsocialist Romania: Labor, the Body, and Working-Class Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). For the transformations brought about by land reform in the 1990s, see Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). Verdery also tackled the issues of nationalism, gender, and civil society in her *What Was Communism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). On the first years of the postsocialist transition to democracy and its nationalist politics, see Tom Gallagher, *Democrație și naționalism în România, 1989-1998* (Bucharest: Editura All Educational, 1999). On social and economic transformations after 1989 more generally, see Liviu Chelcea and Oana Mateescu, eds., *Economia informală în România: Piețe, practici sociale și transformări ale statului după 1989* (Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2004). For a valuable discussion of gender and popular culture, see Denise Roman, *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

⁵³⁷ For recent studies of the Romanian Revolution of 1989, see Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Bogdan Murgescu, ed., *Revoluția română din decembrie 1989: Istorie și memorie* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2007).

championship podiums -- the result of the Romanian centralized system of training that first began in the 1960s.

However, as Jere Longman observed in a 1994 article in the *New York Times*, the changes that occurred as a result of Romania's revolution certainly had an impact in the world of elite women's gymnastics. Longman took note of a surprising training "slowdown" at the Deva gymnastics school. It was not quite a work stoppage or a strike, but the gymnasts' subtle week-long retreat from the usual training schedule was reportedly the result of an unresolved grievance: that athletes had not received government-owed rewards for performances at the 1994 World and European gymnastics championships. Gymnasts initiated the protest at the coaches' suggestion, who decided that this was the only way to obtain their deserved rewards. Taken entirely by surprise, the Romanian state quickly caved in to the sports workers' demands. The Romanian Prime Minister, Nicolae Văcăroiu, directly intervened and paid rewards to the gymnasts, claiming the payments had been caught in a "bureaucratic snag."⁵³⁸ For the gymnasts of the new Romania, an injustice had occurred, and they were not afraid to take direct action in defense of their interests.

The 1994 training slowdown at Deva points to changes in women athletes' attitudes and expectations, as well as their ability to voice their opinions. Clearly, gymnasts were no longer the quiet children once censored by the socialist regime and its press. They were no longer afraid to criticize or even rebel against Federation officials, something "almost unimaginable" before 1989, as Jere Longman pointed out.

Following the revolution, Romanian women gymnasts' and journalists' criticisms were heard in the press for the first time. In 1991, Aurelia Dobre, the 1987 world champion, spoke out bitterly against the "authoritarian system of training" long-embraced by the Romanian

⁵³⁸ Longman, "The Cost of Freedom," B15.

Gymnastics Federation. In an article published in *International Gymnast*, a US publication, Dobre denounced the ruthless dieting restrictions, as well as the lack of individual freedom to speak with foreigners and reporters during trips abroad. However, she spoke most critically of the wearisome training schedule, which did not allow for any semblance of a normal girl's life. In particular, she lamented her lack of a chance to receive a proper education:

I haven't been taught anything other than gymnastics . . . I get nervous if people ask me questions. I hardly know the answer to the most common questions. I have often been jealous of other girls. I can't think of anything positive to say about all those years. My world title? No, that was a big surprise for me, too, but I would have loved to trade it for more freedom at the time. As soon as I got off the awards stand, I was a slave again.⁵³⁹

Dobre's comments demonstrate that she harbored bitter memories of gymnastics during the socialist era. She resented her lack of freedom and the limited formal education she received while training to compete at the world championships and the Seoul Olympic Games. In a post-1989, democratic Romania, however, Dobre's assertive voice signaled the broad range of individual expression that was now possible.

Federation officials and coaches were surprised by Dobre's remarks. Confronted by American journalists during a 1991 US-Romania gymnastics meet in Houston, Texas, Adrian Stoica, the secretary general of the RGF, insisted that Dobre's accusations were implausible since "she had all the honors given in Romania." He saw no reason for Dobre to complain. Coaches and officials insisted that women athletes were never exploited and had the freedom to leave the national team. Octavian Belu, who became the head-coach of the national team in 1988, remarked that none of the girls training at Deva were forced to stay with the national team; they always had the choice to pursue other endeavors.⁵⁴⁰ Though socialism crumbled in 1989,

⁵³⁹ See Michael Janofsky, "Star-Spangled Romanian," *New York Times*, 7 April 1991, S12.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

coaches and officials continued to manage the Romanian school of gymnastics much as they had always done: state-sponsored sports remained a vigorous, demanding, and often exploitive career path for young women.

In response to the growing assertiveness of the athletes in their charge, trainers and coaches had to adapt their training approaches and methods to the new sensibilities of a post-socialist Romania. "Now I must come as a collaborator," Belu remarked in 1995. "Before, a gymnast doesn't ask [sic] -- she was told," he continued. "Now my job is more difficult." He noted that he had to be "more diplomatic," more flexible with both the girls and their family members back home, to be like "an artist" -- able to nimbly juggle different temperaments and personalities with far more sensitivity and fairness. Half-smiling to reporters, Belu concluded: "Now I'm still the God, but I'm more human than before."⁵⁴¹

Still, as Octavian Belu's own words suggest, the transition to a post-socialist society after 1989 by no means undermined the RGF's usual ways of recruiting, training, and rewarding its athletes; in fact, RGF coaches and officials worked to adapt the old ways to the new circumstances. For example, the new democratic Romanian Parliament enacted several laws regarding the compensation of athletes according to the types of medals and records obtained at international competitions, a practice that harkened back to the days of socialism.⁵⁴² The appearance of legislation suggests that, despite the end of socialism, and the economic downturn of the 1990s, the Romanian state continued to see the development of elite sports as a national priority.⁵⁴³ Thus, the material awards for athletes continued practices first established by the

⁵⁴¹ Jane Perlez, "Romanian Coach Keeps Up the Fight," *New York Times*, 13 July 1995, B19.

⁵⁴² For a summary of the laws governing financial payments to athletes who achieved top scores at international competitions, see Alexe Nicu, ed., *Enciclopedia Educației Fizice și Sportului din România*, Vol. 3, (București: Aramis, 2002), 38-45.

⁵⁴³ On the economic downturn in post-Socialist Romania, see Chelcea and Mateescu, eds., *Economia informală în*

pre-1989 regime, which once regarded elite sports as a key way to affirm its legitimacy at home and abroad and to lay claim to superpower status. While women's gymnasts benefited the most, athletes in track-and-field and kayaking also received payments from the Romanian state.⁵⁴⁴

For Romanian women gymnasts, such as those who initiated the 1994 training slowdown, the monetary prizes attached to athletic success represented real incentives to work hard and succeed at their craft. The financial incentives were not slight. For instance, head coach Octavian Belu (who was an assistant coach during 1981-1988) mentioned in 1994 that a world championship silver medal was valued at \$5,390, a gold at \$7,190, and the 1996 Olympic gold medal at Atlanta was valued at \$10,780.⁵⁴⁵ These sums of money, while heavily taxed by the state, were added to nontaxable life-long pensions paid to top gymnasts for Olympic, World, and European titles.⁵⁴⁶ These sums were significant in a country where the average monthly wage was a paltry \$115.⁵⁴⁷ Gymnastics glory was a way out of the economic bottom in both socialist and post-socialist Romania. As Daniela Georgescu, the mother of a 15-year old Onesti gymnast, declared, "Since the revolution, life is hard; it is the law of the jungle." "Gymnastics,"

România; Verdery, What Was Communism?; Ivan T. Berend, Central and Eastern Europe 1944-1993: Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 341-381.

⁵⁴⁴ After gymnastics, track-and-field and kayak performers won the most medals at the Olympic Games between the 1950s and 1980s.

⁵⁴⁵ Unfortunately the pre 1989 figures were not available at the time of the research. Longman, "The Cost of Freedom," B15.

⁵⁴⁶ After their retirement from elite gymnastics, winning athletes were entitled to monthly "retirement" pensions that were calculated according to the number of Olympic medals and the World and European titles won. Thus, according to the Law nr 69 from 2000, a gold Olympic medal was worth 1.5 times more than the average monthly wage, a World title was worth 1.2 times more than the average monthly wage, and a second World title would be calculated at 0.6 times more than the average monthly wage. See the text of the law at http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/legea_sportului.php (accessed 2 July 2009). These measures for the "social protection" of elite athletes were also applied retroactively to pre-1989 gymnasts. Thus, for instance, Nadia Comăneci, Ecaterina Szabo, Daniela Silivaş, Lavinia Miloşovici, and Simona Amânar received the same pensions once the law was enacted. See Mirela Neag and Robert Berza, "Urmează pensia," *ProSport*, 6 December 2002, 10.

⁵⁴⁷ US Department of State, "Romania: 1994 Country Report on Economic Policy and Trade Practices," http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/economics/trade_reports/1994/Romania.html (accessed 26 June 2009).

she claimed, "is an easier future than to work in a factory or to be a sales assistant." With the unrelenting training regimen, "the work of gymnastics," as Georgescu called it, was not as easy as she claimed, but it provided an attractive possibility in a fragile transition capitalist economy quickly overcome by inflation, low salaries, and chronic job insecurity.⁵⁴⁸

As I argued in this dissertation, the Romanian socialist state used elite women's gymnastics to claim a position of power and prestige in a Cold War dominated militarily, economically, and scientifically by the United States and the Soviet Union. During the early Cold War, the Romanian government used the printed press to attack the West, to denigrate what officials and writers dubbed "capitalist sport," portraying it as a source of profit for greedy businessmen, dominated by violence, racism, degeneration, exploitation, and the short-lived fame of exploited athletes. In contrast to the "decadent" and "corrupt" Westerners, Romanian sports officials imagined a sports system that emulated new Soviet methods of training: a system based on a new brand of "top athlete," who was capable of superior athletic performances and displayed what officials called a "correct ideological profile." Sport officials embraced sports as a foundation of successful socialism because it would provide the country with healthy worker-athletes who could help build a vigorous society, successfully compete abroad, and thereby enhance Romania's prestige and clout. These elite athletes needed to secure medals and bring fame to the homeland, yet they also needed to be model citizens with good communist morals, capable of demonstrating the superiority of the socialist regime to doubtful Western audiences.

In the 1950s and 1960s, leaders discovered that elite women gymnastics offered the greatest potential for inserting the Romanian nation in the contested spaces of the Cold War

⁵⁴⁸ Chris Stephen, "Cranking out Comanecis," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 September 2000, 56.

which were so often dominated by the Americans and the Soviets, as Romanian women gymnasts produced unexpected successes in the early Cold War Olympiads. Romanian sports officials, who specialized in Soviet methods of training, coached the first Romanian women gymnasts who became well-known at home and abroad. Beginning with the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, Romanian women gymnasts, such as Elena Leuştean, obtained the first Olympic medals for Romania and inaugurated a long series of Olympic successes. Supporting these early successes was a significant collective effort that brought together gymnasts, coaches, sportswriters, referees, and federation officials. The Romanian government had a specific agenda for women gymnasts: They were seen as ambassadors in sportswear, representing Romania abroad as a successful socialist state. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Romania used sports to align itself with the cultural values of the powerful Soviet Union. Gymnastics fulfilled Romania's policy of serving as a reliable ally of the Soviet Union, endorsing the Russians in all areas, including sports.⁵⁴⁹

Toward the end of the 1960s, the creation of the Onesti gymnastics school signaled the Romanian state's determination to engender sustained athletic success on its own terms. This coincided with a change of direction in the Romanian government's policies in national affairs and in its relationships with Soviet Union. Party officials, now led by Nicolae Ceauşescu, began to distance Romania from Moscow in the second half of the 1960s and established a period of 25 years of Romanian "national communism."⁵⁵⁰ The creation of the new school of gymnastics at

⁵⁴⁹ On the 1950s and early 1960s Romanian Communist Party's line as an adherent to Soviet models, see, among others, Robert R. King, *A History of the Romanian Communist Party* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1980); Ghiţă Ionescu, *Comunismul în România* (Bucureşti: Editura Litera, 1994); Kenneth Jowitt, *Revolutionary Breakthroughs and National Development: The Case of Romania, 1944-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁵⁵⁰ For a discussion of Romanian national communism under Nicolae Ceauşescu, see Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 187-225. On national ideology in Romanian culture and politics, see Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology*

Onesti, with different training methods than those used in the Soviet Union, produced a Romanian brand of elite women's gymnastics and a huge gymnastics star: At the Montreal Olympics in 1976, the international media's attention was captured by the enigmatic Nadia Comaneci, a not-yet fourteen-year-old who, according to observers and fans, revolutionized the sport.

With Nadia's success and celebrity, Romania was able to make an important claim as a powerhouse in international women's gymnastics, a field dominated previously by the Soviet Union. Even as the United States expanded onto the playing field of women's gymnastics during the 1980s, an era overshadowed by controversial Olympic boycotts, Romanian gymnasts continued to dominate the sport as one of its superpowers. Also as a result of success in women's gymnastics, Romanians could embrace a sense of national prestige in a period of economic stagnation. Sports allowed Romanians to feel powerful: much more than a small country struggling under the weight of authoritarian rule and a meager economy.

Romanian party officials wanted to use the fame brought by Nadia Comăneci to push their nationalist agenda both internationally and internally. Nadia's performances became tools for sports and party officials to prove to the world and also to Romanian citizens that the Romanian brand of socialism was viable, legitimate, and deserving of international recognition. However, Comaneci's image and legacy proved to be too much for the Romanian state to control as her celebrity and fame became global. Western audiences' adoration made her much more than a symbol of Romanian nationalism and socialism. They adored Nadia as a young girl, a child, who seemed to defy her youth by becoming a "perfect" world champion in the largest

under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). For other works that discuss the nationalist tendencies of Ceaușescu's regime, see Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe 1944-1993*, esp. 131-136; Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule* (Bucharest: Civic Academy Foundation, 1998).

spectacle in sports: the Olympic Games. Even after Nadia officially retired from gymnastics in 1981, journalists continued to celebrate her performances as the best the world had ever seen – or would see again. Journalists, however, overlooked the fact that a new generation of women gymnasts was already achieving comparable results at international competitions, including the team Gold Medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

The Romanian school of gymnastics continued to produce world-class stars throughout the 1980s. Ceaușescu's propaganda apparatus attributed gymnasts' performances to the coaches' and athletes' commitment to the socialist homeland. However, these young athletes pursued gymnastics not for the regime but to "bring joy back home," as they often remarked. Also, they performed in order to obtain individual rewards and perks that would provide them and their families with more comfort than ordinary Romanians experienced during the economic penury of the 1980s.⁵⁵¹ Romanian citizens expressed great pride as they watched international competitions featuring gymnasts' victories over Soviet, American, or Chinese athletes throughout the 1980s. And it wasn't because they were celebrating Romania's socialism. Their pleasure came from the fact that they genuinely admired the little girls who were capable of such acrobatic feats and daredevil exploits. Their performances managed to raise the Romanian flag to top positions on winners' podiums, often surpassing the principal superpowers of the Cold War. Consequently, Romanian sports fans strongly identified with Romanian gymnasts and felt proud to be Romanians, even if only for a short period of time. In contrast to the glory of women's gymnastics, Romanians' daily routines became less and less glamorous, especially during the 1980s when the majority of Romanians were struggling to secure even the most basic consumer

⁵⁵¹ For instance, as a reward for her winning results at the 1987 World Championships, Aurelia Dobre received a four-bedroom apartment in Bucharest. See Ovidiu Ioanițoaia, "Aurelia Dobre: voi căuta să răspund, prin rezultate, grijii și căldurii care mi se arată," *Sport*, January 1988, 6.

goods: toilet paper, meat, cooking oil, sugar, flour, clothing, and bread.⁵⁵²

The Cold War era culture of celebrating women gymnasts as national heroes has continued to the present day, but with great difficulty. After retiring from gymnastics, some women gymnasts of the post-communist era used their celebrity in previously inconceivable ways. Some used the newfound freedoms of democratic Romania to obtain money by displaying their naked bodies. First was Aurelia Dobre, who appeared naked in the Dutch edition of *Playboy* in 1991 for the sum of \$50,000. The Romanian press was shocked and dismayed, questioning her morals and patriotism. Dobre explained that she was finally free to do anything she pleased. While she certainly wanted money, she imagined her *Playboy* pictorial as a rebellion against the strict training regime she knew until her retirement from the national team in 1989, as well as the patriotic, nationalistic presumptions of Romanian officials, journalists, and citizens who expected her to behave more appropriately as a symbol of the Romanian nation.

⁵⁵³ Dobre would be followed by Corina Ungureanu who posed naked for the Romanian version of *Playboy* in 1998.

A second scandal appeared in 2002. Lavinia Milosovici, Claudia Presecan, and Corina Ungureanu -- all world champions -- filmed videos and posed topless for the Japanese magazine

⁵⁵² For oral histories detailing the hardships of everyday life in the 1980s, see the collection put together by a team of researchers from the Romanian Peasant Museum: Irina Nicolau et al., *LXXX. Mărturii orale: Anii '80 și Bucureștenii* (Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2003). Similarly, Adrian Neculau edited a volume on various aspects of everyday life under Ceaușescu's regime, focused on such issues as shortages of consumer goods, censorship, the status of intellectuals, dissent movements, etc., see Adrian Neculau, ed., *Viata cotidiană în comunism* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2004). Another collection of documents about Romanians' everyday lives in the 1980s was collected by Gelu Ionescu and authored by Vlad Georgescu and presented by Radio Free Europe. See Vlad Georgescu, *România anilor '80* (München, București: Editura Jon Dumitru Verlag, 1995). For a feminist take on everyday life in Eastern Europe before and immediately after the fall of communism, see Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

⁵⁵³ On Aurelia Dobre's all-around world championship title in the Netherlands in 1987, see Doina Vasiliu, "Aurelia rămâne o vedetă," *Sportul*, November 1991, 17.

Shukan Gendal, allegedly for \$30,000 each.⁵⁵⁴ While some voices in the press vehemently condemned the three athletes, other well-known Romanian journalists denounced their colleagues' as prudes.⁵⁵⁵ The debate around the naked bodies of these former gymnasts finally ended with a 5-year ban imposed by the Romanian Gymnastics Federation, who barred the three gymnasts from representing the RGF in any official capacity until 2007. The sport officials' rationale emphasized the gymnasts' "abusive use of RGF symbols," referring to the sports gear used in the photos, as well as "the damages brought to the image of Romanian gymnastics in general and of RGF in particular."⁵⁵⁶ Nicolae Vieru, president of the RGF, was prepared to go as far as to suspend the life pensions for the gymnasts involved in the scandal, which was seen as outrageous by other gymnasts and Romanian sports fans.

The scandal revealed that sports officials -- many of whom were the same persons who ran the RGF before 1989 -- were slow to adapt to the new sensibilities of post-socialist Romania. Despite officials' stern reaction, public opinion supported the athletes. Observers continued to praise their achievements and their history as national heroes, and to say their actions were justifiable in the new Romania. Journalist Tudor Octavian's commentary on the 2002 incident nicely summarizes the expectations placed on women gymnasts throughout the Cold War era:

As long as our women gymnasts represented Romania abroad and were seen as a vital part of the communist foreign policy, Romanian girls mattered as an elite raw material for Romanian sports. And they made us feel proud so many times, even if we didn't know why, and mostly at what price. If we want to talk about a national duty, although nobody should be held so obliged to its homeland as to break their bodies for it, then we can still say that our gymnasts fulfilled their duty. . .

⁵⁵⁴ Horațiu Ardelean, "Goale pentru japonezi, pudice pentru români," *ProSport*, 15 November 2002, 12.

⁵⁵⁵ Several well-known journalists commented on the incident in "Cuvinte despre un gest," *ProSport*, 16 November 2002, 1, 12.

⁵⁵⁶ Luminița Paul, "FRG le-a suspendat pe Miloșovici, Presecan și Ungureanu," *ProSport*, 19 December 2002, 1.

Tudor Octavian pointed to the importance of women gymnasts to the socialist regime, and to the ongoing propensity of the Romanian state to "nationalize" their bodies even after the demise of communism. But now, Octavian noted, Romanians needed to accept change and perhaps fashion a new sense of Romanian-ness: "Now Romania simply has to let its former Olympic champions live . . . as they like."⁵⁵⁷ Old expectations no longer applied.

The Romanian school of gymnastics that created so many champions in the 1970s and 1980s continued to achieve world championship results in the 1990s and the early 2000s: for example, Gina Gogean's silver medal all-around win in Atlanta during the 1996 Olympics; the women's team all-around gold at the 2000 Sydney games; and Catalina Ponor's 2004 gold medal balance beam routine in Athens, as well as the all-around team gold medal. The centralized system of training for the national team, however, would cease to exist in 2005. First, Octavian Belu and Mariana Bitang, who coached the team since 1988, retired amid persistent criticism from the women gymnasts of the national team.⁵⁵⁸ Gymnasts complained on several occasions during the early 2000s that Belu and Bitang's close supervision of their private lives was too restrictive. Rebellion abounded. Reports in the press described the gymnasts' carousing at night on the weekends, as well as the exasperation of the coaches who did not want to tolerate anymore the gymnasts' lack of discipline in training and commitment. Second, the Romanian Gymnastics Federation decided to end the centralized training system for the national team and send gymnasts from local clubs -- such as Steaua Bucharest or Farul Constanta -- to major international competitions such as the Olympic Games, as they did in 2008 at the Olympics in

⁵⁵⁷ Tudor Octavian, "Cuvinte despre un gest," *ProSport*, 16 November 2002, 12.

⁵⁵⁸ For a synthesis of the RGF decision to end the national Olympic team of women gymnasts, see, among others, Sorin Anghel and Florin Gongu, "A fost odată! S-a desființat lotul olimpic feminin de gimnastică," *Jurnalul National*, 21 August 2005, 1, 6-7; Claudiu Zamfir, "Dispare ultimul brand: Romania fără gimnastică! De la eroina Nadia la petrecărețele zilei actuale," *Ultima Ora*, 31 August 2005, 10.

Beijing. The retirement of coaches Belu and Bitang proved to be the end of an era in the history of elite Romanian women's gymnastics.

Romania's superpower status in women's gymnastics survived more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, lasting until 2005. Even though the glory days are now largely over, the Romanian school of gymnastics transformed nationalism, popular culture, and sports culture, both in Romania and elsewhere in the world. The popularity of gymnastics in Romanian history is owed to the Cold War itself; it was a sport that allowed the Romanian socialist state to most effectively project national clout and uniqueness on the international stage. In addition, women gymnasts were ambassadors in sportswear who made it possible for Romania to challenge the superpower structure of the Cold War -- a framework so heavily dominated by the Americans and the Soviets. From the winners' podium at Montreal, where Nadia Comăneci famously achieved the first perfect 10s in Olympic history, to the schoolyards of Romanian cities, towns, and villages during the 1970s-1980s, where a generation of young girls tried to emulate the floor routines of their heroes, gymnastics became emblematic of Romanian-ness and the viability of the Romanian state during the years of the Cold War -- and beyond.

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