

The Cold War and Ice Hockey: How the Rink Became an International Battleground

Devin Guevara

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Introduction

In 1969, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia went to battle in Stockholm, Sweden after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR months earlier. In what would normally be a quiet arena between two non-home teams at the World Ice Hockey Championships, the Swedish and Czech crowd made sure to let their presence be known.

While there were Soviets in attendance, the angry and excited Czechs held custom banners and shouted chants in their home language to cheer on their team. The game following the invasion was a patriotic and anger driven endeavor for the crowd and the players. With Sweden temporarily severing ties with the USSR in hockey tournaments, the homeland citizens backed the Czech fanbase, breaking their famed neutrality.¹ Cheers roared in both directions as the puck traveled up and down the ice in an intense game that saw passion drive the Soviets to abnormal sloppy play, which the Czechoslovaks took advantage of. With the crowd at their backs, the Czechoslovaks looked to take the battle to the Soviets as a revenge tour for the injustices done in their homeland. Unbeknownst to the Soviet team, Scheiner examines that the USSR players may not have known why the Czechoslovaks were so fierce about this particular game and that the invasion on Czechoslovakia was to prevent a counterrevolution.²

After three loud and violent periods, the Czechoslovakian team reigned supreme, edging the Soviets out in a win on the ice that was needed for the citizens fighting back home. It is expressed that even the Soviet players, on that evening, understood that this was much more than

¹ Ethan Scheiner, *Freedom to Win: A Cold War story of the courageous hockey team that fought the Soviets for the soul of its people-and olympic gold* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2023), 141

² Scheiner, 148.

a hockey match for the Czechoslovaks and the enduring crowd.³ “..Where they [Czeckoslovakian team] cheered incoherently and embraced one another with the jubilation of men who had won a two-decade war, not a hockey match...”.⁴ The battle that hockey players face on the ice often goes far beyond the game itself. In this example, that is explained by the motivation of the crowd and the players to ensure a Soviet loss on the ice, resulting in a Czechoslovakian win off the ice. How did the ice hockey rink become a battleground during the Cold War? While tensions between super power countries rose and societal competition materialized at home, international tournaments and players allowed the friction to be experienced by the public. This permitted patriotic incentives and enabled victorious sentiments in a war with little bloodshed off the ice.

The NHL vs. The Soviet Union

Beginning in 1972, the NHL had commissioned the league to play against the USSR and Soviet players for the first time in what was called “The Summit Series”. This would be the first time that the North American based league would play against the teams based out of the Soviet Union due to the extreme differences in gameplay and restrictions from the USSR.⁵ The significance of this series did not lay on the NHL superstar actors that took part such as: Bobby Clarke, Phil Esposito, Ken Dryden, and J.P. Parise, but in the actions that occurred on the ice as two different types of hockey clashed. The Soviet teams were known for being more eloquent skaters, methodical in their play with little physical contact. Canadian and American players

³ Scheiner, 156

⁴ Scheiner, 157

⁵ Jeff Z Klein, “In 1972, Hockey’s Cold War Boiled Over,” *New York Times*, Sept 02, 2012.

played a different game, one that saw violence become a distinct factor for the winning side.⁶ Another prominent actor was Boris Mikhailov, captain of the Soviet team, who always had input on the violence of the North American teams he played against. It is reported that in the 1972 Series, Phil Esposito made a motion of a finger across his throat at the red team captain to threaten him mid-game. “To me, it was war” exclaimed Esposito in 1989 when referencing this game, stating that he would have done anything to win against the Red Army.⁷ There is emphasis put on the violence of this game given the societal context of the time. Being that there were tensions between the USSR and both Canada and the United States, it is easy to say that there were motivations from the American teams to do their best against a country that was to be looked at as a threat. Klein states that the players had looked back at these games as time had passed and the need to win was both a validation for the violence in the game as well as a win for the society of the winning nations.⁸

The trend of violent games continued through the future as the Summit Series turned into the Super Series where the reigning super powers of the NHL would face off against Soviet Union teams. In 1976, the infamous “Broad Street Bullies” of the Philadelphia Flyers faced the Red Army team in one of the most violent displays of hockey to date. Boris Mikhailov was still to compete with the Soviets as he experienced his teammate Valery Kharlamov take a check from Flyers Ed Van Impe that dropped the Soviet to the ice in pain.⁹ “It was too much physical,”

⁶ Klein, “In 1972, Hockey’s Cold War Boiled Over”

⁷ Klein, “In 1972, Hockey’s Cold War Boiled Over”

⁸ Klein, “In 1972, Hockey’s Cold War Boiled Over”

⁹ Joe Lapointe, “Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight,” *New York Times*, Jan 9, 1990. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index

said Mikhailov as it seemed that the Flyers were on a mission to head-hunt the most talented players on the Soviet team.¹⁰ Lapointe's article covers a rematch of the Soviets and Flyers taking place on January 9th, 1990, fourteen years after the violent game that sent the Soviets to the locker room to surrender only to return to the ice after hearing they would not be paid if they did not. At the time of the rematch, there were lessened tensions between the teams as the Berlin wall had just fallen months prior, and it seemed like the Cold War would be settling down. Mikhailov was an assistant coach of the 1990 Red Army team and expressed his sentiment returning to the states saying "It will be interesting to compare what has changed."¹¹

The NHL and USSR had distinct battles on the ice that represented Cold War tensions between the superpower countries with patriotism and sentiment that went far beyond the game itself. The physical battle of each game showed that, even though the Cold War did not result in all out war, violent fights still took place for the competition of societal ideology. While Soviets played cleaner and more strategic games, the American teams took the battle to heart and played with fierce physicality to ensure wins for the team and the American people.

Politics in Hockey

While battles raged on the ice, there were also conflicts off it which fueled the players and coaches to step up more than ever. Part of the reason that Lapointe reported of the rematch between the Flyers and the Red Army team was a dispute between Soviet officials and the Buffalo Sabres before their game with the touring team. Aleksandr Mogilny was a young superstar for the Sabres who looked to make a splash with the team, however, the league had other plans as the NHL president John A Zielger jr. insisted Mogilny be sat against the visiting

¹⁰ Lapointe, "Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight"

¹¹ Lapointe, "Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight"

Soviet team.¹² The request transpired from Soviet authorities due to the fact that Mogilny had defected from the Soviet Union a year earlier and looked to America as a way to play the game outside of the tyrannical state. This came to be significant when the owner of the Philadelphia Flyers, Ed Snider, stated his distaste for the decision to sit young Mogilny as he said it “was a disgrace” to not include someone from the game in the country where they sought asylum.¹³ Although Snider did not employ any Soviet players at the time, he exclaimed that he would “welcome a Soviet defector with open arms” as he was displeased with The Union still being behind the Iron Curtain meaning people and players could not come and go as they pleased.¹⁴ The significance of hockey team owners intervening with political decisions off the ice is an example of conflict that would affect the players on the ice. Once players get wind of this news, it is easy to say that Mogilny’s teammates would not take it easy on the visiting Red Army team due to the restriction of their defector superstar.

Since the revolution in 1917, the USSR has had specific and strict political resolutions about sporting and how it is used in their society.¹⁵ Mentioning societal competition earlier, this is a key factor for why the Soviet Union was open to international competition in sport, particularly against other competing societal ideologies in countries such as Canada, United States and, those in Western Europe.¹⁶ James Riordan examines how the Soviets viewed winning in sporting competition and had explained that every win would be an advertisement for the

¹² Lapointe, “Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight”

¹³ Lapointe, “Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight”

¹⁴ Lapointe, “Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight”

¹⁵ James Riordan, “Soviet Sport and Soviet Foreign Policy.” *Soviet Studies* 26, no. 3, (1974), 323

¹⁶ Riordan, 332

Communist social system against the “decaying culture of the capitalist states”.¹⁷ This inherent competition of societal ideologies is what makes the Soviet passion for sport much more competitive and driven to win no matter the circumstance. Ice hockey became a large part of the USSR once they began competing first at the 1954 World Championship of Hockey and then the 1956 Winter Olympics, both of which the Soviets saw success.¹⁸ Tying these ideas back to the article by Joe Lapointe, Bob Clarke commented on the violent 1976 Super Series game between the Flyers and Soviets saying “it seemed like a clash between a ‘style of life and a political system. We were right and they were wrong.’”¹⁹ Analyzing this we see that the context that the Soviet Union puts sporting into makes for more dramatic and patriotic reasons behind winning. The Soviet Union view was that when they won on the ice, the win would span across cultures to show the world that the Communist society was superior and western society would eventually fall. Those who opposed the Soviets, like Bob Clarke, Ed Snider, and Aleksandr Mogilny showed that there would be those who did not agree with their systems and would fight on and off the ice against them.

The Miracle

In 1980, the United States also took advantage of a win and used their unlikely victory in the Olympic Ice Hockey tournament to bolster their western ideas against the powerhouse Soviets. What is called “The Miracle on Ice” has been talked about since its inception with movies made and countless articles and books written about the historical American victory. Not only were the victory sentiments on display, but the militant and strict style of discipline in

¹⁷ Riordan, 332

¹⁸ Riordan, 333

¹⁹ Lapointe, “Politics Aside, Flyers and Soviets Resume Action Tonight”

coaching could be comparable to that of Soviet training. This was because of head coach Herb Brooks who would take control of the meager former collegiate level club.²⁰ Although Brooks was seen as a “maniac in charge” he was what the team needed, bringing a genius mindset that set him apart from the hockey narratives of the 1970s.²¹ Up until this point, the Soviet teams have met the NHL players and suffered from extreme violence and hard hitting competition that saw them leave the ice at some points. However, the Soviets had dominated on the Olympic stage winning Gold in the previous four Olympic competitions in addition to fourteen out of sixteen World Hockey Championships prior. Brooks took note of the style of play and the success the Soviets had in these recent competitions and decided to adapt it to the American team for this Olympic tournament.²² “His genius was to see that the American team needed to engage the Russians with their own style of play – fast, fluid and based on puck control, not muscle – and then to brainwash the American players, most of whom were former collegians with no international experience into believing they were better than they were.”²³ Examining the strategy Brooks was taking, it could be compared to that of Soviet ideas that were to be feared during this time and in preceding years. McGrath highlights parts of Coffey’s book, *The Boys of Winter*; that state that Brooks used tactics and “mind games that verged at times on the

²⁰ Wayne Coffey, Charles McGrath, “The Really Cold War: Revisiting the U.S. hockey team;s stunning defeat of the Soviets in the 1980 Olympics. THE BOYS OF WINTER” *New York Times*, Jan 09, 2005. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index

²¹ Coffey, McGrath, “The Really Cold War”

²² Coffey, McGrath, “The Really Cold War”

²³ Coffey, McGrath, “The Really Cold War”

sadistic.”²⁴ But Brooks may have just been doing what needed to be done in order to secure a win, for the 1980 Olympics took place in a time where the outcome of the Cold War seemed very uncertain. And win they did, outclassing the Soviets 4-3 in a hard fought and much needed victory for the Americans.

Like the other victories discussed thus far, the American one was no different, and perhaps more influential on a political level. The sentiments experienced would ride parallel with the anti-communist and anti-war sentiments of the time as the American love of the country resurged over the Soviet loss. Recalling the significance of the societal competition taking place, John Soares writes that the link between differing societal ideas and sport being played in different manners highlights the competition in Lake Placid.²⁵ “Hockey, in other words, was not just a (comparatively) peaceful form of proxy warfare in which national prestige was at stake. It also was a contest between two social systems whose outcome had political ramifications.”²⁶ While the Soviets and Americans would be very different off the ice, on it they would fight for similar causes given the contexts of the Cold War and how the respective countries were fighting it. For the Americans, the win in 1980 would be extremely impactful; touting anti-Soviet sentiments with the win which aligned well with the anti-Communist standpoint of presidential candidate Ronald Reagan.²⁷ Soares explains that Reagan rode the coattails of the win to his

²⁴ Coffey, McGrath, “The Really Cold War”

²⁵ John Soares, “The Cold War on Ice” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol 14, no. 2, (2008), 84

²⁶ Soares, “The Cold War on Ice”

²⁷ John Soares, “Cold War, Hot Ice: International Ice Hockey, 1947-1980.” *Journal of Sport History*, Vol 34, No. 2, (2007), 221

presidential success in 1984 with his campaign slogan “America is back” following the patriotic uprising.²⁸

The victory in Lake Placid was much more than just a hockey game of the United States versus the USSR. Analyzing the effects of the win shows that the societal competition was won and the effects the game had on politics would carry on for years to come. Being that the American team were the underdogs coming into the game, there was little for them to lose and Herb Brooks took advantage of the opportunity to stun the Soviets in the biggest way possible, beating them at their own game. The resounding patriotic effect that the game had on the people transformed American society and was also able to revive a collective Western society agreement of the democratic favors over the Communist ideas of the Soviet Union.²⁹

Conclusion

The relationship between ice hockey and international relations between superpower countries during the Cold War is one that should not be overlooked. From underdog wins against reigning champions, to hard fought violent battles that imitated war time battlefields. For decades, the ice hockey rink set the stage for the Cold War to be fought on, limiting real war efforts, but still having a profound impact on the people and societies of the countries. While professional competitions coming in the form of the Super Series saw massive success for the American and Canadian teams, there were still divides to be found in which players were allowed to play and how the games would be played. However, the Soviets were proving to be all-stars on the international stage due to collapses from the Western teams during this time. Where the Americans and Canadians were failing, the Soviets were winning, but when the

²⁸ Soares, “Cold War, Hot Ice”

²⁹ Soares, “Cold War, Hot Ice”

Soviets had opportunities to play with the greatest players in the world, they quickly crumbled under the pressure. The back and forth of success in different stages of hockey always came down to who was the best on the ice at the time and the best were always playing for something more than the game itself.

International ice hockey games and tournaments allowed for the friction of the Cold War to be experienced by players, coaches, and viewing citizens. Although players knew of the tensions rising throughout the years, it was important to not let it taint their play or affect the game, but it did. Wins on the international stage saw the Soviets become World Wide threats, but humbling exhibition games against NHL teams showed that they were not the best players in the world. The dueling teams consistently came together in attempts to show which society was more powerful, playing for the win on the ice to ensure the loss of the other team and country off the ice.

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