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The Olympic Games and the Secret Cold War: The U.S. Government and the Propaganda Campaign Against Communist Sport, 1950-1960

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Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Program

Kinesiology

Supervisor

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviet Union and its East European satellites used international sport as a diplomatic tool to convince the world that communism was a vibrant and superior political ideology. This study explores the U.S. government's effort to counter the communist "sports offensive." In particular, it is demonstrated that the U.S. government harnessed the Olympic Games as a platform to wage a propaganda campaign against communist sport during the early years of the Cold War. Based on declassified documents and a range of previously unexamined archival material, this dissertation argues that the United States responded to the expansive post-war challenge of Soviet sport earlier, and far more aggressively, than previously acknowledged by scholarly examination. The response was not a replication of the state-directed Soviet sports system, but instigated through covert psychological warfare operations and overt propaganda distributed to the "free world."

From 1950 to 1960, the U.S. government took an unprecedented interest in international sport and the Olympic Games. In the lead up to, and during each Olympic festival, the U.S. information program sent waves of propaganda material across the globe to promote the American way of life and, by the same token, to denounce communism. It used the Olympic host cities as venues for a range of propaganda drives to advertise the American economic and political system; it also attempted to manipulate the International Olympic Committee in clandestine ways. The most prevalent aspect of many of these initiatives was the government's cooperation with private groups, some of which were secretly funded émigré organizations bent on "liberating" the regimes of Eastern Europe from communism. While all of these efforts to utilize sport may have been less extensive than those pursued by the Soviet Union, they do provide further insights into how the U.S. government mobilized culture to conduct the Cold War.

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