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László Marácz[1]

The Hungarian Fencing Elite in the Service of the Soviet Union

Abstract

The Soviet Union was not part of the international sports circuit during the Interwar period. After the Bolshevik October Revolution, the newly formed communist state focused on developing its own political structures, which also affected sports in the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, the policy of isolation was given up and the Soviet sports management targeted the Olympic Games as a platform to demonstrate the superiority of the communist system by planning to win the Olympic medal tally. The Soviets considered fencing a class-hostile, 'bourgeois sport' and did not promote it among civilians during the Interwar period. This radically changed as soon as the Soviet political and sports leadership decided to participate in the Helsinki Olympic Summer Games of 1952. The 21 medals that the Olympic fencing competition had to offer became interesting for the medal ranking. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, knowledge and experience in fencing became highly relevant for the USSR. The geopolitical relations had changed after the Second World War; now, the Soviet Union was ruling over Central and Eastern Europe, and Hungary became one of its satellites. Hungary had a long fencing tradition and dominated international and Olympic fencing competitions, especially in saber, during the Interwar period. By the end of 1951, a delegation of Hungarian elite fencers and coaches was brought to Moscow to prepare Soviet fencers for the 1952 Olympic Games. Based on this exchange and its follow-up sessions in the first half of the 1950s, the success of the Soviet fencing team progressed quickly, and in the course of the 1960s, the Soviets took over the Hungarian hegemony in the Olympic discipline of fencing.

Keywords: Hungary, Soviet Union, fencing, Hungarian elite fencers, 1951 Moscow joint Soviet-Hungarian training camp, Olympic Games

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1. Introduction

After the Second World War, Hungary became integrated – against her will – as a satellite state into the Soviet Empire. The Red Army ensured that a small group of local communists could install a communist regime. This dependency relation also had an impact on Hungarian sports. This was certainly true for fencing, which was cultivated after the First World War in Hungary as a national sport. Saber fencing originated from the Hungarian hussar tradition and was part of the national self-image and archetype. In the twenties, a lot of effort was put into the innovation of technical styles and training methods in this national sport. These efforts were successful. In the Interwar period, Hungary dominated saber fencing at the Olympic Games. Almost without exceptions, all gold medals in the men's individual and team saber fencing competitions were won by Hungary. The Soviet Union had chosen to stay apart from the international sports movement. Soviet sports policy was characterized by almost international isolation (Riordan, 1977: 391). Furthermore, fencing was considered a bourgeois, class-hostile sport. For serious practice of fencing sports, there was, apart from military circles, little opportunity in the USSR.[2]

Hungary and the Soviet Union had no official sports contacts in the Interwar period. These started after the Second World War in 1945 when Hungary was occupied by the Soviet Union (Riordan, 1977: 391). According to Riordan, in the period between 1945-1956, other socialist states were more or less obliged to learn from the Soviet model, form Soviet-type administrative organizations, and run physical fitness programs. This was despite the long sporting traditions of Central European countries, like Hungary, which had competed successfully in international sports many years before Soviet participation (Riordan, 1977: 380). The position

2 It is far beyond the scope of this contribution to present a history of fencing in Russia and the Soviet Union. Here are some notes to provide some guidance in this domain. A characteristic of fencing in both Russian and Soviet sports history is that it was related to the military. Russian fencing has its roots in the Tsarist military, where it was popular among officers and members of the aristocracy. The first fencing club was established in 1857 in the capital of Russia, St. Petersburg, after the abolishment of serfdom, enabling the organization of fencing in private clubs in major cities by well-to-do middle-class and liberal noblemen (Riordan, 1977: 10). The Officers' Fencing Gymnasium in St. Petersburg was soon followed by other military clubs in the Empire, notably at Warsaw and Kyiv (Riordan, 1977: 14). The close connection between the military and fencing in the early years of the Soviet state was inherited from the Tsarist regime (Riordan, 1977: 289). The quasi-military aspect of fencing was implemented in the 'Vsevobuch' (see section 2 for a discussion of 'Vsevobuch') in the beginning of the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1920 (Riordan, 1977: 74). This close relation with the military under Soviet rule might explain why fencing belonged to those sports pursued in schools between 1945 and 1958, aiming to contribute to the military education of school children (Riordan, 1977: 179). In 1966, the number of sports participants per one part-time instructor was increased, particularly in those sports with the closest association with military training, such as combat sports, including fencing (Riordan, 1977: 272). Despite this, fencing did not appear in the list of sixteen sports by the number of participants between 1940 and 1970 (Riordan, 1977: 189). However, according to Riordan (1977: 376), in four types of sports, including those characterized by combat, artistic expression, cerebral skills, and quasi-military aspects, the USSR was successful at the Olympic Games. Fencing belonged to the type of quasi-military sports.

of self-chosen international sports isolation changed when the Soviet Union decided to develop a different sports policy after the Second World War. In 1951, the Soviet Olympic Committee was formed and affiliated with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The Soviet Union joined the ranks of the International Fencing Federation (Fédération Internationale d'Éscrime, abbreviated FIE) in 1952 (Riordan, 1977: 364). Hence, it could start to participate in the Olympic Games from 1952 on. The Olympic medal mirror became against the backdrop of the Cold War an instrument of soft power. A higher ranking on the medal mirror could be used to demonstrate that the communist state system was better than the one of the capitalist West, and vice versa. Due to this, the Olympic Games became a theatre of the Cold War, and the medal ranking served as an important propaganda instrument. As a result, there was additional attention to Olympic disciplines where substantial medals could be won. This was also true for fencing. Already at the London Olympic Games in 1948 a delegation of Soviet observers noticed that in the Olympic fencing tournament, seven gold medals could be scored: in the men's category at all three weapons, namely foil, epee, and saber both in the individual and team competition; and in the women's fencing tournament only one discipline was on the program of the Olympic Games, namely the women's individual foil competition (Riordan, 1977: 364). So, at the Olympic fencing tournament 21 medals could be won in total.

The Soviet leadership that took the decision between 1948 and 1952 to participate in the Olympic Games surely realized that successes in the Olympic fencing competition would mean an unelectable contribution to a higher ranking on the medal mirror. In the Olympic fencing tournament, seven gold medals could be won after all.[3] In the men's category, the tournament took place in three weapons, i.e. foil, epee, and saber, both in the individual and team competition; in the women's category, the fencing competition was restricted only to individual foil competition. Hence, in the fencing tournaments, 21 medals could be won out of a total of 459 medals, of which 149 were gold medals distributed over all of the sports disciplines featured on the Olympic program in 1952. Consequently, the Soviets made a detailed study in the first half of the fifties of the Hungarian elite fencers and their coaches.

The Hungarians were expected to transfer every detail of their fencing knowledge, including their technical and tactical skills, to the Soviet sports management. This was especially the case for saber fencing, in which Hungary had enjoyed half a century of absolute hegemony. At the end of 1951, the complete Hungarian national fencing selection was flown to Moscow to serve as a 'study object' for Soviet fencing management. This 'training method' would soon pay off. At the end of the fifties, the advance of Soviet fencing began at the Olympic Games. At the Summer Games in Rome in 1960, the first gold medal was gained in the comparatively new sport of fencing. Once the Soviet Union had made its international debut, even in an old 'aristocratic', comparatively new sport like fencing, Olympic medals were within reach (Riordan, 1977: 369; 374). Although Hungary still won the fencing medal ranking at the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964, it became clear that with the victory of the Soviet men's saber team, the USSR would take over the hegemony in fencing from Hungary. The foundations for this

3 See for the medal mirror of the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games the official website of the IOC: www.olympics.com/en/olympic-games/helsinki-1952/medals. Accessed: 2022, May 31.

were laid in the above-mentioned joint training session in Moscow at the end of 1951 and their follow-up sessions.

2. Sports in the Soviet Union

The developments of sports in the Soviet Union served several different functions, such as strengthening the communist ideology, promoting social integration, facilitating nation-formation, and serving as an instrument in international relations. Additionally, sports also functioned as an instrument of soft power.

When the Bolsheviks took power after the October Revolution of 1917, sports and physical education became integral to the revolutionary discourse, used as tools to introduce and promote a new communist lifestyle through political, social, and cultural means (Grant, 2014: 724). The concept of 'Homo Sovieticus,' individuals completely dedicated to the socialist cause, emphasized the importance of physical education. The idea was that physically stronger Soviet citizens could outperform their weaker capitalist counterparts. Sports and training also contributed to the overall health condition of Soviet citizens, enabling them to be more efficient in their workplaces (Riordan, 1988: 570). Soviet propaganda thus worked diligently to expand and popularize sports to cultivate healthy and strong socialist citizens.

The Marxist perspective assumes that the human organism develops under external conditions, such as the social environment. Consequently, a strong connection exists between the social and mental development of the individual, which is also influenced by society (Riordan, 1976: 153). Sport is not separate from society; instead, it is closely intertwined with politics, socio-economic relations, and social classes. According to Marx, both the mind and the body needed to be trained. The body was primarily trained in gymnastics schools and through military exercises. Additionally, a physical and technical training of the body was necessary to acquire the fundamental principles of the production process and the essential instruments of all professions (Riordan, 1976: 155). Lenin, himself an active athlete, also subscribed to the Marxist view of the role of sport in society (Elwood, 2010: 79). He strongly supported daily physical training through gymnastics (Riordan, 1976: 158). This not only aimed to improve the health of individuals in the interest of socialism but also to provide the army with sufficient recruits.

Recruits who were in better condition could more effectively commit themselves to the defense of the motherland. This necessity called for an active state policy towards sports. After the October Revolution, all existing sports associations were closed, and all sports equipment was directed to the 'Vsevobuch,' a portmanteau for 'Universal Military Training,' governed by a central body that coordinated military training–the Chief Administration of Universal Military Training of the People's Commissariat of Military Affairs between 1918 and 1923. The Red Army needed healthy young men to successfully defend the young Soviet state against any domestic and foreign pressure (Mertin, 2009: 471). Sport also played a crucial role in stimulating women's emancipation. Lenin considered sports an opportunity for women to participate in public life and quickly achieve a measure of equality with men (Riordan, 1976: 159).

Sport was considered a vital vehicle to propagate the ideology of the communist regime in society. Under communism, the boundaries between public and private were blurred, leaving no space for individualism within society. Instead, collectivism was strongly encouraged. Throughout the communist era, grassroots sport was emphasized as an expression of an egalitarian society. Recreational sport received significant support because "the proletariat was seen as a collective force in the battle for freedom and liberty; not a single person completing heroic deeds but a whole class of heroes." (Mertin, 2009: 473). Grassroots sports events, such as physical culture parades or the Spartakiads, served as platforms for political and ideological messages, aimed at unifying the diverse nationalities within the Soviet Union and symbolizing a common communist nation-building effort." (Mertin, 2009: 471).

In addition, sports also served to foster stronger ties with other countries. Riordan lists several points that contributed to the promotion of international sport in the Soviet Union. Firstly, he notes that sport was used to promote "relations with pro-Soviet and potentially sympathetic groupings abroad and undermining 'bourgeois' and social democratic authority." (Riordan, 1988: 570). The Soviet Union sought to establish good relations with other socialist countries through sport. Sport was also used to "promote good-neighborly relations with states bordering on the USSR." (Riordan, 1988: 572). This was for strategic reasons and to demonstrate the progress made under socialism. These sports relations were particularly characteristic of the early Soviet Union period between 1917 and 1945. Later, there was a cultivation of ties with "newly independent or dependent nations in Africa, Asia, and, later, Latin America." (Riordan, 1988: 572). For this purpose, the Soviet leaders organized sports competitions with other socialist brother states and sent Soviet coaches to those countries to train their socialist brothers in various sports. Finally, sport served as a soft power tool for the Soviets to demonstrate the superiority of the communist system. The international sports relations established by the Soviet Union with the help of this foreign policy strategy began in the late 1940s and were intensified during the 1950s. This also included contacts with the IOC." (Riordan,1988: 586).

Sergey Pavlov, the chairman of the Central Sports Committee, stated in 1981 that "sport was a great diplomatic weapon, for it boldly crosses political, religious, and other frontiers, unites people, helps to strengthen co-operation. It helps young people of different states to understand one another better; it encourages them to gain a sense of deep respect for both their own and other nations, nationalities, and people." (Riordan, 1988: 578). Despite this, one of the most significant functions of sport during the Cold War was to demonstrate the superiority of one's own system and undermine its counterpart. International prestige was thus measured by the victories of each side's athletes. By the late 1940s, the Soviets no longer viewed the international sports arena as a threat but rather as a platform with great potential for publicity. Ideologists and politicians assumed that the successful participation of Soviet athletes in international competitions and championships would positively influence the image of the Soviet Union. The idea was that achieving good results in top sports competitions would garner admiration from the foreign public for the communist society (Mertin, 2009: 471). The medals gained at international sports competitions such as the Olympic Games were supposed to demonstrate the efficiency of the Soviet model (Mertin, 2009: 473). The athletes who achieved extraordinary results in national and international competitions were decorated with one of the

highest awards in the Soviet Union, the Order of Lenin. These athletes were seen as heroes (Mertin, 2009: 475). Their "heroes" in sports were used to show what socialism and socialist ideas were capable of (Riordan, 1993). Fencing came into the picture during the preparations for the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952.

However, an important ideological obstacle stood in the way of fencing in the Soviet Union. Fencing was viewed in official sports propaganda as a 'bourgeois sport' or so-called class-hostile activity. As a result, modern sport fencing was relatively unfamiliar, and knowledge of fencing under the Tsarist regime was primarily preserved within military circles in the USSR. Despite these ideological and practical objections, the Soviets had to set them aside in preparation for their participation in the 1952 Olympic Games. Unorthodox means were used to ensure full participation in the race for medals. The geopolitical situation had changed dramatically after the Second World War, allowing the Soviet Union to become the master of Central and Eastern Europe.[4] Hungary, which was also occupied by the Red Army, became annexed to the Soviet Empire as a satellite state. This granted the Soviet Union access to fencing knowledge, modern fencing sports experiences, and training methods that had been developed to a top level in Hungary during the Interwar period. Hungary ranked among the top three countries in fencing alongside Italy and France and dominated saber fencing at the Olympics (Terret et al., 2007; Onyestyák, 2013).

This provided the Soviets with a shortcut to acquire high-quality fencing knowledge when it became opportune for them. Under the guise of 'friendly exchanges of fencing experiences,' the Hungarian top fencers and their coaches were more or less forced to transfer their knowledge of fencing to Soviet sports management. The first of these exchanges, of which there exist references, was organized in Moscow at the end of 1951, in preparation for the Olympic Games of 1952. The entire Hungarian fencing elite, both athletes and coaches, took part. During this 'exchange,' the Soviets laid the foundations for their hegemony in Olympic fencing, which they would take over from Hungary in the late 1960s. Below, the joint Soviet-Hungarian training camp of 1951 in Moscow is discussed in greater detail. This so-called study fencing session organized by the Soviets belongs to the forgotten chapters of sports history and is mentioned only a few times in passing in official publications of sports historiography.[5]

4 The close relation between sports and geopolitics is also discussed at length in a recent study of Boniface (2021).

5 In Ottogalli et al. (2013: 113-151), a study published at the occasion of the centenary of the FIE a whole chapter (partie 3) is devoted to a detailed elaboration of the road of Soviet fencing to hegemony which according to the authors lasted from 1956 until 1982. However, the joint Soviet-Hungarian training sessions in the beginning of the fifties of the twentieth century offering the basis for the Soviet hegemony are not referred to. The authoritative study of Riordan (1977) on sport in Soviet society mentions the contribution of Hungarian coaches to the development of fencing, swimming and pentathlon in the USSR but does not provide any details (Riordan, 1977: 383).

3. Fencing in Hungary

This section analyzes the origins of Hungarian hegemony in saber fencing.[6] This was the result of successive geopolitical circumstances during the turbulent first half of the twentieth century. For Hungary, these were marked by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, the Treaty of Trianon that the Allies concluded on June 4, 1920, which left Hungary badly damaged, the re-establishment of the Hungarian state, and the establishment of an authoritarian regime under regent Miklós Horthy, which came under the influence of German and Italian fascism in the course of the 1930s. All these geopolitical factors contributed to the development of fencing in Hungary. The tradition of Hungarian fencing, and in particular saber fencing, grew out of military fencing, which was a compulsory part of Austria-Hungary officer training (Clair, 1879; 1930; Arlow, 1902). The 'saber' is a weapon used in the military, especially by light cavalry regiments. The standard equipment of a Hungarian mounted soldier called 'huszár', or 'hussar', included a 'saber' (called 'szablya' in Hungarian) (Marácz, 2017: 312-313). The military saber was usually a curved sword of iron sharp on one side. The hussar regiments with their elegant uniforms played an important role in the defense of Hungarian sovereignty against the Ottomans and the Habsburgs in the 15th and 16th centuries (Kun, 1969: 52-55; Földes et al., 1977). By the way, the model of the Hungarian hussar regiments spread all over Europe. Military fencing contributed to the development of saber fencing which was considered a national sport in Hungary. Hence, the saber was traditionally regarded by the Hungarians as the "Hungarian" weapon and was an inherent part of the external Hungarian image and the Hungarian self-image (Marácz, 2007: 174-176).

With the establishment of the first sports associations in Hungary, sports fencing took off. The 'Magyar Athletikai Club' ("Hungarian Athletic Club"; MAC for short) was founded by Count Miksa Esterházy and Lajos Molnár in 1875. This first sports club in Budapest was founded after the British example. Count Esterházy had been attaché to the Austro-Hungarian Embassy in London, where he had studied extensively the establishment of English sports associations. Sports associations were established all over Hungary after MAC was founded. MAC's first fencing teacher was József Keresztessy. He developed a Hungarian style of saber fencing that would later be refined by Italian masters who settled in Hungary around 1900. The Italian fencing masters brought a lighter saber more suitable for sports fencing. This contributed to a profound change in Hungarian saber fencing techniques and tactics.

In 1894, MAC organized the first national fencing demonstration in Budapest. The following year, the first official fencing competition was held. In 1896, sports fencing became an official part of the 'Thousand Years of Hungary' program to celebrate the official foundation of the Hungarian state in 896 AD (Marácz, 1996: 33-37). This was a huge boost for sports fencing. Between 14 and 20 May 1896, a major international fencing competition took place in the 'Vigadó', a large concert hall on the east bank of the Danube built in 1859. The best 140 fencers from Europe took part in these fencing competitions (Földes et al., 1977: 205). The

6 See Marácz (2019) for a more detailed discussion of the origins of Hungarian fencing against the backdrop of the remaking of the Hungarian state in the twenties of the twentieth century.

masters category was won by the Italian fencing master from Florence, Italo Santelli, who received his fencing training at the prestigious Italian military fencing institute 'Scuola magistrale militare di Scherma di Roma'. Because of his victory in the Millennium fencing competition, Santelli was offered a contract as a fencing master with MAC, which he accepted. Later he founded his own fencing hall in Budapest, 'Salle Santelli', and even during the Interwar period, Santelli had a lot of influence on fencing in Budapest. Hungarian fencers were also actively involved in international fencing competitions early on. From 1900 Hungarian fencers competed in the Olympics, and in 1902 Dr. Béla Nagy's drafted his first proposal for universal, conventional fencing rules. A year after the FIE was founded in Paris, in 1913, the Hungarian Fencing Federation was founded ('Magyar Vívó Szövetség', abbreviated MVSz). Nagy was chosen as the first president of the MVSz. He would become a well-known sports diplomat with an international reputation. As Vice-President of the FIE in the years 1913 and 1914, he continued to work in Paris on the universal sports fencing conventions (Dávid, 1988: 46).

In addition to the civilian fencing societies that spread across the country, the education of military fencing in the Interwar period remained the responsibility of the Hungarian army. Within Austria-Hungary, the training of military fencing teachers took place at the Austrian Theresianum Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt, where officers had to follow a 'Militär-Fecht- und Turnlehrer-Kurs'. After the 'Ausgleich' between Austria and Hungary in 1867, which resulted in the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, Hungarian officers also received their fencing training at the Theresianum. Several first-class fencing masters taught at the Theresianum, such as the Croat Milan Neralić and the Italian Luigi Barbasetti. The Theresianum thus formed the starting point for many Hungarian fencing teachers who would play an important role in the development of saber fencing in Hungary after the First World War. One of the outstanding military fencing masters was László Borsody (Máday, 2017b; Marácz & Máday, 2019).

Borsody was born into a poor Jewish family in a small village near Pest in 1878. During the fin-de-siècle in royal Hungary, national consciousness grew. The Borsody family converted to Catholicism and changed their German name 'Pfeffer' to 'Borsody'. The Magyarization of surnames was a common practice among people who aimed to climb the social ladder of multi-ethnic Hungary. In 1899, Borsody was expelled from the University of Pest for engaging in an illegal duel. He then joined the Royal Hungarian Army. Later, he received his diploma as a fencing teacher at the Theresianum, where he was an assistant to the fencing master Neralić for a while. László Borsody was highly successful in the Austro-Hungarian military fencing competitions he participated in, excelling in both saber and foil. In 1906, the head of state Emperor and King Franz Joseph attended one of the competitions and was so impressed with Borsody's fencing style that he immediately promoted him to the rank of second-class fencing master. From 1902 to 1925, Borsody taught fencing at the Royal Hungarian Ludovika Academy in Budapest, which was the cadet training school of the Hungarian army until 1945. In 1916, Borsody was promoted to the rank of captain and appointed as the head fencing master. In the Austro-Hungarian army, ranks held great significance, as only higher-ranking officers could become chief fencing instructors. The end of the First World War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had a profound impact on the development of fencing in Hungary. The

country faced severe repercussions from the Allies for its participation in the war on the side of the Central Powers.

For Hungary, the First World War formally ended with the Treaty of Trianon that was concluded on June 4, 1920. Due to the treaty, Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its territory and a third of ethnic Hungarians ended up as a 'minority' in the new or enlarged successor states of Hungary (Marácz, 1996: 130). The Hungarians experienced the Trianon Peace Treaty as a 'dictate' (Marácz, 1996: 129). However, the peace treaty allowed Hungary to build a new army. This decision was influenced by Britain, which sought to prevent France from dominating Central Europe and to keep Central Europe from drawing closer to the Soviet Union. Thus, Britain authorized the establishment of a Hungarian National Army in Szeged. The context for this decision stemmed from the events of 1919 when Hungarian communists proclaimed the Hungarian Council Republic on March 21. Subsequently, the Romanian army, with the support of France, occupied Budapest on August 9 of the same year, leading to the downfall of the Council Republic in a short period. Admiral Miklós Horthy, the last Commander in Chief of the Austro-Hungarian Navy and a trusted confidant of Emperor and King Franz Joseph, was appointed as the commander of the Hungarian National Army. Following the signing of the peace treaty, Admiral Horthy assumed a prominent role in Hungary and became its strongman. He established a conservative-authoritarian regime that heavily relied on the Hungarian army for support and stability. The officers of the Hungarian National Army received their training almost exclusively at the Austrian Theresian Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt. Fencing was an obligatory part of the officer training curriculum at this institute (Szikora, 2013). The institutions of the Hungarian state had to be rebuilt. This also applied to the Hungarian army's fencing courses. The Theresianum in Wiener Neustadt could no longer be called upon. Hence, on May 1, 1920, the Hungarian Ministry of Defense set up its own training course for fencing and gymnastics teachers. This course 'Military Fencing and Physical Education' was taught at the Hungarian Royal Ludovika Academy (Marácz, 2019). The aim was to train certified military sports instructors in eight months. The teaching staff consisted of officers trained at the Theresianum, including Borsody. Although the Treaty of Trianon restored Hungarian sovereignty, Article 111 of the treaty prohibited all activities related to rearmament. That is why the Military Fencing and Physical Education course had to be discontinued on July 1, 1922 (Martin, 1924: 500). In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the Horthy regime facilitated the development of institutes for training modern military fencing and gymnastics instructors (Szikora, 2012). The aim was to improve the physical condition of the Hungarian army, but in terms of fencing, it was also aimed at raising the level of fencing so that Hungary could successfully compete in the international arena. The motivation for sports fencing at the Ludovika Academy was, thus, a direct response to the Treaty of Trianon. The general opinion was that, due to international successes with the "Hungarian" weapon, revenge had to be taken for the humiliations of the Trianon Treaty. After the sports blockade by the Allies was lifted just before the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924, Hungary was able to participate in the Olympic Games again (Kun, 1969: 111).

It was not until 1925 that the course for fencing teachers was allowed to be organized again by the Hungarian army. This was now embedded in a broader course for training fencing instructors. The course was also no longer held at the campus of the Ludovika Academy but

was moved to another military campus in Budapest. Borsody, previously promoted to the rank of major, was appointed the chief fencing master of the Royal Hungarian Military Course for Sports Instructors. Here, Borsody started developing his own method of saber fencing. He also put a lot of energy into the training of future champions. Borsody had his sights set on the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928. With success: his student Ödön Tersztyánszky eventually won Olympic gold here, after competing in a Hungarian-Hungarian final against Attila Petschauer, a pupil of Santelli (Van Rossem, 1928).

After his victory on August 12, Tersztyánszky traveled to London to meet the conservative British aristocrat, a member of the House of Lords, and newspaper magnate Lord Harold Rothermere. Rothermere had launched a campaign in his newspaper 'The Daily Mail' in June 1927 entitled 'Justice for Hungary', making him the only Western European politician to openly support Hungary's claims for a peaceful revision of the Treaty of Trianon (Romsics, 1989: 181-183; Marácz, 1995: 49). As a sign of respect for Rothermere's pro-Hungarian attitude, the fresh Olympic champion gave him the saber with which he had fenced in the final in Amsterdam. When Tersztyánszky returned to Hungary and met his fencing master, Borsody, he qualified Tersztyánszky's action of gifting his saber to the British Lord as follows: "Your deed is worthy of a Hungarian army officer, worthy of Hungarian saber fencing." (Máday, 2017a: 30).

On March 1, 1932, the 'Royal Hungarian Military Course for Sports Instructors' was replaced by the 'Miklós Toldi Royal Hungarian Military Academy for the Education of Hungarian Sports Instructors and Fencing Instructors' (abbreviated as SPOTI). Until his retirement in 1936, Borsody remained the chief fencing master at this institute and continued to achieve successes with its military fencers. At the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, his favorite student György Jekelfalussy Piller won gold in both the men's individual and team saber competitions. Piller would also carry on Borsody's legacy as a trainer at SPOTI from 1927 to 1932. Moreover, in the context of the present paper, he would prove to be a key figure during the Soviet-Hungarian fencing exchanges in the early fifties of the twentieth century (Máday, 2017b: 96).

During World War II, Jekelfalussy Piller served as a lieutenant colonel on the Eastern Front, including Lake Balaton. Between May and August 1945, he became a Soviet prisoner of war in Austria, where he was interned. Piller was eventually repatriated to Hungary on a POW train. At Kelenföld station, he was noticed by police chief Gábor Péter, who would later become the feared head of the Hungarian communist security service, the ÁVH. Péter recognized the Olympic champion and is quoted to have said: "That one can come in handy later." (Polgár, 2017: 56-70). In 1946, Jekelfalussy Piller was allowed to function as a fencing coach again, but now at associations that had been given a "socialist sounding name," such as Vörös Meteor S.E., which translates to 'Sports Association the Red Meteor'. Starting from 1948, Piller became the head coach of the Hungarian national saber team, working under the guidance of state coach Béla Bay. However, in 1951, he unexpectedly returned to Russia, but this time not as a front officer. Instead, he went as a fencing master, tasked with teaching the Soviet fencing trainers and top athletes the intricate details of the Hungarian saber school.

4. The Hungarian Fencing Elite in Moscow

What happened in the joint Soviet-Hungarian fencing training camp in Moscow at the end of 1951 is mainly known from five short newspaper articles that appeared in the official sports newspaper of communist Hungary, 'Népsport' (People's Sport). The articles appeared under the name of Dr. Béla Bay, the national fencing coach. Bay is introduced in the first of these five publications, which were published in 'Népsport' on November 11, November 16, December 21, December 23, and December 24, 1951, as the state trainer who led the Hungarian fencing delegation in the "exchange of fencing experiences" with the Soviet fencers.[7] It is not entirely clear how long the training camp lasted. Bay talks about a training camp of several weeks. The training camp probably started just before his first report on November 11, 1951, and was finished around mid-December. The last three contributions, entitled "Our Fencers in the Soviet Union I, II, and III," are rather a brief look back at the camp that Bay likely wrote after the Hungarian fencing delegation returned to Budapest.

State trainer Bay came from a dynasty of aristocratic Transylvanian landowners and was initiated into the secrets of fencing by the well-known fencing teacher László Gerentsér during the interwar years. In 1936, he competed as a fencer at the Summer Olympics in Berlin. Despite coming from a so-called class-hostile background and starting his active fencing career under the Horthy regime, Bay managed to gain the trust of the Hungarian communist sports bureaucracy. During the 1948 Summer Olympics in London, he was added as a trainer to the Hungarian fencing delegation. From that point on, Bay held absolute power over fencing in Hungary until his retirement in 1977. He received support from the so-called National Sports Bureau, led by Gyula Hegyi, with István Kutas being the official responsible for fencing. Among other responsibilities, Bay had the authority to decide which weapon would be given priority, who would qualify for an international career as a top fencer, and which Hungarian fencer would be allowed to win if multiple Hungarians reached the final round in important international tournaments. His obliging attitude towards the Soviet sports management during the joint training camp in Moscow likely contributed to his firm control over the Hungarian fencing world as a single person. Not only was Bay appointed the national coach, but he also took charge of the theory of fencing as a lecturer at the fencing chair at the Budapest Sports University. Bay emphasized foil and epee stabbing weapons, feeling that they had not been able to develop sufficiently in Hungary due to the dominance of saber fencing. As a result, the further development of saber fencing was neglected. The fact that Kutas and Bay held absolute control over "socialist fencing" in communist Hungary is also confirmed by sports journalist Sándor Dávid in his official publication on the 75-year history of the Hungarian Fencing Federation. The booklet was written on behalf of the Hungarian Fencing Federation and appeared just before the fall of communism in 1988 (Dávid, 1988: 98). Dávid only briefly mentions the joint training camp in Moscow in 1951. In doing so, he writes in a remarkably jovial tone

7 Bay's articles and photographs are reprinted in Máday (2017a: 160-167).

about this first meeting between the Soviet and Hungarian fencers: "Our fencers, who had beaten the world, passed on 'the new fashion' to our new friends." (Dávid, 1988: 99).[8]

Bay's newspaper articles in 'Népsport' show that during the joint training camp in 1951, in addition to the training activities, there were joint meetings with Soviet sports officials (Bay, 1951a). The schedule also included time for cultural activities and visits to Soviet sports facilities (Bay, 1951a; Bay, 1951e). The Hungarian delegation brought a complete electric epee equipment as a gift (Bay, 1951b), indicating that the Soviet Union was not yet very familiar with modern epee fencing. However, this would soon change after the joint training session. In the meetings with Soviet sports officials, the duo of Kutas and Bay represented the Hungarian side. Kutas was in charge of the political leadership of the Hungarian delegation, while Bay himself gave a lecture on the development of Hungarian saber fencing since 1896. Additionally, György Jekelfalussy Piller, the 1932 Olympic saber champion of Los Angeles, and László Duronelly, epee teacher at the Sports University of Budapest, also contributed to the lecture (Bay, 1951b). Bay also reported on the state of affairs in Italian and French foil fencing during these meetings.

In his reports for 'Népsport', Bay spoke highly of the Soviet Union's achievements in the construction of stadiums, such as the Kirov Stadium in Leningrad (Bay, 1951e). The Kirov Stadium was a giant stadium in the form of a vast amphitheater with seating for 150,000 spectators (Riordan, 1977: 135). Bay mentioned that indoor games could be played, even when it was freezing outside. Bay's reports also contained ideological remarks. According to him, everything showed that sport was an important means for the Soviets to realize the concept of 'Homo Sovieticus'. Bay also wrote about the enormous interest in fencing among Soviet youth, particularly in working-class children's circles (Bay, 1951c). This kind of exaggeration was likely intended for the home front, as in the early years of Hungarian communism, fencing was often characterized as a "bourgeois sport for Europeans." (Dávid, 1988: 97). Apparently the communist authorities in Budapest needed reassurance that fencing was already ideologically sanctioned and socially accepted in the Soviet Union.

In all of Bay's contributions, he writes about the technical and tactical skills and training methods that the Hungarians passed on to the Soviets. At the same time, he praises the athletic ability of the Soviet fencers. According to Bay, the Hungarian fencers had a hard time keeping up with the Soviet athletes, especially during the warm-ups before the training sessions. The Soviet fencers spend a lot of time on warming up, and from this aspect, the Hungarian fencers can learn a lot.

There are two sources from which we can deduce who was present at the Moscow training camp: Bay's newspaper articles and photos. Bay's five articles list the names of both Soviet and Hungarian athletes and coaches who attended the camp. Additionally, there are three accompanying photos to the articles, which depict the participants. The group photo that appeared in the 'Népsport' provides a lot of information about those who were present.[9] Then there is a

8 Quote translated by LM.

9 See for this group photo also Horváth (2014: 165).

group photo of the event that has been collected by the French author on fencing history Gérard Six.[10]

According to Bay, the most important Soviet fencing teachers were present. The most famous among them was V.A. Arkadyev who taught fencing at the Moscow Sports University and belonged to the first generation of fencing coaches in the Soviet Union (Bay, 1951d). The first generation of Soviet top fencers, who won Olympic medals as early as the 1950s, were also present: Ivan Manayenko (1919-1985) competed in the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki in the individual saber tournament and in the team saber competition; Lev Kuznetsov (1930-2015) won two bronze medals at the 1956 Games in Melbourne, both in the individual saber tournament and in the saber team competition. After his active fencing career, Kuznetsov became a successful fencing coach. David Tyshler (1927-2014) was a member of the bronze saber team at the 1956 Games. Tyshler reached the finals of the World Saber Championship five times between 1955 and 1959 and was seen as an innovative sabreur. (Dávid, 1988: 99). Yakov Rylsky (1928-1999) was a Soviet sabreur who competed in three Olympic Games and became an Olympic champion as a member of the Soviet saber squad in Tokyo in 1964. He was a three-time world champion in saber (Dávid, 1988: 99). The training camp also saw the participation of top Soviet floret fencers, including Mark Midler (1931-2012), who took part in four Olympic Games and won two gold medals. Women also took part in the Moscow training camp, at that time only competed individually in the foil section at international tournaments. Bay also refers to Nadezhda Shitikova (1923-1995), who participated in the women's foil individual competition both at the 1952 Helsinki and 1956 Melbourne Olympics (Bay, 1951d).

Photos were also published with the 'Népsport' articles. On three of them, participants of the training course can be seen. The 'Népsport' of December 21, 1951, published a photo with Ivan Komarov (1921-2005), a foil fencer who was a member of the Soviet team at the 1952 Olympics, and with Vladimir Vyshpolsky (1915-1987), who played in the saber team at the same games for the Soviet Union. Both Soviet fencers are in conversation with Aladár Gerevich and Pál Kovács, the absolute top Hungarian fencers who were already multiple Olympic champions on saber in 1951. The second photo shows how the national coach of the Hungarian saber team, György Jekelfalussy Piller, was teaching a few Soviet sabreurs the fine details of saber fencing. Jekelfalussy Piller, the 1932 Olympic saber champion who had fought against the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front in 1944, was in the Soviet Union again, but now to train the Soviet fencers. Apparently, the 'Népsport' had no ideological or political problem with the publication of this prominent photo of Jekelfalussy Piller, who had adjusted to the communist fencing world after his arrest and release after World War II. Jekelfalussy Piller remained the national team coach for saber until the Melbourne Olympic Games. These took place from November 22 to December 8, 1956, just after the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising

10 See G. Six as a co-author of the volume on the history of the FIE (Ottogalli et al. 2013) and his book on the interest of the founder of the Olympic Movement Pierre de Coubertin for fencing (Six 2013). I am indebted to Gérard Six for a copy of his group photo of the 1951 joint Soviet-Hungarian training camp. I will refer to this photo in the remainder of the article as "the Six photo".

against Soviet rule. Part of the Hungarian sports team, including Jekelfalussy Piller and other members of the Hungarian fencing team, decided not to return to communist Hungary. They were offered political asylum in the US.[11]

Then there is also an overview photo with the participants of the training camp. In his overview of the history of Hungarian saber fencing, Hungarian fencing master Géza Horváth has identified most of the Hungarian coaches and athletes in the photo (Horváth, 2014: 165). From his writing, it becomes clear that it was indeed the top of Hungarian fencing that participated in the 1951 joint Soviet-Hungarian training camp in Moscow. The political delegation leader was István Kutas. The fencing teachers who took part included Béla Bay (1907-1999), who was proficient in all three weapons and had achieved his Olympic results in the stabbing weapons; György Jekelfalussy Piller (1899-1960), a military fencer and fencing teacher, who was an Olympic champion in saber individually and in the saber team at the 1932 Los Angeles Games; Béla Somos (1912-1999), a military fencing master; János Szűts (1904-1976), a military fencing master; and Dr. László Duronelly (1907-1955), an epee fencing teacher and lecturer in fencing at the Budapest Sports University.

Horvath further identifies the following athletes: Gábor Delneki (1932-2008), a sabreur who won gold as a member of the Hungarian saber team at the 1960 Rome Olympics; the sabreur Bertalan Papp (1913-1992), who gained two Olympic gold medals as a member of the Hungarian saber team; Rudolf Kárpáti (1920-1999), one of the greatest Hungarian saber fencers, a multiple Olympic and world champion; Tibor Berczelli (1912-1990), a three-time Olympic champion as a member of the saber team; and Aladár Gerevich (1910-1991), who is generally regarded as the best Hungarian saber fencer of all time. Gerevich was already a celebrated champion in 1951 and was a multiple Olympic and world champion. He went on to gain seven gold medals at six different Olympics. The same accomplishment was achieved by Pál Kovács (1912-1995), a military saber fencer, who won multiple Olympic gold medals and world championships. Other notable athletes identified by Horvath include József Sákovics (1927-2009), an Olympic foil and epee fencer; Béla Rerrich (1917-2005), an Olympic epee fencer; and Ilona Elek (1907-1988), a foil fencing star who won two Olympic gold medals. Her sister, Margit Elek (1910-1986), was also an Olympic foil fencer. Additional athletes identified are József Gyuricza (1934-2020), a foil fencer, world champion, and bronze medalist as a member of the Olympic foil team; Endre Tilly (1922-1958), a foil fencer, Olympic and world champion; and Endre Palócz (1911-1988), who fenced in all three weapons and won an Olympic medal.

There are some differences between the Six photo and the one that appeared in 'Népsport'. The Népsport photo depicts the Hungarian and Soviet fencers, their coaches, and the ever-present Hungarian communist official István Kutasi. The group is bigger on the Sixth photo. In both photos, the Russian athletes are in their typical Soviet tracksuits with the Cyrillic letters

11 See also the documentary on the life of Jekelfalussy Piller 'The Last Captain', the story of Jekelfalussy (Piller) György, the 1932 Olympic Sabre champion who defected to the United States during the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne.' The documentary has been directed by Doug Nichols and produced by IMDbPro in 2017.

'CCCP' indicating the abbreviation of the Soviet Union 'USSR'. Most of the Hungarian athletes are wearing civilian clothes in both pictures, just like the Hungarian and probably Soviet officials in the Sixth photo. Only in the first row of the Six photos do we find Hungarian women fencers in tracksuits. In the leftmost position of that row, a Hungarian woman fencer is wearing the tracksuit of the Hungarian sports club 'Haladás,' as can be read from her training jacket. She could be a fencer of the Budapest 'Haladás' fencing club or an athlete of the railroad sports club 'Haladás VSE' from Szombathely, which included a fencing department between 1938 and 1995. On the Six photo, Olga Seregi and Géza Horváth were able to identify Pál Kovács, Aladár Gerevich, Tibor Berczelli, József Sákovics, Papp Bertalan, Somos Béla, Elek Margit, and Lev Kuznetsov, who are present on the 'Népsport' photo as well.[12] The following athletes could not be identified in the 'Népsport' photo but are present in the Sixth photo, including Paula Marosi (1936-2022). She won a gold medal in the women's team foil competition at the 1964 Olympics and a silver medal in the same competition at the 1968 Olympics. Lídia Dömölky (1936-) participated in the 1956, 1960, 1964, and 1968 Olympics, where she won a gold medal in the individual women's foil competition and two silver medals in the women's team foil competition. She became a world champion at the age of 19 and was married to the aforementioned fencer József Sákovics.

Magda Nyári (1921-2005) was a five-time world champion and earned a gold medal in the women's foil team competition at the 1964 Olympics. Erna Bogáthy-Bogen (1906-2002) won a bronze medal in the 1932 Olympics women's individual foil competition. She was married to the multiple Olympic champion Aladár Gerevich. Ilus Vargha (1910-1973) was an Olympic foil fencer and also held European and world champion titles. Lajos Maszlay (1903-1979) was an Olympic fencer in both foil and saber disciplines. He received his fencing education in the Borsody style at the Royal Hungarian Ludovika Academy. Lajos Somodi (1928-2012) won a bronze medal in the men's team foil competition at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. Tamás Gábor (1932-2007) was an Olympic and world champion epee fencer and secured a gold medal in the 1964 Olympic men's team epee competition. Kázmer Pacséry was a foil fencer and earned medals at four world championships. In addition, the following top coaches were also present: Árpád Nagy (1902-1975), who exclusively coached elite fencers; István Tari (1912-1996), an elite fencing and pentathlon master; and Gusztáv Rabe, who was an epee fencer, fencing master, and had a successful career as an international fencing referee.

After 1951, the Hungarian fencing delegation visited Moscow again in 1953 for a joint training camp. In return, the Soviets visited Budapest in 1952 for a four-week training course and again in 1954 for another joint training course. Additionally, in May-June 1952, a Hungarian fencing delegation visited the Soviet Union once more for a training camp. This visit is documented by a picture from the private photo archive of Lídia Dömölky, which has been published on the website of the digital fencing museum of the OSC Fencing Club. The text

12 These participants were identified by Olga Seregi, a former foil fencer and fencing coach on March 6, 2022 and by Géza Horváth on May 27, 2022 in personal communication. There is still a lot of work to be done concerning the photo identification of the participants, especially the Russian ones. I will leave this as a task for further research.

accompanying the picture mentions some of the participants, including Kázmér Pacséry, Bertalan Papp, Lajos Somodi, and Lídia Dömölky herself. Furthermore, Zsuzsa Morvay (1929-2009), a foil fencer who won three world championships in the women's team foil competition, can also be seen in the photo. However, she was not mentioned in connection with the previously discussed photos.

In the second half of the 1950s, the Soviet Union's fencing successes began to increase significantly. During the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the Soviets secured seven out of the 21 fencing medals. Subsequently, at the 1957 Fencing World Championship in Paris, the USSR fencing team earned four medals, two of which were gold. It's important to recall that during this period, there were six fencing disciplines for men and only one for women, which was the individual foil event. However, starting from the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo, the women's events were expanded, resulting in more medals available for the fencing competitions. Despite Hungary leading the overall medal ranking in the Olympic fencing tournament of the 1964 Summer Olympics, the Soviet Union secured the second position that year. Additionally, during those Olympics, Hungary only won gold in the individual saber tournament, while the gold medal in the saber men's team competition went to the Soviet Union. This marked the beginning of a trend reversal. Prior to the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Hungary had consistently dominated in the saber events. With the exception of the 1920 Antwerp Olympics, where Hungary was excluded from participation, and the 1924 Paris Olympics when Hungary only won the individual men's saber tournament, Hungary was victorious in both individual and team saber events from 1908 in London until the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo (Kereszténvi, 1976: 281). In 1968, the Soviet Union won the overall fencing ranking at the Mexico Olympics, and Hungary failed to win a gold medal in the saber disciplines for the first time since the 1908 Olympics. This marked the end of the Hungarian saber hegemony, and from that point on, saber fencing would be dominated by the Soviet Union.

In 1975, Horváth had the opportunity to interview Lev Kuznetsov during his stay in Budapest as the head coach of the Soviet saber team. Back in 1951, Kuznetsov (1930-2015) received individual lessons from the Hungarian elite saber masters Szűts, Somos, and Jekelfalussy Piller during a joint training course. In the interview, the Soviet saber coach claimed that Soviet fencing had undergone tremendous developments until 1956 under the guidance of his teachers, Arkadyev, and Manayenko. Kutnetsov considered himself on par with the great Hungarian top fencers of that time, stating, 'During that period, we developed fencing a step further than Hungarian fencing.' Kuznetsov openly admitted that his fencing style was the closest to the classical style and the most Hungarian among all Soviet fencers.

Dr. Ferenc Zöld, the last student of Italo Santelli and chef de mission of the Hungarian fencing team at the 1948 London Olympics, also mentioned that Soviet fencing began to rise from the 1957 fencing World Championship onwards. After the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, Dr. Zöld emigrated to the US. In 1958, he initially linked the rise of Soviet fencing to the fact that the Soviets had copied Hungarian fencing techniques (Zold, 1958a: 4). But in an article in the American Fencing Federation magazine later that year, he slightly changed his mind. According to Zöld, the rise of Soviet fencing was not solely due to the perfunctory copying of Hungarian fencing techniques (Zold, 1958b: 14). In 1949, when Zöld still supervised the Hungarian team, he believed that the Russians were not yet a serious match in fencing. How-

ever, he later confirmed that there had been an intensive exchange between the Soviets and the Hungarian fencing elite. Zöld mentioned that films were made of Gerevich, analyzing every single detail, and the Soviet trainers and fencers were receptive to criticism. Despite this cooperation, Zöld also acknowledged the Soviets' own contribution to the development of their fencing, which had been previously noted by Bay as well. Zöld observed that the Soviet fencing program had access to a vast pool of fencers with athletic prowess, and they were provided with all the necessary facilities and privileges for training. As a result, Soviet fencers became faster, had more stamina, and were physically stronger than their Hungarian counterparts. The innovations in fencing during the 1950s, such as electric scoring machines and lighter weapons, further opened up new opportunities for athletic fencers like those in the Soviet team.

4. Conclusions

Until the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, fencing was not extensively cultivated in the Soviet Union. This was due to the international isolation of the Soviet Union and the fact that the communists regarded fencing as a class-hostile sport. In 1951, the Soviet Union decided to join the Olympic movement and take part in the Olympic Games. During the Cold War, the medal standings of the Olympic Games were seen by both the East and West as a soft power instrument to demonstrate the superiority of their own political system. Fencing, as an Olympic discipline with 21 medals at stake, certainly counted in this context. Hence, the Soviets discarded their ideological and practical reservations against fencing.

Fencing, especially saber fencing, was practiced at a high level in Hungary. This was the result of a combination of identity-related, historical, and geopolitical circumstances. To quickly gain knowledge about fencing, the Hungarian top fencers and their coaches were ordered to Moscow in late 1951 to participate in an "exchange of fencing experiences." For the Soviet sports management, the Hungarian fencing delegation was an interesting object of study that helped the Soviet Union to surpass Hungary's hegemony in fencing in the late 1960s and add many Soviet fencing medals to the Olympic medal tally.

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