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SPORT, CINEMA AND IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT: PROPAGANDA IN THE USA AND USSR DURING THE COLD WAR

Prof. Rosario Forlenza

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Carolina De Stefano

CO-SUPERVISOR

Morena Torri ID 654852

CANDIDATE

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A Micerino

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INTRODUCTION

The Cold War was a prolonged struggle in which each symbol had meaning. Beyond military alliances and nuclear deterrence, the conflict unfolded within the cultural sphere, where images and narratives acquired strategic value. In this context, propaganda became one of the most decisive instruments through which the United States and the Soviet Union attempted to define themselves and to define the other.

As Jacques Ellul observes, modern propaganda cannot be reduced to simple manipulation, as it constitutes a structural element of technological mass society, operating continuously and shaping the environment within which individuals interpret reality.¹ During the Cold War, this structural dimension intensified, as a consequence of propaganda's transition to becoming permanent and attached to media systems.²

In this context, sport emerged as one of the most visible arenas of this symbolic confrontation: each international competition transformed ideological rivalry into measurable outcomes, where victories became evidence of systemic superiority. As Robert Edelman has demonstrated in his analysis of spectator sports in the Soviet Union, athletic success was never merely athletic, as it was understood as a reflection of political organisation and collective discipline.³ In a similar way, Sport in the United States was

¹ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, 27.

² Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 111.

³ Edelman, Robert. *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 240.

deeply connected with national identity, reinforcing ideals of meritocracy and democratic opportunity.⁴

Cinema amplified this dynamic, as it transformed competitions into narratives and athletes into symbolic figures. As Tony Shaw and Denise Youngblood argue, Cold War cinema functioned as a crucial battleground in the struggle for hearts and minds, translating ideological conflict into emotionally accessible stories.⁵ Within this framework, sports films offered a particularly effective instrument, staging characteristics such as discipline and sacrifice and outcomes of victory and defeat in ways that could entertain and persuade at the same time.⁶

This thesis claims that Cold War sports cinema actively participated in the construction of national identity and ideological boundaries. After examining sports films produced in the United States and the Soviet Union, it becomes possible to observe how propaganda operated through narrative structures and symbolic images. Therefore, the research question concerns the role of sports cinema as a vehicle of propaganda and identity construction in the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the extent to which it articulated both hegemonic narratives and their internal or external contestation. This study examines the intersection between sports and cinema as a structured communicative space in which political values were translated into emotionally resonant narratives. In particular, it analyses how sports films constructed models of national identity aligned with the ideological principles of each superpower and how different forms of propaganda operated within Soviet and American cinematic production. Finally, it examines how, in certain cases, sports cinema became a site of dissent and counterpropaganda.

As a consequence, this thesis advances three arguments, which are interrelated. First, it claims that sports cinema operated as a form of sociological propaganda in Ellul's sense, shaping attitudes indirectly by embedding ideological assumptions within everyday

⁴ Baker, Aaron. *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 22.

⁵ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 172.

⁶ Ibid.

narratives.⁷ In both the United States and the Soviet Union, many sports films presented their messages through stories of discipline and moral growth, normalising this way specific political values without explicitly invoking state doctrine.⁸

Second, it argues that despite the structural differences between the film industries of the two countries, where the Soviet one is controlled by the state, while the American one is formally private but politically interconnected, both systems utilised sports cinema to construct similar athletic ideals, portraying hardworking and patriotic heroes. Nevertheless, these ideals were used to advertise a different, almost opposite, political system. As a matter of fact, in Soviet cinema, success was grounded in discipline and mentorship, while in the American counterpart, it was framed as the outcome of individual initiative within a democratic and capitalist system.

Third, this thesis debates how sports cinema cannot be reduced to a monolithic instrument of state ideology. Especially from the 1960s, films in both contexts became spaces in which emerged tensions and contradictions emerged. Therefore, dissent and counterpropaganda reveal that propaganda is never fully stable. As Driencourt suggested, propaganda tends to expand and absorb all aspects of life, but these characteristics may generate discussion and reinterpretation.⁹

Methodologically, this thesis adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, combining film analysis with political and cultural history. The primary sources consist of a selected corpus of Soviet and American sports films produced between the late 1940s and the 1980s, along with their respective critics, which are analysed in terms of narrative content, especially in relation to their reception and the political context in which they were produced. The secondary sources are from Cold War historiography, as well as film studies and sport history, employed to analyse the narratives from different perspectives and situate them within broader ideological developments.

⁷ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 67.

⁸ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 160.

⁹ Driencourt, Jacques. *Problèmes de la propagande* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 57.

The structure of the thesis reflects this analytical trajectory. The first chapter reconstructs the historical evolution of propaganda, from its early origins to its transformation into a structural feature of mass societies of the twentieth century. The second chapter develops the theoretical framework, focusing on propaganda as a mechanism of identity formation and on its relationship with mass communication and political systems. The third chapter turns to the core comparative analysis, examining how sports cinema in the Soviet Union and the United States articulated forms of soft and hard propaganda during the Cold War. Finally, the fourth chapter moves beyond hegemonic narratives to explore dissent and counterpropaganda, highlighting the reinterpretations and responses to external criticism within both cinematic traditions.

Ultimately, this study argues that sports cinema during the Cold War constituted more than a peripheral cultural phenomenon. It functioned as a symbolic arena in which national identity and ideological rivalry were dramatised and made emotionally accessible to mass audiences. By analysing the representation of athletes and their training regimes, it becomes possible to trace how both superpowers tried to naturalise their respective systems while responding to internal tensions and external accusations.

CHAPTER I

PROPAGANDA AND HISTORY

The concept of propaganda is today seen with a specific connotation. At the same time, the meaning attributed to the term has not remained constant over time, and the techniques and symbols associated with it have deep historical roots. This thesis focuses on the propaganda used in the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but in order to fully understand this, an explanation of its historical and conceptual foundation is necessary. For this reason, this first chapter concentrates on an overview of the concept of propaganda as a communicative practice embedded in social, religious and political transformation, starting from its origins, going through the birth of the word propaganda, and ending with its evolution during the First World War and the beginning of the Soviet Union. The second aim of this chapter is to find a definition of the concept of propaganda, with its core features, its symbols, and the moral ambiguity that it has brought since its origins.

In public discourse, propaganda is frequently associated with authoritarian regimes, especially those of the twentieth century, and is often linked to the rise of modern mass media. However, such an interpretation risks reducing the phenomenon to its extreme manifestations. Scholars have demonstrated that propaganda is not confined to totalitarian systems, nor is it an exclusive product of modern communication technologies, but rather

a broader communicative practice with ancient roots that can operate within different political systems.¹⁰

On the contrary, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, the aim of propaganda, in its definition, is to promote a particular case or point of view.¹¹ Following this definition, the anthropologist Margaret Mead found an ancestral version of modern propaganda in prehistoric societies.¹² During her fieldwork in Samoa and New Guinea, she discovered some objects, arranged in a specific way to signal danger. Even if these practices didn't follow the modern techniques of propaganda, they satisfied the main objective in its definition, which is the intentional use of symbols to shape perception and behaviour.

Later, in classical Greece, another ancestral version of propaganda emerged, particularly in the form of persuasive communication, which was theorised as rhetoric. The latter was not seen as manipulation, but as a rational process, a skill through which the speaker could convince an audience.

1.1 The historical origins

The concept of propaganda is now associated with manipulation or ideological control, but in the past, thanks to its roots, it was perceived as a legitimate form of religious persuasive communication. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote in her studies “Coming of Age in Samoa”¹³ and “Growing Up in New Guinea”¹⁴, some primitive societies intentionally used visual symbols for specific purposes. As an example, they used to arrange some leaves and weapons in a way to indicate danger coming from a third

¹⁰ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, 27.

¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “propaganda,”. Available at: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/propaganda_n?tab=meaning_and_use (last accessed: 20th July 2025).

¹² Mead, Margaret. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*. New York: William Morrow, 1928.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Mead, Margaret. *Growing Up in New Guinea: A Comparative Study of Primitive Education*. New York: William Morrow, 1930.

village, with the hope of forming an alliance. While these examples may seem to be significantly different from modern propaganda, as they could appear too simple, they are considered the roots of propaganda, as their aim is the intentional use of symbolic actions to shape thoughts or actions.

At a later stage, the Ancient Greeks used to perceive persuasion as a component of rhetoric. In the classical world, propaganda and persuasion became more and more connected in an explicit way, as persuasion was formalised through rhetoric. Aristotle, in particular, thought that the objective of persuasion was to convey a specific point of view and that true knowledge and wisdom could be achieved only through the application of logic (*logos*), emotion (*pathos*) and credibility (*ethos*).¹⁵ However, rhetoric and propaganda should be distinguished. The first one constitutes a discursive technique concerned with argumentation and persuasion in public life, whereas the second one, especially in its modern form, implies organised and systematic efforts with the aim of shaping collective attitudes within specific political contexts.¹⁶ Propaganda incorporates rhetorical strategies, and it operates within broader structures of power and ideology that distinguish it from classical rhetorical theory.

This emphasis shows the distinction between classical rhetoric and modern propaganda, but it also expresses their common point, as both of them rely on shaping opinion through communication.

1.2 The birth of the word “propaganda” and its religious origins

The word “Propaganda” was born in 1622, when Pope Gregory XV created a new papal department, called the *Sacra Propaganda Fide*, the Congregation for the

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), Book I, 1-4.

¹⁶ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, 28.

Propagation of the Faith¹⁷. The goal was to revive Catholicism in the era of Reformation Europe and strengthen it in the New World. The word began to be used with a negative connotation from 1627, when Pope Urban VIII founded the *Collegium Urbanum*, which served as a training ground for Catholics who were tasked with disseminating propaganda.¹⁸ Their methods had a remarkable amount of discretion. During the Thirty Years War, from 1618 to 1648, the propagandists produced and distributed materials in secrecy, and the word began to be used to indicate suspicion, especially in north European Protestant countries. The latter also began to use propaganda in this period. As a matter of fact, mercenary troops were particularly unreliable and undisciplined; they mostly used their initial wages on leisure such as wine or entertainment, instead of investing in proper equipment or uniforms. Nevertheless, some efforts were made in order to give more motivation to the mercenaries. In particular, the King of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus, personally led his men into the battle amidst a colourful array of flags and banners. These symbols helped the mercenaries achieve patriotism and morale, and they were later known to prefer “to die chivalrously rather than flee”¹⁹.

As a result, it is clear how the word "propaganda" originated from a religious background, but it soon found its way onto the battlefield, serving war and patriotic purposes. In addition, the ones who helped spread the concept were poets, songwriters, pamphleteers and painters, as their work could reach every class of society. The message had to be clear and simple, so even the masses could easily grasp its meaning. Visual tools such as caricatures proved particularly effective; they brought a sharp political message through familiar imagery and appealed directly to the lived experiences of ordinary people, who were mostly illiterate. With the rise of print capitalism, a new model of mass communication emerged, marking a transition from elite to popular propaganda. Furthermore, News sheets achieved a much wider circulation in comparison to the

¹⁷ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 111.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. 112.

sixteenth century²⁰. Yet, small-format publications were the principal medium of propaganda, as they involved the general population in the dynamics of war.

There were some attempts of censorship, but they resulted largely ineffective, as opposing factions flooded the public sphere with leaflets, manifestos, and intercepted correspondence, transforming the conflict into a war of both weapons and words, or, as professor and writer Philip M. Taylor defines it, a “war of pens”²¹. One example took place after the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, where the Catholic League and Spanish and Imperial troops won over King Frederick of Bohemia. In this case, some letters written by the Emperor to Spain were intercepted by the supporters of Frederick V of Bohemia and strategically published in order to expose an alleged Catholic conspiracy between the Emperor and Spain, fueling an anti-Habsburg sentiment. Later, the arrival of Swedish forces in 1630 under Gustavus Adolphus marked a new phase in the propaganda effort. His War Manifesto, which was widely circulated across German territories, framed the intervention as a mission of religious liberation, employing symbolic wordplay and heroic imagery to elevate the Swedish king as a divine saviour. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm for the liberators quickly lowered as military violence and local suffering intensified. As the war changed and evolved, the “war of pens” had to adapt. Even if the combination of military conflict and propaganda was not new, the volume, scale, and international dissemination of printed material marked the century as a turning point in the history of war propaganda. Professor Kamen wrote: “For sheer volume of publicity, the seventeenth century was one of innovation”²², but Taylor added: “For the sheer internationalisation of propaganda, the Thirty Years War was a watershed”²³.

In the same way, as printing became more popular, access to materials and, in consequence, political ideas, began to expand beyond elite circles. As it was declared: “The art of printing will so spread knowledge that the common people, knowing their

²⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, 2006, 37-46.

²¹ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 114.

²² Ibid. 116.

²³ Ibid.

own rights and liberties, will not be governed by way of oppression”²⁴. This escalated in the civil war in England in the 1640s, when the opponents of Charles I believed that their constitutional position was being destroyed, so they started a massive propaganda assault against the king. At this moment, the word “propaganda” began to be intended as a liberating force. Later, with the Reformation and the Dutch Revolt, printing started to have a new use as well, where the oppressed could attack the oppressor and respond with counterpropaganda.

1.3 Toward modern propaganda

Another decisive moment in the history of propaganda was the French Revolution, when propaganda marked a mass mobilisation. During this period, propaganda was not a tool in the hands of elites or governments to manage opinion anymore, but it was a central instrument for constructing a new civic religion and collective identity. Revolutionary leaders understood its power and began to use and diffuse it, with the help of symbolic imagery, language and rituals. Their objective was to secularise and sacralise the Revolution, with the use of public festivals, national anthems like *La Marseillaise* and the transformation of Christian saints into republican martyrs. Visual propaganda was one of the most effective, since it was easily understandable by everyone, with artists such as Jacques-Louis David, who produced representations of revolutionary virtue, sacrifice and justice. Political newspapers flourished, with the masses being increasingly literate, and figures such as Marat and Hébert used the publications to ask for support and denounce enemies.²⁵ Even slogans became ideological anchors, such as the famous Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité. The main goal of the new propaganda, controlled by the revolutionaries, was to define the moral boundaries of the new republic and inspire participation. Their

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Haley Witsell, *Journalism of the French Revolution*, BU Blogs. Available at: <https://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/moderneurope/haley-witsell/journalism-of-the-french-revolution/> (last accessed: October 19, 2025).

methodology of reinforcing the “us versus them” dynamic remained central in later ideological conflicts.²⁶

Starting from a tool for the elites and the governments, and later becoming of use among the masses, from its religious origins and tactical use in war, propaganda evolved into a more structured and strategic tool for shaping collective consciousness. The birth and rise of printed materials can also be associated with the birth of propaganda, and it later amplified its reach, but also deepened its influence on identity formation. As different political struggles intensified across Europe, propaganda began to serve a dual purpose: initially, to mobilise the warriors and later the population in moments of conflict, and then to define who belonged to the nation and who stood outside it. In this context, it can be said that propaganda laid the symbolic foundations of national identity, promoting unity, legitimising authority and designating ideological enemies. This transformation was the base that set the stage for the modern use of propaganda.

Any attempt to define propaganda encounters immediate conceptual difficulties. As Jacques Ellul observes, the phenomenon is often approached through moral and political preconceptions. As mentioned beforehand, it is commonly regarded as evil, associated with lies or deception, which prevents an objective analysis of its structure.²⁷ However, the reduction of propaganda to the dissemination of falsehood obscures its modern complexity. In contemporary societies propaganda operates as a technique embedded in technological environments mediated by the mass and is governed by a logic of efficiency.²⁸

The problem of definition has produced significant divergence among scholars. As an example, some approached from American scholars of the twentieth century emphasised its psychological manipulation, often stressing the hidden nature of its objectives.²⁹ Other attempts at definitions, as the one influenced by Harold Lasswell and the Institute for

²⁶ Bryan A. Banks & Erica Johnson, *Religion and the French Revolution: A Global Perspective*, Age of Revolutions, 2017. Available at: <https://ageofrevolutions.com/2017/12/18/religion-and-the-french-revolution-a-global-perspective/> (last accessed: October 19, 2025).

²⁷ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 3.

²⁸ Ibid. 7.

²⁹ Albion, John. *Public Opinion* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 288.

Propaganda Analysis, described it as the deliberate attempt by individuals or groups to influence the opinions or actions of others through the manipulation of symbols for predetermined ends.³⁰ In particular, Lasswell defines the goal of propaganda as to “maximise the power at home by subordinating groups and individuals, while reducing the material cost of power”³¹, to which Ellul adds: “Before the war, propaganda is a substitute for physical violence; during the war, it is a supplement to it”³².

These formulations highlight intentionality and psychological influence, but they risk becoming either excessively broad, including all forms of persuasion, or overly narrow, restricting propaganda to deceptive practices. For this reason, Ellul prefers to consider propaganda as a structured and organised form of communication that combines psychological techniques with institutional frameworks, aiming at persuasion as well as the integration of individuals into a specific social or political order.³³ In this sense, propaganda exceeds classical rhetoric, as it includes the art of argumentation, typical of the latter, but it also involves a systematic effort to shape behaviours within mass society.

The cited symbols can be of different forms, whether visual, auditory or gestural, and they can be represented by “words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps, and so forth”³⁴. These forms are extremely effective, since they do not communicate through rational argument, but through affective resonance. The aim of propaganda is to provoke immediate emotion. Regarding this, Jacques Ellul sustains that modern propaganda “does not aim to elevate the individual by appealing to reason, but to integrate him into a collective movement through repetition, emotional reinforcement, and simplified messaging”³⁵. This stimulation of feelings of fear, pride, hatred or belonging is particularly effective in

³⁰ Institute for Propaganda Analysis, cited in Ellul, *Propaganda*, 12; Lasswell, Harold D. “The Theory of Political Propaganda,” *American Political Science Review* 21, no. 3 (1927), 627.

³¹ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, 7.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Propaganda” Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda> (last accessed: June 14, 2025).

³⁵ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, 27-28.

moments of crisis, when people are more vulnerable. Philip Taylor adds that propaganda “must simplify, personalise, and dramatise”³⁶ in order to be effective.

As mentioned, while the word “propaganda” originally referred to the religious efforts of the Catholic Church, and later it was even intended to carry a positive and free connotation, in modern times it has taken on a negative nuance. In the twentieth century, the word started to be associated with manipulation, deceit, and authoritarian control, since totalitarian regimes began to use it systematically to dominate public opinion and suppress dissent.

The first ones were the British during the First World War, as the government set up a war propaganda bureau at Wellington House under the direction of Charles Masterman. It was so secret that even most members of the Parliament didn’t know about its existence. Their approach was more low-key and selective, with prominent writers, such as Arthur Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells, who had to write essays and articles to justify British war aims and demonize the enemy, with Germany in particular, and even neutral countries, including the United States.³⁷ As an example, they used to write unsettling stories about German soldiers in order to show them as barbaric. Some of the stories were based on facts, while others were exaggerated or fabricated for this purpose. They preferred to use persuasion rather than exhortation, and, as Philip Taylor quoted, the principle was “that it is better to influence those who can influence others than attempt a direct appeal to the mass of the population”³⁸. At the end of the First World War, propaganda had become a usual practice, making it a necessary habit of the government and marking a turning point in the history of mass persuasion, especially in its institutionalisation in liberal democracies.

³⁶ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 11.

³⁷ Cull, Nicholas J. *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American “Neutrality” in World War II* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 9–12.

³⁸ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 178.

1.4 Conclusion: continuities and transformations

In conclusion, this first chapter reveals a historical overview how the concept of propaganda has transformed over the years, where some core elements observed during the early modern propaganda have not changed consistently, for example, the centrality of war, the emotional appeal to collective identity, the idealization of the soldier, and the construction of the enemy as a moral threat, which will be analysed further.³⁹

At the same time, the twentieth century introduced decisive structural changes. The techniques of propaganda started to be more sophisticated, with enormous differences in terms of scale and institutional structure. These changes are the result of new elements such as mass media and the professionalisation of international relations. Civilian populations switched their role in this context, from being spectators to being actively integrated into the war effort through coordinated communication strategies, transforming propaganda from an episodic tool into a permanent component of political organisation. As several scholars have noted, modern propaganda operates within mass society and is inseparable from technological development and bureaucratic coordination.⁴⁰

Moreover, propaganda increasingly extended beyond national borders. Alongside domestic mobilisation, states developed systematic forms of psychological warfare directed at foreign enemies or third countries, aiming to influence their international perception.⁴¹ This international dimension became particularly relevant during the Cold War, and it will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters, especially in the analysis of counterpropaganda in sports films in Chapter IV. Therefore, understanding these historical continuities and transformations is essential to explain how propaganda was ultimately weaponised within a bipolar global order.

³⁹ Ibid. 25.

⁴⁰ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 24.

⁴¹ Lasswell, Harold D. "The Theory of Political Propaganda," *American Political Science Review* 21, no. 3 (1927), 631.

CHAPTER II

THE IDENTITY BUILDING OF PROPAGANDA

2.1 From Persuasion to Identity Formation

The first chapter demonstrated how propaganda emerged as a religious practice aimed at dissemination. Over time, propaganda progressively developed into a structural mechanism for the formation of collective identity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it became increasingly connected to processes of mass mobilisation and national integration.⁴² Modern propaganda began to expand and generate emotions and symbols that later turned ideology into belonging, a phenomenon that coincided with the rise of nationalism. The latter turned the cultural and emotional power of propaganda into a tool for defining the nation itself. As Benedict Anderson argues, nations are “imagined communities”⁴³, constructed through shared representation and communicative practices. In a similar way, George L. Mosse has shown how modern political movements relied on rituals and symbolic imagery to integrate individuals into a national framework of meaning.⁴⁴

⁴² Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*, 165.

⁴³ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴⁴ Mosse, George L. *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975), 9.

Nonetheless, the phenomena of nation and nationalism can appear difficult to recognise, and in consequence to determine, as the historian and political scientist Hugh Seton-Watson observes: “Thus I am driven to the conclusion that no ‘scientific definition’ of nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists”⁴⁵. Later, the author Benedict Anderson agreed with the current argument, arguing that the terms “Nation, nationality, nationalism [...] have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse”⁴⁶.

Despite these difficulties, the aim of this chapter is not to reconstruct the rise of nationalism as a historical process. Rather, it examines how modern propaganda operates as an instrument of identity formation in mass society, producing narratives that distinguish the political “we” from the ideological “other”⁴⁷. This analytical focus is directly relevant to the Cold War, especially in the case of the United States and the Soviet Union, which can both be described as continental, federal and multi-ethnic polities. Both countries relied on propaganda to articulate forms of national and ideological belonging that could integrate diversity into coherent political identities.⁴⁸

Therefore, this chapter pursues two objectives. First, it outlines the structural conditions that made modern propaganda possible. In particular, the upcoming paragraphs aim to explore how propaganda became part of ordinary life in the nineteenth century in some countries, and in the twentieth century in others, examining the case of Great Britain, a crucial example of the attempt of persuasion from the government, but also from the press, which, as will be explained below, became independent.⁴⁹ Second, it develops a conceptual framework, adopting a more theoretical approach, with the aim of analysing the theories of different scholars on how propaganda works and its importance in every aspect of everyday life, as well as how it is interconnected with different political

⁴⁵ Hobsbawm, Eric. *Some Reflections on “The breakup of Britain”* (New Left Review: 1977), 13.

⁴⁶ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 7.

⁴⁸ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 87.

⁴⁹ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 159.

systems.⁵⁰ This framework will guide the subsequent analysis of Cold War propaganda and counterpropaganda in the United States and in the Soviet Union.

2.2 Propaganda, Myth and Construction of Collective Narratives

The nineteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the development of modern propaganda as it is known today. As major advances occurred in matters such as transportation systems and newspapers (in 1833, the New York Sun was founded, marking one of the first mass newspapers⁵¹), the period between the end of the Napoleonic wars and the beginning of the First World War was also characterised by the invention of photography, the advent of electricity, and the development of flight, as industrialisation and population were increasing. For this reason, the Australian historian Asa Briggs defines it as an era of “Communications Revolution”,⁵² and Philip M. Taylor adds that we are still undergoing it today.⁵³ In consequence, all of these improvements and geopolitical changes, where smaller-scale conflicts (especially when compared to the Napoleonic wars) became the priority and started to receive more publicity, the European media concentrated its attention on politics, resulting in revolutionary ideas, which gradually reached an increasingly broad audience, and nationalist movements that emerged to challenge the established order.⁵⁴

In light of these rather fast and significant changes that reached every layer of society and affected all spheres of life, everyone had to adapt, especially on a topic as important as communication. As the professor of political science, Terence H. Qualter, wrote in his

⁵⁰ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 3-16.

⁵¹ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 159.

⁵² Briggs, Asa. *The Communications Revolution*, in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, Vol. 3: Serious Pursuits: Communications and Education (University of Illinois Press, 1991), 62-77.

⁵³ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 160.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 159.

book *Opinion Control in the Democracies*, “even those whose attitude towards public opinion in politics did not change found that of necessity they had to learn the mechanics of peaceful persuasion by propaganda”⁵⁵. This shift, as he explains, originated from the widening of the right to vote and the growth of the population, since “it was too expensive to do anything else”⁵⁶. As a consequence, while “voters could be bought”⁵⁷ in the past, they now “had to be persuaded”⁵⁸, and, in conclusion, “politicians had, therefore, to become interested in propaganda”⁵⁹.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Great Britain understood the importance of adaptation and, in consequence, the power of political propaganda. This awareness led the then-empire to be the “undisputed master of war propaganda”⁶⁰ in the twentieth century, especially during the First World War. Nonetheless, the base of mass modern propaganda started a century before, after events such as the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, which extended the size of the electorate,⁶¹ or the abolition of the Stamp Duty in 1855 and of the tax on paper, better known as the tax on knowledge, in 1861.⁶²

The new modern system of communication established by the United Kingdom was essential for two main reasons, according to Taylor. The first one was the communication with its colonies in a manner that allowed the government to demonstrate its *infinite* power, with the aim of maintaining its worldwide empire. In practical terms, “if British power was to be sustained, it was vital for the Empire to ‘think British’”⁶³, which is a remarkable insight that other countries, such as France and Germany, understood later.

⁵⁵ Qualter, Terence H. *Opinion Control in the Democracies* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 169.

⁶¹ The National Archives, *What Caused the 1832 Great Reform Act? Political and Social Reform in 19th Century Britain*, 4–7. Available at: <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/great-reform-act-lesson-pack.pdf> (last accessed: November 17, 2025).

⁶² Association of Tax & Trade History, *Taxes on Knowledge*, Available at: <https://www.att.org.uk/taxes-knowledge> (last accessed: November 17, 2025).

⁶³ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 160.

The second main reason was the fact that propaganda transmitted reciprocal messages: through the press, politicians and the government could communicate with everyone, but they could also understand the thoughts of public opinion. As an example, the political movements of the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League used slogans, banners, badges and bands to spread their beliefs.⁶⁴ Some leaders who understood the importance of this phenomenon were William Ewart Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli, two rivals who played a crucial role in refining techniques of political persuasion.⁶⁵

Another crucial element that contributed to the evolution of modern propaganda was the use of war correspondents. This was the result of the press becoming independent from government subsidies and, in consequence, reliant on sales and advertising. For this reason, the aim of the editors became to find entertaining material; therefore, special correspondents started to travel to the front in order to gather information. They often moved undercover, as civilians were not allowed. As a result, the press managed to publish sensible information, which sometimes led the enemy to discover useful materials. The outcome of this new practice was Napoleon's famous remark: "English papers make my best spies"⁶⁶. Later, the government tried to control the release of information with rigorous military censorship; as an example, officers were prohibited from publishing their letters.

On these grounds, as the press found that positive news had a better impact on people, especially when it regarded the topic of war, and, in consequence, sales increased, journalists tended to only publish victories and to omit defeats and negative news. An example was the defeat of the British at the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812-1815. On this matter, politician William Corbett wrote in his weekly political register: "The country people in England, and a great many of the townspeople, never know

⁶⁴ Ibid. 161.

⁶⁵ Shannon, Richard. *The Crisis of Imperialism, 1865–1915*. (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1974), 157.

⁶⁶ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 162.

anything of such defeats. The London newspapers, which alone have a very wide circulation, are employed in the spreading of falsehood and the suppressing of the truth”⁶⁷.

Overall, taking these elements into consideration, some might suggest that British propaganda was not established by the government on purpose, but it was born from private newspapers.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, regardless of its origins, both the government and the press realised their power and the importance of coming together and pursuing the same aim: to have an effective national propaganda campaign. In consequence, war correspondents, who were originally considered “newly invented curses to armies”⁶⁹ by the military, soon became their most valuable allies.

2.3 Propaganda and Mass Society: Sociological Foundations

The rise of modern propaganda as a practice controlled by the government, with the help of the press and mass media, created the conditions for theoretical reflections on how propaganda influences mass societies. Jacques Ellul was one of the first scholars to grasp this transformation and elaborate an essential analysis of the topic. According to him, modern propaganda cannot be reduced to government campaigns or news from the front during wars, but it started to operate continuously, becoming a necessity in a society that is constantly changing, adapting to technology and becoming more and more complex.⁷⁰ Moreover, during the twentieth century, propaganda became not only a technique refined with time, but it turned out to be “an indispensable condition for the development of technical progress and the establishment of a technological civilization”⁷¹. For this

⁶⁷ Cobbett, William. *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, vol. 29, no. 1 (London, 10 July 1815). Available at: https://archive.org/details/sim_cobbetts-weekly-political-register_1815-10-07_29_1/page/n2/mode/1up (last accessed: November 19, 2025).

⁶⁸ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 166.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 169.

⁷⁰ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 3-16.

⁷¹ Ibid. 7.

reason, the French historian and sociologist explores the concept of propaganda in its broadest sense, as he disagrees with all the previous attempts to define it. He finds four domains, where each one is interconnected and contributes to the formation of collective consciousness. Firstly, he identifies psychological action, according to which the aim is to change the opinions of its citizens through education, public messaging or social campaigns. This form includes “purely psychological means”⁷² and is not necessarily coercive. Secondly, he distinguishes psychological warfare, which, in comparison, is addressed to foreign adversaries, and tries to destabilise the opponent’s confidence in their political system, creating doubt. This form emerged during the First World War and later became a central element during the Cold War. The third domain is for extreme situations, and it can only be used on prisoners, as it is called re-education and brainwashing. This exceptional category shows the depth of propaganda, which not only influences opinions, but it reshapes identities, “transforming an adversary into an ally”⁷³. Finally, the fourth domain is characterised by public and human relations, which shows the goal of propaganda of conforming an individual, adapting him to society.

This theory can be compared to that of Maurice Mégrét. In his analysis, the scholar identified three fundamental parts of propaganda, where the first one is characterised by the existence of agencies dedicated to supporting military operations, the second one includes actions that are rather political or military and have the purpose of maintaining the submission of the population, and the final one involves a broader ideological system, which needs to provide coherence to these practices.⁷⁴

What can be observed from these analyses is the fact that propaganda operates in a comprehensive manner, reaching into every aspect of the individual as a whole. As a matter of fact, even Ellul finds that modern propaganda addresses “itself at one and the same time to the individual and to the masses”⁷⁵, as “it cannot separate the two

⁷² Ibid. 9.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Mégrét, Maurice. *L’Action psychologique*. (Paris: A. Fayard, 1959), 18-25.

⁷⁵ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 16.

elements”⁷⁶. The two are interconnected and cannot be treated as separate targets, as each one reinforces the effectiveness of the other, and they cannot be penetrated otherwise. This dynamic aligns with the findings made by the sociologists Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, who observed that the response of propaganda depends mainly on the relationship that an individual has with a group and on the degree to which the group may be fragmented or reinforced.⁷⁷ In their research, they found that, when an individual finds himself within a group, his emotional dynamics may be intensified, for example enthusiasm or fear, making him more impulsive and, in consequence, more susceptible to external influence. With the advent of mass media in modern societies, this phenomenon becomes even more powerful, as a massive number of people can be reached, while giving the impression of being addressed personally. As a matter of fact, the newspaper reader, the radio listener or the television watcher is alone at the moment, so he feels that the message is directly given to him as an individual. Yet the same message can reach a multitude of people who choose to read, listen to, or watch a specific article, radio program, or channel. This is the sociological condition that scholars David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney define as the *lonely crowd*, a context in which individuals rely on external cues to form a belief, such as public opinion or media.⁷⁸ In Ellul’s view, this is where propaganda can be the most effective: the situation of “isolation in the mass”⁷⁹, where the individual is physically alone but psychologically connected to a group. Moreover, he adds that propaganda would almost have no effect if it were targeted at an organised group, until the group in question gets split.

In addition to this, the individual *per se* chooses what newspaper, radio program or TV channel to read, listen to or watch. This way, he would feel in control of the situation and wouldn’t notice that he is being persuaded. These programs will tend to express only the news or the information that the person is interested in, so there will not be any disagreements. This way, when the individual finds himself in a group, he will notice that

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Shils, Edward A. and Janowitz, Morris. “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, volume 12, issue 2 (1948), 280–315.

⁷⁸ Riesman, David and Glazer, David and Denney, Reuel. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 13.

⁷⁹ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 17.

he will be “moved by the same motives”⁸⁰ as those of his or her companions: they will share the same interests, feelings and even “participate in the same myths”⁸¹. Ellul describes this phenomenon as a “psychological, not biological mass”⁸². Furthermore, when people find themselves in a group, they can get more pressured and tend to feel more emotional or impulsive. These are characteristics of the individual, but when caught up in a mass, they become more vulnerable to influence strategies.

This illustrates how propaganda relies on all types of means, whether explicit or implicit, and whether they involve private or public life. Thus, propaganda constitutes “an organized myth”⁸³ that seeks to engage the individual in his or her entirety, referring to a coherent symbolic framework capable of structuring perception and emotions, and therefore constructing a total interpretative environment within which individuals situate themselves and make sense of reality. Besides, each instrument of persuasion strongly reinforces a specific dimension. As an example, visual media, such as films or human interaction, are particularly effective in supporting forms of sociological influence that act gradually and include total integration. On the other hand, formats, such as public meetings or posters, may generate immediate emotional impact, working in an intense way, even though it is temporary. For what regards newspapers, they achieve giving more general ideas, and are used at a local level, while the radio can also be found to work at the international level. This insight shows why diplomacy is often considered to be intrinsically linked to propaganda.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid. 18.

⁸⁴ Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 247.

2.4 Techniques and political systems

Some experts argue that some forms of persuasion are more important than others. As an example, Ellul argues that propaganda is more efficient when it provides an immediate emotional shock.⁸⁵ On the other hand, the American journalist MacDougall claims that it is necessary to gradually repeat a message over time, so that opinion will be transformed into a charged conviction. Once this phenomenon, which MacDougall defines as *crystallisation*, is reached, it will be almost impossible for the individual to change his judgment.⁸⁶ This reinforces the importance and inevitability of slogans, which are simple and often repeated. However, both of the cited scholars agree on a common ground, which is the importance of simplification. In Ellul's opinion, multifaceted views can lead to different nuances, and might eventually succeed in forming one's opinion, but it will take a longer time.⁸⁷ On the contrary, once propaganda is as simple as possible, the result can only be one of two opinions: whether positive or negative. This way, it will be easier and faster to shape opinions. Even the minister of propaganda for the German Third Reich, Paul Joseph Goebbels, wrote on the matter: "By simplifying the thoughts of the masses and reducing them to primitive patterns, propaganda was able to present the complex process of political and economic life in the simplest terms"⁸⁸. He then added: "We have taken matters previously available only to experts and a small number of specialists and have carried them into the street and hammered them into the brain of the little man"⁸⁹.

Another important distinction to be noted is between the so-called covert and overt propaganda. The first one, also known as *black propaganda*, is indirect and hidden; it doesn't want people to know that they are being influenced in any way. The other one,

⁸⁵ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 149.

⁸⁶ MacDougall, Curtis D. *Understanding Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 98-101.

⁸⁷ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 150.

⁸⁸ Goebbels, Joseph. quoted in Welch, David. *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations* (London: Routledge, 2001), 32.

Originally in Goebbels, Joseph. *Wesen und Gestalt des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Junker und Dönhaupt, 1935).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

which could be named *white propaganda*, is explicit and clear: it implicates the existence of the Ministry of Propaganda, whose aim is obviously to persuade people's opinion, and its source is always public.⁹⁰ In the Soviet Union, for instance, the cultural production sponsored by the state was explicitly framed as an instrument of ideological education under institutional supervision. By contrast, in the United States, propaganda was more frequently embedded within supposedly independent cultural and media industries, blurring the line between state messaging and private initiative.⁹¹

A similar division is offered by political scientist Harold Lasswell, which is between direct or indirect incitement produced by propaganda. In this case, the first one occurs when the propagandist is personally committed to the opinions he wants to share. In this way, he demonstrates his beliefs and presents himself as an example to follow. This characteristic best agrees with democratic contexts, where political leaders show themselves as part of the people rather than a distant authority. In contrast, indirect incitement relies on a clear separation between the leader and the masses. In this situation, the authority makes the decisions, and the citizens just passively accept and obey. This can be found in authoritarian regimes.⁹²

There are different opinions also for what regards the use of propaganda in distinct political systems. As an example, the French scholar Jacques Driencourt argues that "propaganda is totalitarian in its essence"⁹³, as he claims that it has an intrinsic tendency to expand and absorb every available means of influence. As mentioned before, propaganda needs to use all the instruments that are in its power in order to be effective, and, in Driencourt's opinion, once a political leader relies on propaganda, it becomes impossible to limit its actions. As a result, these actions can no longer be considered democratic, as they abandon the characteristics that distinguish them from authoritarian

⁹⁰ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 22.

⁹¹ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 172.

⁹² Lasswell, Harold D. *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 221-224.

⁹³ Driencourt, Jacques. *Problèmes de la propagande* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 57.

systems.⁹⁴ On this topic, Ellul adds that democratic propaganda cannot influence the people in the direction of democracy, but, on the contrary, it will persuade them into strengthening their totalitarian tendencies.⁹⁵

Nonetheless, Ellul debates that propaganda is used in democratic systems as well. As a matter of fact, he argues that no democracy can exist without propaganda, as one of the main characteristics of democracy is to permit the expression of different forms of opinion. On the other hand, he also considers that it is impossible to permit the expression of all opinions, as he states, there should be “no freedom for the enemies of freedom”.⁹⁶ This is a controversial topic, especially for what regards modern propaganda. However, one should also consider the fact that democracy depends on public opinion as well as competition between the different political parties in order to get more voters and come to power. In this context, Ellul writes that “historically, from the moment a democratic regime establishes itself, propaganda establishes itself alongside it under various forms”⁹⁷. He also cites different American writers, whose opinion states that once democracy uses propaganda, the latter becomes democratic. This is in direct relation to two widespread opinions among Americans in the twentieth century: the first is the belief that democracy cannot be affected in any way, quite the opposite, it will change everything it encounters. The second principle regards the modern man in general, and it is the idea that “propaganda is really creating truth”⁹⁸, and, in consequence, “truth is powerless without propaganda”⁹⁹.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 58.

⁹⁵ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 175.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 171-172.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 169.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 170.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

2.5 Propaganda as a framework of identity: concluding remarks

The analysis developed in this chapter has shown that propaganda is not merely a technique of persuasion, but a structural component of all aspects of the individual's life, from the political to the social ones. Its purpose is to shape symbols and narratives through emotions and patterns of collective belonging, both when an individual is alone and surrounded by other citizens. This contributes to the formation of what Benedict Anderson describes as “imagined communities”¹⁰⁰, sustained by shared representations and communicative practices. This observation is reinforced by Czech political scientist and professor Karl Deutsch, who argued that identity emerges from the circulation of messages that create mutual understanding and a sense of common purpose, emphasising the communicative basis of national cohesion.¹⁰¹

This development is particularly evident in the British case during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which offers a crucial example of how communication became a structured instrument of influence. As a matter of fact, Great Britain understood the importance of propaganda and turned it into an organised activity long before the emergence of totalitarian regimes. This phenomenon was also possible thanks to the expansion of literacy, the growth of the press, and the size of the growing empire, which needed to consolidate and reach an imperial identity.¹⁰²

Moreover, this theoretical framework is particularly relevant for understanding the Cold War context. Both the United States and the Soviet Union, as continental and ideologically driven superpowers, relied on sustained communicative strategies to consolidate internal unity while projecting a coherent image of themselves to the outside

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London, 2006), 6.

¹⁰¹ Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 96-97.

¹⁰² Taylor, Philip M. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 166.

world. In this context, propaganda functioned as a means of stabilizing political order and defining the moral boundaries between “us” and “them” within a bipolar system.¹⁰³

Later, the analysis given by Ellul shows the relevance of the emotional dimension. As the scholar argues, modern propaganda works not only by informing but by integrating individuals into a shared environment, satisfying their needs for belonging and recognition.¹⁰⁴ This is amplified by the mass media, which, with their fast technological evolution, establish a paradoxical yet effective condition where individuals are found physically alone, but immersed in a collective experience.¹⁰⁵

Finally, it can be said that propaganda has the ability to adapt to different political systems, as demonstrated by Lasswell and Ellul. Both in democratic and authoritarian systems, it shapes the relationship between citizens and authority.

Taken together, all of these elements reveal how propaganda constructs shared meaning, regulates emotions and defines identities. Therefore, understanding its mechanisms and history is necessary for the analysis of the cases of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, during which both countries developed distinct systems of identity building through communication and ideology.

¹⁰³ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 149.

¹⁰⁵ Shils, Edward A. and Janowitz, Morris. “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, volume 12, issue 2 (1948), 280–315.

CHAPTER III

CHANNELS AND MEDIA OF COLD WAR PROPAGANDA

During the Cold War, propaganda did not operate through a single, centralised channel, but rather through a complex constellation of practices and media that permeated everyday life. Both the United States and the Soviet Union relied on a wide range of communicative instruments to disseminate ideological messages, shape public opinion, and reinforce national identity. In this matter, sport was one of the most effective symbolic arenas for persuasion. Athletic competition translated abstract ideological differences into visible and measurable outcomes. Victories and defeats had a broader meaning, representing one political system as morally superior to the other.

Cinema managed to amplify this dynamic, structuring a narrative. Sports films turned all the characteristics into a symbol: they transformed training into moral formation, the coach into a guide, and the athlete into a representative figure of the nation. As the scholars Shaw and Youngblood have argued, Cold War sport and film were deeply intertwined in the broader struggle for hearts and minds¹⁰⁶. Through fictional narratives concentrated on matches and biographical dramas, cinema helped construct a coherent image of national identity, often blurring the line between entertainment and persuasion.

This chapter examines how sport functioned as propaganda within Soviet and American Cinema. It first outlines the role of sport as a tool of ideological competition, before turning to the Soviet case, distinguishing between soft and hard propaganda across different political phases from Stalin to Brezhnev. In this context, it is useful to recall

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 160.

political scientist Harold Lasswell's distinction between black and white propaganda, which will be discussed in more detail.¹⁰⁷ The chapter then moves to the case of the United States, where, despite the absence of direct state ownership, numerous forms of ideological persuasion emerged, both subtle and more overt, particularly during the McCarthy era and the 1980s.¹⁰⁸

By adopting a comparative perspective, the chapter demonstrates how similar media were employed by the two superpowers in distinct yet similar ways, reflecting their distinct political systems and cultural traditions. The emphasis is not placed on propaganda content per se, but on the means by which ideological narratives reached domestic and international audiences.

3.1 Sport as a tool for ideological competition

Sport occupied a central place in the symbolic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. International sporting competitions soon became a symbol of political clashes in which each party had to demonstrate its ideological superiority and national strength. In consequence, a success in the athletic field was interpreted not only as an individual achievement but as evidence of the effectiveness of an entire political system.¹⁰⁹

Moreover, this phenomenon was often represented in movies, as sport can result in a perfect metaphor, implicitly teaching about the values that make “the great man”, whether they imply individualism or collectivism, whether they idolise or vilify discipline.¹¹⁰ The

¹⁰⁷ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 54.

¹⁰⁸ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 160.

¹¹⁰ Pearson, Demetrius et al., “Sport Films: Social Dimensions Over Time, 1930–1995,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2003), 145.

aim of this paragraph is to analyse how sport was used as propaganda, especially in the context of cinema.

In the United States, sports were seen in the cinema industry long “before ‘Hollywood’ itself came into being in the 1910s”¹¹¹, and the films were predominantly categorised as melodramas or short documentaries, but also comedies or short documentaries. During the Cold War, they gained major commercial success, resulting in more investments and, in consequence, better quality. A good number of these movies were also made by or starred by famous American professionals.¹¹²

On the other hand, in the Soviet Union, the number of produced movies is significantly lower, especially for what regards sports, which was only a minor genre.¹¹³ As a matter of fact, Soviet citizens were not as interested in sports in general as they appeared to be, especially regarding spectator sports. There were “fewer games, fewer teams, fewer stadiums, fewer sports, fewer newspapers, less television coverage, and much less advertising”¹¹⁴. As a consequence, sports films had lower budgets and didn’t feature famous actors or directors.

A fundamental difference in the cinemas of the two superpowers was the influence of the state. As it may be logical, Soviet cinema was owned by the government, thanks to what scholar Youngblood describes as “a process that started in 1919 and was completed in the mid-1930s”¹¹⁵. This so-called project was the outcome of Vladimir Lenin’s politics, who considered films as “the most important of the arts”¹¹⁶. In comparison, the film industry in the United States was not owned by the government, but it was deeply influenced by it. As a matter of fact, a significant number of experts in cinema were found

¹¹¹ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 161.

¹¹² Briley, Ron; Schoenecke, Michael K. and Deborah A. Carmichael, eds., *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

¹¹³ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 177.

¹¹⁴ Edelman, Robert. *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 240.

¹¹⁵ Youngblood, Denise J. *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

¹¹⁶ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 178.

to be connected with different government agencies, such as the Defence Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department or the U.S. Information Agency. All of them used Hollywood for recruitment and propaganda purposes.¹¹⁷ The main difference that can be found between the two countries in this topic is that the first used cinema as a straightforward tool, while the second one used it, but kept it secret, as it was considered essential to maintain the reputation of the United States as a country with free and independent mass media.¹¹⁸

Another distinction that can be noticed in cinema is in the category of sports that were represented. In the United States, the most popular sports were baseball, boxing, auto racing, American football, as well as basketball, ice hockey, and horse racing; whereas in the Soviet Union, one would expect to find team sports that would lead to a collective ideology. As a matter of fact, soccer, the most popular spectator sport, was shown significantly, but there is also a long list of individual sports, such as gymnastics, figure skating, boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, swimming, skiing, running, auto racing, horse racing, dressage and mountaineering.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, film directors in both countries often focused on the individual, who was usually the star athlete. The distinction, in this case, was the figure of the coach, who did not get much importance in American films, but was often the second lead in Soviet cinemas; in some cases, he or she even had the lead role. This could be interpreted as a reflection “of the socialist mentor who is a stock figure in socialist realist fiction”¹²⁰, as Professor Olga Klimova claims.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 161.

¹¹⁸ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 9.

¹¹⁹ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 179-180.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

3.2 Soviet films

3.2.1 Soft propaganda

To move from a more general overview to a more specific analysis, these tendencies will become more evident. In the Soviet context, the style, the messages and even the number of films varied significantly over the period of the Cold War, reflecting the different shifts in politics. During the Stalin era, immediately after the Second World War, the priority was to concentrate on producing quality films rather than large quantities. This urge was taken to an extreme, resulting in the release of only nine films in 1951.¹²¹

Most of the films of this period, even if there were just a few, represented the so-called Great Patriotic War, and some of them also enjoyed great success within the Soviet audience, such as “Meeting on the Elbe” (*Vstrecha na Elbe*, 1949).¹²² This film, in particular, was also shown in Socialist “brotherlands”¹²³, such as Eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia, and received great reviews from these countries. According to the British historian, David Caute, “Meeting on the Elbe” stood out for its artistic and technical quality, and the film achieved a level that was higher than that of American productions dealing with the East-West conflict at the time.¹²⁴

Later, with the so-called *zhdanovschina*,¹²⁵ named after Leningrad party head and chief ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, the cinematic style changed¹²⁶. Films adopted a lighter tone and an approach oriented to entertainment, resulting in the release of more comedies

¹²¹ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 46-47.

¹²² Ibid. 77.

¹²³ De Keghel, Isabelle. “Meeting on the Elbe (*Vstrecha na El'be*): A Visual Representation of the Incipient Cold War from a Soviet Perspective.” *Cold War History* 9, no. 4 (University of Konstanz: Germany, 2009), 464.

¹²⁴ Caute, David. *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141.

¹²⁵ The term “Zhdanovism” refers to the post-war cultural policy initiated in the Soviet Union immediately after the end of the Second World War, based on a critique of decadent individualism in literature and formalism in the arts and music. It imposed ideological conformity on artistic production, condemning Western influence and promoting Marxist-Leninist principles through extensive censorship. See Zdanovismo, Treccani Vocabolario online, available on: <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/zdanovismo/> (last accessed: December 20, 2025).

¹²⁶ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 3.

or comedy-dramas. The aim was to convince the people that “life had returned to a happy ‘normal’”¹²⁷. With this objective in mind, a larger quantity of sports films started to be produced, showing happy and fit people enjoying life, training and often winning competitions, fostering their moral integrity and, at the same time, physical conditioning. This functioned as a tool to reinforce sport as an integral component of Soviet everyday life, a concept that scholars Shaw and Youngblood define as “soft” propaganda.¹²⁸ The implicit message is often to show the superiority of Soviet values, which lead to triumph, whether it regards sports or politics.

These comedies about sports usually have a similar plot: a young and inexperienced athlete gets recruited, often from a rural environment, and is relocated to a major city, such as Moscow or Leningrad, by train, showing sport as a channel of upward social mobility. While training professionally, he or she meets the coach, who will guide them towards maturity, thanks to the values of discipline and commitment promoted by the Soviet system, which will lead them to success. Nonetheless, the focus of the movie is not on winning, but on character-building. In this respect, the figure of the sportsperson is similar to the portrayal of the American athlete.¹²⁹

Two great examples of this representation are the comedies “The Reserve Player” (*Zapasnoi igrok*, 1954), showing the win of the hardworking reserve player over an egocentric and famous soccer player, and “Champion of the World” (*Chempion mira*, 1954), telling the story of a Greco-Roman wrestler, who disgraces the importance of training as he feels he has a natural physical talent, but is later saved by his kind coach and girlfriend. The latter, just in one year after its release, took twelfth place at the box

¹²⁷ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 179.

¹²⁸ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 40.

¹²⁹ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 180.

office, with 28.21 million viewers.¹³⁰ Both of these films reflect the Stalinist comedic style, even if they were released after his death.¹³¹

During the brief period of Malenkov's leadership of the Soviet Union (March 5, 1953 - September 8, 1953), the movie industry did not undergo significant changes. It could be intended as a bridge between the precedent of the controlled Stalin regime and the subsequent, selectively transparent cultural environment of Khrushchev. Nonetheless, during the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 1952, Malenkov managed to address cinema as a problematic industry, especially for what regards drama and fiction, but the critiques remained cautious and technical.¹³²

With the advent of Khrushchev (September 8, 1953 - October 14, 1964), the political situation changed substantially, the film industry finally flourished, and it received incredible feedback. The cultural and cinematic landscape began to change almost immediately, but the most substantial transformation can be noticed only after Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress of February 1956. The leader affirmed that the "resolute opposition" of the Central Committee to the "cult of personality alien to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, which turns once or another leader into a miracle-performing hero and, at the same time, minimises the role of the Party and the popular masses"¹³³. The Congress was addressed only to the political elite, as the population had no access to its text. However, some Party officials, such as Suslov and Mikoyan, reported these same themes in their own words, and the fundamental points reached editorials such as *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, and *Iskusstvo kino*.¹³⁴

The period following the Twentieth Congress was then known as the Thaw (*ottepel*), and it lasted for the whole phase of Khrushchev's leadership and even some years later. It was a moment dedicated to the denunciation of repression and censorship. From the

130 Zemlyanukhin, Sergei and Segida, Miroslava. *Domashnyaya sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino, 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1996), p. 490.

131 Joseph Stalin died on March 5th, 1953, an event that marked a gradual shift in Soviet cultural policy and artistic production.

132 Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 5.

133 Brumberg, Abraham "Iconoclasm in Moscow: A Commentary," in *Russia under Khrushchev*, ed. Abraham Brumberg (New York: Praeger, 1962), 72.

134 Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 9.

cultural point of view, this stage opened new spaces for expression and experimentation, fostering the reaffirmation of truthfulness, and affecting the creativity of a variety of artistic forms, especially for what regards the cinema.¹³⁵ On this matter, artists and students of the subject engaged more openly with the possibility of a socialist project freed from the oppressive legacy of despotism. As an example, Irina Shilova, a student at VGIK¹³⁶, in her memoir and critical reflection of Soviet film culture, expressed the excitement that she felt, along with her friends and colleagues, over Khrushchev's promise of a future characterised by "utopian socialism without the crippling weight of despotism"¹³⁷.

The subsequent critique of hierarchies reinforced this process, reshaping the ideological framework of Soviet filmmakers. As an example, the Party secretary of the Gorky Studio publicly reproached studio personnel for their continued obedience to arrogance, especially in the case of the director Sergei Gerasimov. He said: "We have not yet eradicated our habit of servility toward our masters"¹³⁸.

The result of the Thaw era led to the production of seventy-five films only in 1956, where the majority were released by the companies Mosfilm and Lenfilm, and they mostly represented contemporary heroes and socialist reality, as well as kolkhoz¹³⁹ achievements and the lives of young people.¹⁴⁰ This also developed as a consequence of the ambitious target figures of the Party for the cinematic area, which implemented massive financial resources. As an example, a great number of cinemas were built across the Soviet Union, with a total seating capacity of 500,000. In addition, different investments in the modernisation of equipment were made.¹⁴¹ The effects of these

¹³⁵ Ibid. 10.

¹³⁶ The All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Vsesojuznyj Gosudarstvennyj Institut Kinematografij), the principal soviet institution and the oldest school dedicated to cinema in the world, founded in Moscow in 1919.

¹³⁷ Shilova, Irina ...*I moe kino: pyatidesyatye, shestidesyatye, semidesyatye* (Moscow: NIIC Research Institute of Film Art, 1993), 11.

¹³⁸ "IK," *Khronika*, no. 7 (USSR, 1955), 103.

¹³⁹ Kollektivnoe Khoziaistvo, literally collective farm.

¹⁴⁰ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 11.

¹⁴¹ Iurenev, Rostislav. "Khlopoty o kritike," in *Kinematograf ottepli: Dokumenty i svidetel'stva*, ed. Valerii Fomin (Moscow: Materik, 1998), 223.

changes were clear and almost immediate. People were interested in these new and numerous categories of films. As a matter of fact, statistics show that during the 1950s and the 1960s, common Soviet citizens visited cinemas on average at least twice a month, while regulars attended more than three times a month.¹⁴²

Despite all of these innovative changes, sports films suffered during the Thaw era, as producers and directors probably concentrated on their new and more intellectually stimulating artistic issues, and enjoyed their recently found freedom to follow their own inclinations.¹⁴³ This is confirmed by an editorial commentary, published in August 1955, which encouraged filmmakers to reorient their narratives towards ordinary individuals, identifying simple people as more appropriate protagonists for contemporary cinema.¹⁴⁴ One month later, the readers' responses on the matter reflected this same position, reaffirming, almost repeating the same text word for word, the necessity for more understated heroes, centred on everyday experiences, particularly of workers and peasants.¹⁴⁵ Some sports films were still released, but they can be considered as an exception. An example is "The Hockey Players" (*Khokkeisty*, 1965), the first Soviet feature film regarding the activity of ice hockey, explaining the consequences that extreme training has on the private lives of players, in particular as they grow up and get older, alongside rivalries embedded in the structures of the sporting institutions.¹⁴⁶ Another instance may be the film "The New Girl" (*Novenkaya*, 1968), released after Krushchev's era, but still representing the values of the Thaw, regarding a talented gymnast, but whose interest concentrates more on being nice to her teammates than in competing internationally, which is not a compatible characteristic with Soviet competitiveness. Finally, the same words could be attributed to the sports film "Goal! Another Goal!" (*Udar! Esche Udar!*, 1968), which regards soccer, as the title may make it seem obvious. It reflects the qualities of the Thaw, while also integrating socialist realist

¹⁴² Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 7.

¹⁴³ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 181.

¹⁴⁴ "Tematicheskii plan proizvodstva khudozhestvennykh fil'mov." *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 8 (1955), 4.

¹⁴⁵ "O chem dumaet zritel' (obzor chitatel'skikh pisem)." *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 9 (1955), 92.

¹⁴⁶ Apostolov, Andrei. "Passivnaya passionarnost': Zritel i mediya v otechestvennykh filmakh o khokkei." *Logos*, no. 6 (2014), 163-193.

themes, as it explicitly projects the construction of Soviet sporting values from the beginning.¹⁴⁷

The political transition from Khrushchev to Brezhnev in 1964 marked a turning point in the history of the Soviet Union, but it did not erase immediately the cultural dynamics set in motion during the Thaw, as mentioned beforehand.¹⁴⁸ As a matter of fact, the first four years of Brezhnev's leadership (October 14, 1964 – November 10, 1982) were characterised by a gradual reassertion of ideological discipline, which was aimed at containing the transformations of the preceding decade.¹⁴⁹ Then, in 1968, the Soviet government began to ban films again, and the dynamics commonly associated with the Thaw had progressively faded.¹⁵⁰ Similar to Stalin, Brezhnev showed little appreciation for formally innovative or intellectually demanding cinema. However, a greater number of sports films started to be produced, making a comeback. This return may be connected to social criticism, as it was commonly reported in the Soviet press that athletes had “lost their lust for victory and their willingness to train hard”¹⁵¹, especially for what regards soccer players.

The first example that can be found is the film “Blue Ice” (*Goluboi led*, 1969), which openly criticises the extreme training regime of world-class soviet dancers. In particular, it focuses on the emotional and relational strain produced by relentless training demands. The protagonists are a married couple of ice dancers, whose professional partnership begins to fracture under the weight of competitive pressure. The wife, in particular, cannot put up with a life shaped entirely by training schedules and expectations, and expresses a desire for normality.¹⁵² A difference which can be noticed from the period of Stalin is that the attention is not focused on the figure of the coach anymore, but rather on the way the

¹⁴⁷ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 181.

¹⁴⁸ Fishzon, Anna. “Queue Time as Queer Time: An Occasion for Pleasure and Desire in the Brezhnev Era and Today,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 548.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 5.

¹⁵¹ Edelman, Robert. *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 172.

¹⁵² Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 56.

ideals of Soviet success are enforced within everyday life. In the end, the couple finally solves their problems and even manages to win the world championship. In the film, this victory is portrayed as necessary and appropriate, regardless of the lack of happiness from the protagonists.¹⁵³

This is a recurrent plot that can often be seen in the 1970s. The main difference from the aforementioned film is the role of the return of the heroic-like coach figure, which has the purpose of getting the athletes focused on success, and not letting them get distracted by their selfishness or their private lives. Wives and girlfriends are seen as an interference in the sports careers, as well as the desire to go out until late dancing to Western pop music.¹⁵⁴

Nonetheless, at the end of the decade, sports films change their usual protagonists, shifting from focusing on the coach to the main athlete, in a more similar way to American films. In addition, the represented sports are mainly team sports, in which collective effort continues to play an important role. As an example, the film “The Son of a Champion” (*Syn Championa*, 1979) can be analysed. In this case, the hero is the star of a downhill ski team, who decides to stop training in order to rebel against his father, who is also the coach of the team and a former world champion. In this film, he is represented as an egotistical protagonist who, in the end, acknowledges that he is essential for his team, decides to compete and wins an important international competition.¹⁵⁵

Another example to be cited is the film “A Moment Decides Everything” (*Vse reshaet mgnovenie*, 1978), in which, coherently with the most common Soviet plots regarding sports¹⁵⁶, a talented swimmer is spotted by a scout at a regional competition in Sochi, and travels to Moscow by train, where she quickly achieves remarkable results, setting record-breaking performances during competitions. The main difference between the previous Stalinist films is that the athlete does not respond well to the demanding training regime;

¹⁵³ Iurenev, Rostislav. “Khlopoty o kritike,” in *Kinematograf ottepli: Dokumenty i svidetel'stva*, ed. Valerii Fomin (Moscow: Materik, 1998), 223.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 183.

¹⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of this concept, see Chapter 3, section 3.2, page 29.

on the contrary, she starts suffering from panic attacks. Moreover, the end is not as expected: she concedes her place to an ageing champion. In this case, a new message arises in the history of Soviet sports films, which is that maturity is more valuable than innate talent alone, as athletic ability needs to be cultivated and trained to turn into wisdom.¹⁵⁷ This message is coherent with the values that the government was interested in reviving at the end of the 1970s, regarding traditional ideals, collectivism, discipline, hard work, and respect for authority. At the same time, this film reflects the unease affecting the Soviet youth during those same years.¹⁵⁸

These films were conceived as tools of moral and ideological guidance, but they were undermined by modest production standards and conventional plots. Moreover, the performances of the actors are considered mediocre and uninspired. For these same reasons, the actual reach of Soviet films appears to have been limited.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, in a context where leisure practices were increasingly shifting towards less demanding and forms of entertainment influenced by the West, these productions struggled to be relevant. As a result, they did not perform enough to counter the cultural distance separating official values from everyday experience. There is little indication that they circulated widely or that they had any lasting influence on the audience they were meant to address.¹⁶⁰

3.2.2 Hard Propaganda

All of the films examined up to this point share a common reliance on a form of propaganda that operates in a subtle and indirect way, and therefore, they can be read as expressions of soft propaganda. This kind of persuasion can also be referred to as black propaganda,¹⁶¹ as political scientist Lasswell mentions, or, in a similar way, as sociological propaganda, whose aim is to establish a certain ideology “through the

¹⁵⁷ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 184.

¹⁵⁸ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 49.

¹⁵⁹ Fishzon, Anna. “Queue Time as Queer Time: An Occasion for Pleasure and Desire in the Brezhnev Era and Today,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 562.

¹⁶⁰ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 184.

¹⁶¹ This distinction has already been introduced earlier in the thesis (see Chapter 2, section 2.3, page 21).

medium of economic and political structures”¹⁶² and it “leads to the active participation of the masses and the adaptation of individuals”¹⁶³, opposed to political propaganda.

In the opinion of Youngblood and Shaw, these films are examples of soft propaganda not only for the characteristics mentioned above, but also because there is no explicit denigration of the enemy or the use of confrontational political rhetoric.¹⁶⁴ This is a consequence of the fact that competition was seen negatively and attributed to a Western characteristic¹⁶⁵. On the contrary, the focus is on the affirmation of Soviet values, presenting them as the correct way of living. The messages they convey are integrated into everyday narratives and familiar settings, allowing ideology to emerge gradually and without overt emphasis. Through the communication of a coherent vision of Soviet society, while avoiding direct political exhortation, the aim is to shape attitudes and perceptions in an indirect and persistent way.¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions, which stand as an example of the so-called hard or white propaganda. A film that deserves citation is “Sporting Honour” (*Sportivnaya Chest*, 1951), which reflects the aforementioned plot of Stalin’s era: a factory worker from the Urals discovers an unexpected, untutored talent that leads him to join a prominent soccer team. Everything seems to go well, and everybody is happily living the “Soviet good life”¹⁶⁷, except for the team’s star player, who begrudges the newcomer and challenges him by intimidating him. The features of this film are similar to those of soft propaganda that can be found in the movies “The Reserve Player” and “Champion of the World”¹⁶⁸. The hard propaganda comes later, when the team travels abroad to compete against a Western team, which is shown as morally suspect, surrounded by unsympathetic conventional figures, among whom a grotesquely depicted priest stands

¹⁶² Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 54.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ This distinction has already been introduced earlier in the thesis (see Chapter 3, section 3.2, page 29).

¹⁶⁵ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 179.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 184.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ See Chapter 3, section 3.2, pages 29 and 30.

out. The decisive match unfolds in harsh weather conditions, marked by rain and dense fog, probably evocative of Britain, and is characterised by repeated acts of Western brutality, including an intentional attempt to injure the protagonist. Despite these obstacles, the film celebrated the triumph of the “new Soviet system of collective play”¹⁶⁹, which ultimately proves superior. The team’s morale is further strengthened by the flood of telegrams sent from across the Soviet Union, a symbolic reminder of nationwide support. Framed in this way, defeat appears virtually inconceivable. While the film attracted some criticism for its lighter and humorous elements, it nevertheless achieved considerable commercial success, ranking fifth at the box office in 1951 with an audience of over twenty million viewers.¹⁷⁰ The narrative may also be read as a veiled reference to Dynamo Moscow’s highly successful tour of Britain in 1945, an event that had already acquired a strong symbolic resonance within Soviet sporting culture.¹⁷¹

During the leadership of Khrushchev, the cinematic intelligentsia was engaged in revisiting and reinterpreting the memory of the Great patriotic War. In this context, one notable film regarding sports is “Third Period” (*Tretii Time*, 1962), which is about a wartime episode centred on a football match played in Kiev in June 1942, during which Soviet prisoners of war faced a team of German soldiers under conditions that transformed the game into a matter of life and death. Although framed as a sporting event, the match functions as a symbolic confrontation in which the political and moral stakes far exceed the outcome on the field. The field occupies an intermediate position between different cinematic traditions: while it incorporates elements associated with the Thaw, it also retains features characteristic of socialist realism that would not have appeared out of place in earlier decades.¹⁷² The German officers are depicted in largely unambiguous terms, yet the Soviet protagonists and secondary characters are portrayed with greater psychological depth than was typical of Stalinist cinema. Moments of moral ambiguity are introduced, particularly through characters whose fear and hesitation invite the

¹⁶⁹ Downing, David. *Passovotchka: Moscow Dynamo in Britain, 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 45.

¹⁷⁰ Zemlyanukhin. Sergei and Segida, Miroslava. *Domashnyaya sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino, 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1996), 422.

¹⁷¹ Downing, David. *Passovotchka: Moscow Dynamo in Britain, 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 49.

¹⁷² Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 185.

viewer's empathy. Even the presence of a German character who questions the intrusion of politics into sport serves to underline the inevitability of ideological conflict.¹⁷³ Ultimately, as in many earlier films, the decisive victory lies in the protagonists' readiness to sacrifice themselves for the motherland, not in athletic success or competition. The emotional intensity of this narrative resonated strongly with contemporary audiences, making the film one of the most commercially successful sports films in Soviet cinema.¹⁷⁴

The film that stands out for its particularly uncompromising tone and for the overtly negative depiction of the Western World is "A Cool Guy" (*Mirvoy paren*, 1971). Set around a truck rally held in an unnamed Middle Eastern country and filmed in Afghanistan by the Belarusian film studio, the narrative revolves around the international promotion of a new heavy-duty truck manufactured in Minsk. The competition offers an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the technological and moral superiority of the Soviet vehicle, which is placed in direct confrontation with trucks produced by European and American companies. While the drivers themselves are not uniformly villainous, their Western sponsors are portrayed as unscrupulous and willing to resort to sabotage and even violence in order to secure victory. The American competitor, Parker, is depicted with more restraint than his counterparts, yet remains firmly embedded within a morally suspect environment. At its core, the film frames the rally as a test of character rather than a purely athletic contest. The Soviet protagonist is presented as disciplined and deeply rooted in Soviet values, showing little interest in foreign travel and viewing the outside world with suspicion. His misgivings are reinforced throughout the journey, from his encounters with Western passengers to the chaotic urban setting and the morally ambiguous spaces in which the competition unfolds. Despite being subjected to intimidation and even imprisonment, the Soviet protagonist ultimately prevails, confirming the film's insistence on Soviet resilience and moral strength. The conclusion, marked by his eager return home and a sweeping aerial view of a Soviet city, leaves little doubt as to where order and clarity are meant to reside. This film comes closest to a stereotypical Cold War narrative within Soviet sports cinema. Its exaggerated and often

¹⁷³ Riordan, James. "Match of Death, Kiev, 9 August 1942," *Soccer and Society* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 87.

¹⁷⁴ Zemlyanukhin, Sergei and Segida, Miroslava. *Domashnyaya sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino, 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1996), 454.

caricatural portrayal of Western characters may have appealed to some viewers for its camp qualities, yet by the early 1970s, such representations were already beginning to appear dated. By 1971, simplified and cartoonish images of the West were increasingly at odds with a cultural climate that had started to question rigid Cold War binaries.¹⁷⁵ The film's marginal status is reflected in its limited circulation. As a matter of fact, no reliable box office data are available, and it is absent even from the most comprehensive catalogues of Soviet feature films. Moreover, the repetitive focus on long sequences of trucks navigating winding mountain roads offers little narrative dynamism, making the film visually monotonous. It is therefore difficult to assume that Soviet audiences would have been particularly inclined to invest either time or money in a viewing experience that lacked both novelty and sustained dramatic tension.¹⁷⁶

3.3 Sports Cinema in the USA

In the American context, propaganda often operates more through soft propaganda, which can also be defined as sociological propaganda. The messages are perceived as a form of persuasion that diffuses values by inserting them within everyday social practices and shared ways of life. In Ellul's opinion, this form of propaganda is comparatively slow and discreet, but particularly effective in the long term, as it works through progressive adaptation and internationalisation.¹⁷⁷ Once a given way of life becomes the implicit standard by which good and evil are measured, individuals are naturally led to interpret reality through that lens. But, as Ellul argues, in this case, what is perceived as "anything un-American is evil"¹⁷⁸: the individual will not see it as something merely different anymore, but it will be judged as implicitly wrong. As a result, social behaviour is guided

¹⁷⁵ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 186.

¹⁷⁶ Zemlyanukhin. Sergei and Segida, Miroslava. *Domashnyaya sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino, 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1996), 459.

¹⁷⁷ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

toward conformity with the established order without the need for overt instruction. The origins of this mechanism can be found in the historical formation of the United States itself. At the beginning of its independence, the nation was faced with the challenge of unifying a heterogeneous population drawn from diverse European traditions. This was seen as “the great political problem [...] at the end of the nineteenth century”¹⁷⁹. In consequence, American society relied on psychological and cultural standardisation, which was intended as the promotion of a common way of life that later became a tool of social cohesion and an instrument of persuasion. Over time, this process acquired a decisive economic dimension, as mass production required mass consumption, and the latter presupposed a broad consensus about what could be intended as normal needs or desirable lifestyles. Therefore, cultural uniformity ensured that public opinion could respond quickly and collectively to social and economic stimuli, reinforcing the link between conformity of life and compliance of thought.¹⁸⁰

Within this system, the celebration of American standards became a central and largely unquestioned value. Public opinion was encouraged to perceive American products and institutions as superior, while medias reinforced these perceptions, showing them as natural and desirable. This context provided particularly fertile ground for “unexpected extremes”¹⁸¹, even in a society that prided itself on liberalism and individual freedom. Some periods of ideological anxiety, especially at the beginning of the Cold War, revealed how deeply rooted this logic had become. An example is the so-called “wave of collective hysteria”¹⁸² of 1948, that lead to McCarthyism. The cause could be found in the moments of uncertainty that generated rigid affirmations of identity and an intensified need to defend the American way of life.¹⁸³

This environment proved especially favourable to the use of mass culture as a vehicle of persuasion. Cinema, in particular, played a crucial role in translating abstract values

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Qualter, Terence H. *Opinion Control in the Democracies* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 39.

¹⁸¹ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

into concrete narratives and emotionally resonant images, while sports cinema offered an ideal space in which competition, discipline, success and national pride could be dramatised without recourse to explicit political discourse. These films contributed to shaping collective perceptions of identity and belonging operating at the intersection between sociological persuasion and more deliberate forms of propaganda. It is within this context that the distinction between soft and hard propaganda must be understood.¹⁸⁴

3.3.1 Soft propaganda

In the United States, there was no direct control of the film industry as a formal instrument of the state during the Cold War. It was important for Hollywood to keep its image of a free and commercially driven cultural industry, autonomous from explicit governmental control. However, over the course of the Cold War, a series of informal but consequential relationships developed between filmmakers and various U.S. government agencies, such as the Department of Defence, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA).¹⁸⁵ All of these institutions recognised cinema's potential for recruitment and image-building, finding in Hollywood a willing partner and managing to keep these forms of collaboration invisible to the general public.¹⁸⁶ As a result, the widespread belief in freedom and independence of American mass media was preserved, reinforcing one of the central ideological claims of the United States during the Cold War: the contrast between the open, pluralistic cultural sphere and the overly state-controlled media systems of the socialist bloc. This perception can be considered as an asset of hard propaganda. Although in most cases, political influence operated indirectly, through access to resources, technical assistance, narrative frameworks or shared assumptions about national identity and values.¹⁸⁷ There are only a limited number of examples where sports films had explicit or substantial involvement.

¹⁸⁴ Qualter, Terence H. *Opinion Control in the Democracies* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 39.

¹⁸⁵ Cull, Nicholas J. *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁸⁶ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 8.

¹⁸⁷ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 162.

This relative autonomy complicates any attempt to identify a single, coherent ideological line within American Cold War sports cinema. As explained before, Soviet productions were shaped by centralised guidance and censorship, while U.S. films display a more fragmented and evolving set of political messages.¹⁸⁸ Nonetheless, certain shifts can be detected over time. Changes in tone and thematic emphasis often reflected fluctuations in East-West relations, but they were also shaped by internal dynamics within the film industry itself, as for example generational change, commercial pressures and broader political realignments.¹⁸⁹

From the political point of view, Hollywood's general orientation moved rightward in the early Cold War years, in parallel with the climate of ideological rigidity and anticommunism, then shifted more cautiously toward liberal or critical positions during the 1960s and 1970s. This trend was partially reversed in the 1980s when a renewed emphasis on patriotism and competition coincided with the presidency of former actor, college football player and radio show sports presenter Ronald Reagan (January 20, 1981 - January 20, 1989).¹⁹⁰ These oscillations did not produce a uniform cinematic response to the Cold War, but they did shape the narrative frameworks through which sport was mobilised on screen, as a site of individual achievement and symbolic confrontation between competing value systems, contrary to Soviet cinema, which did not place emphasis on competition as an end in itself.¹⁹¹

Within this context, propaganda in American sports cinema emerges as a flexible cultural space in which persuasion could operate subtly or explicitly, depending on the historical moment. This dual capacity explains the distinction between soft and hard propaganda that structures the following sections.

¹⁸⁸ For a detailed discussion of this concept, see Chapter 3, page 27.

¹⁸⁹ Suid, Lawrence. *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 43.

¹⁹⁰ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 162.

¹⁹¹ Cull, Nicholas J. *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 28.

At the beginning of the Cold War, immediately after the Second World War, until the early 1950s, there cannot be found any sports film dedicated explicitly to the conflict. Instead, political anxieties appeared in a more indirect way, through oblique references to existential threats and through narratives that exposed corruption or internal flaws in U.S. sport. In this early stage, sport was used less as a medium for ideological confrontation with an external enemy than a mirror of domestic concerns, reflecting the need to reaffirm ethical standards and social cohesion at home.¹⁹²

As the Cold War became increasingly institutionalised in the mid and late 1950s, the range of acceptable representations narrowed. This period saw a more coordinated effort to privilege positive forms of persuasion over explicitly negative portrayals of the adversary, in a similar way to the Soviet Union. Sometimes, it even involved informal collaboration between Hollywood and governmental actors. Films increasingly sought to promote the virtues of liberal capitalism, emphasising freedom and meritocracy. Within this broader cultural strategy, sports films occupied a relatively marginal position, yet some achieved considerable commercial success. An example may be the melodramatic narratives “The Square Jungle” (1956), which depicts some marginalised boxers who achieved personal redemption both inside and outside the ring, managing to overcome poverty and alcoholism.¹⁹³

Alongside the narratives celebrating liberty and meritocracy, other productions used sport to address what was perceived as a major vulnerability of the American system, which was racial inequality. In these cases, athletic narratives became a vehicle for self-critique as well as self-legitimation, which was found to be a response to Soviet allegations that “African Americans were treated little better than slaves”¹⁹⁴. Another recurrent theme, which could be classified as soft propaganda, regards the U.S. military. This phenomenon is connected to “the need to engender a patriotic ‘team spirit’”¹⁹⁵,

¹⁹² Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 163.

¹⁹³ “The Top Box-Office Hits of 1956,” *Variety Weekly*, 2 January 1957.

¹⁹⁴ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 169.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 164.

especially during the 1950s, when the Communist aggression was perceived as extremely threatening both at the internal and the external level.

An example is the film “The Long Gray Line” (1955), which is not a conventional sports movie, but carries a clear message regarding the relationship between sports, family, the military and traditional American values.¹⁹⁶ The movie presents an idealised portrait of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point through the life story of Marty Mather, a former boxer and long-serving athletic trainer whose personal trajectory embodies social mobility, loyalty and service to the nation. Over the course of a fifty-year career, Maher is shown earning the respect and affections of generations of cadets, many of whom go on to become central figures in American military and political life, such as George S. Patton and Dwight D. Eisenhower. In this film, sport has a pedagogical function. Maher transmits values of discipline, honour, patriotism and masculinity through training on the football field and in the swimming pool, reinforcing the idea that athletic practice is inseparable from moral and civic formation. In addition, the domestic side complements the message, as Maher’s wife symbolically adopts the cadets, integrating military education into a broader narrative of community.¹⁹⁷

The film was shot on location at West Point and directed by John Ford, who was a key figure in the secret Militant Liberty program run by the Pentagon and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1950s. These initiatives aimed to disseminate American ideals indirectly, through cultural production rather than direct propaganda. One of the main characters is a Militant Liberty activist as well: the actor Ward Bond, who played West Point’s esteemed director of physical education Herman Koehler.¹⁹⁸ In this sense, the film illustrates how sports cinema could function as soft propaganda, embedding political meanings within stories of personal virtue, and using a form of persuasion that operates without overt ideological confrontation. There are no explicit anti-communist

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Crowther, Bosley. “‘Long Gray Line’ Tinted Green; Movie of West Point Honors Irish Hero,” *The New York Times*, 11 February 1955, p. 19.

¹⁹⁸ Stonor Saunders, Frances. *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 186.

messages, as the emphasis lies on cultural strategies that promote the values of liberty through affirmative narratives.¹⁹⁹

Another interesting example of narratives on the U.S. Military, which deserves mentioning, is “Strategic Air Command” (1955), released the same year as “The Long Gray Line”. The film centres on a successful baseball player who willingly abandons fame and financial security to return to active military service, presenting this choice as a moral imperative rather than a personal sacrifice. In this case, athletic achievement is symbolically subordinated to national duty, reinforcing the primacy of military service over individual success.²⁰⁰

Played by James Stewart, himself a U.S. Air Force reservist, the protagonist embodies a model of masculine virtue grounded in discipline, responsibility and loyalty to the nation. Initially, he tends to be resistant to the military’s intrusion into what he perceives as peacetime civilian life, but later he gradually comes to recognise service within the United States’ nuclear bomber force, the Strategic Air Command, as essential to national security. The film thus normalises nuclear preparedness by framing it as a necessary and honourable extension of wartime sacrifice into the Cold War era.²⁰¹

The film achieved the sixth position among the most commercially successful films released in the United States in 1955. Additionally, it had a reported impact on military enlistment. These elements definitely underscore the film’s persuasive capacity. In comparison with the earlier cited forms of sports cinema that relied primarily on indirect, affirmative narratives, “Strategic Air Command” illustrates a shift toward a more assertive mode of propaganda, in which sport functions as a bridge between popular culture and the legitimization of military readiness in the nuclear age.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood’s Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), p. 202.

²⁰⁰ Briley, Ron. *The Baseball Film in Postwar America: A Critical Study, 1948-1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2011), p. 131.

²⁰¹ Biskind, Peter. *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (London: Pluto, 1983), p. 64.

²⁰² Jacobsen, Meyers K. *Convair B-36: A Comprehensive History of America’s “Big Stick”* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1997), p. 297.

Coming to the 1960s, the domestic consensus supporting U.S. Cold War ideology began to erode, and this shift was reflected in a more ambivalent cinematic landscape. A limited number of films adopted a satirical tone, implicitly questioning the convergence between military values and competitive sport, and suggesting the existence of a broader culture of militarisation. At the same time, popular cinema and television experimented with hybrid genres, portraying American athletes as agents of Western security in a global struggle that increasingly extended beyond the Soviet Union. As Shaw and Youngblood argue, this was a consequence of the success of the James Bond franchise, which brought to the cinema the representation of U.S. athletes as spies, who had the task of saving the West from Mao Zedong's China. These representations combined elements of entertainment and geopolitics, blurring the boundaries between sport, espionage, and ideological confrontation.²⁰³ Some narratives of the so-called "spying game"²⁰⁴ were actually television series, such as "I Spy", aired for the first time in 1965. This NBC show had light-hearted dialogue, and some episodes focused on the role of sports during the Cold War. Nonetheless, it is more accurately characterised as a representation of hard propaganda, of which the overt denigration of the Soviet Union constitutes only one element, alongside a broader strategy of rigid ideological polarisation.²⁰⁵ Therefore, it will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.²⁰⁶

During the 1970s, the critical impulse was intensified, since segments of New Hollywood openly challenged the dominant Cold War narrative, and, in doing so, they turned a critical eye toward the national sports culture itself. This phase marked a temporary retreat from triumphalist representations of competition. The trend was reversed in the 1980s, when renewed geopolitical assertiveness revitalised Cold War themes in popular cinema. Sports films once again became a site of explicit ideological struggle, as new docudramas were released, celebrating symbolic victories over the Soviet Union, as well as production of lower budgets that condemned alleged abuses

²⁰³ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 164.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 167.

²⁰⁵ Cushman, Mark. *I Spy: A History and Episode Guide to the Groundbreaking Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 9.

²⁰⁶ See Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2, p. 51.

within the Eastern bloc sports systems, and mainstream productions portrayed U.S. and Soviet athletes as engaged in violent competitions, often framed as an almost existential clash between opposing value systems.²⁰⁷

However, at the same time, the revival of ideological confrontation did not displace more subtle forms of persuasion. Alongside these assertive representations, American sports cinema of the 1980s continued to rely on affirmative and nostalgic narratives that operated within the logic of soft propaganda. An example can be found in the drama “Hoosiers” (1986), which showed a reassuring account of transformation, portraying basketball coaches from big cities who, upon relocating to the rural United States in the 1950s, rediscovered the values of teamwork and community.²⁰⁸

As film historians have consistently noted, Hollywood sports cinema has long functioned as a powerful vehicle for the affirmation of traditional American values. These films have tended to privilege narratives of individual success, centred on exceptional athletes who thrive within a meritocratic, capitalist democracy. Social disadvantage is therefore framed as a challenge to be overcome through perseverance and discipline. Even in films ostensibly devoted to team sports, the narrative emphasis frequently relies on star performers, both as cinematic figures and as athletes within the story. This recurrent focus reinforces a broader cultural belief in individualism, presenting personal achievement as the primary engine of social mobility.²⁰⁹ As sports historian Ron Briley has observed, by depicting sport as a sphere in which hard work and determination are ultimately rewarded, mentioning the moral tradition associated with different figures, such as Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger, Hollywood contributes to the normalisation and legitimisation of the existing political and economic order.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 164.

²⁰⁸ Briley, Ron. “Basketball’s Great White Hope and Ronald Reagan’s America: Hoosiers (1986),” *Film and History*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2005), pp. 12-19.

²⁰⁹ Baker, Aaron. *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 22.

²¹⁰ Briley, Ron. “Sports in Film, Television, and History: Introduction,” *Film and History*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2005), p. 17.

In this context, American sports films exemplify a form of soft propaganda that operates through repetition, familiarity and emotional identification. Embedding ideals of self-reliance and meritocracy within popular and accessible narratives, sports cinema has played a substantial role in reinforcing the cultural foundations of U.S. hegemony, particularly during periods of ideological tension. This subtle, yet persistent, mode of persuasion provides the backdrop against which more explicit and confrontational forms of propaganda would emerge later.²¹¹

3.3.2 Hard propaganda

During the Cold War, Hollywood devoted relatively limited attention to the direct cinematic representation of superpower sporting confrontations. As Professor Joshua Lieser notes, this absence was partly structural.²¹² The team sports that were most deeply embedded in American popular culture, such as baseball and American football, were largely absent from Soviet and Chinese athletic traditions, making them poorly suited as sites of direct competition between the East and the West on screen. Moreover, the cinema struggles to rival the immediacy and emotional intensity of primetime television, whose live and overtly nationalistic coverage of international events, particularly the Olympic Games, increasingly dominated the visual representation of Cold War sporting rivalry.²¹³

Despite this general tendency, several U.S. films did mobilise sport within a markedly different register, advancing forms of hard propaganda that explicitly demonised Communism and framed the Cold War as an existential struggle. In these cases, sport was no longer a subtle vehicle for cultural affirmation, but a symbolic instrument through which ideological boundaries were drawn with clarity and moral absolutism. The sports that were mostly featured in this category were boxing and, as the Cold War progressed, martial arts, which offered physical and highly gendered arenas in which conflict, discipline and violence could be openly dramatised. Other sports, including football and

²¹¹ Ibid. 18.

²¹² Lieser, Joshua. "Los Angeles and the 1984 Olympic Games: Cultural Commodification, Corporate Sponsorship, and the Cold War," Ph.D. Diss., University of California Riverside, 2014.

²¹³ Ibid.

tennis, appeared in this context as well, though often in more indirect and allegorical ways.²¹⁴

A particularly revealing example of this can be found in the melodrama “My Son John” (1952), directed by Leo McCarey at the height of Senator McCarthy’s career.²¹⁵ The film utilises sport metaphors, mainly of American football, as moral and ideological markers. Within the narrative, an attachment to sport becomes synonymous with loyalty, masculinity, religiosity and national belonging, while detachment from athletic culture is associated with deviance in its multiple forms, an association typical of the McCarthy era, during which several films drew an explicit association between rejection of sport and sympathy for Communism. Contrary to the other cited films, “My Son John” does not stage sport as competition.²¹⁶

John Jefferson, the protagonist played by Robert Walker, is portrayed as intellectually gifted but physically and morally deficient: he is arrogant, an atheist, a closeted homosexual, and ultimately a Soviet spy operating within the federal government. His estrangement from sport is emphasised retrospectively, through contrast with his brothers, who are introduced as enthusiastic football players and decorated Korean War heroes. In one of the film’s most emblematic scenes, John’s mother recalls cheering from the sidelines while her preferred sons played football, before imploring John to rejoin her team, which is used as a metaphor that blends family, nation and sport into a single moral

²¹⁴ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 166.

²¹⁵ McCarthyism refers to the period of intense anti-communist repression in the United States during the early Cold War, between 1950 and 1954, associated with the political campaign led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. It was an era characterized by widespread accusations of communist infiltration in government, culture and included media, leading to a climate of suspicion and conformity, during which dissent was frequently associated with national betrayal. In this context, Hollywood became a key arena of ideological enforcement, as film directors were formally and informally pressured to produce works that explicitly affirmed patriotism and traditional values. This logic provides a better understanding that explains the emergence of hard propaganda in U.S. sports cinema. For a detailed analysis of McCarthyism’s political and cultural impact, see Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan: The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 250-253.

²¹⁶ Johnson, Glen M. “Sharper than an Irish Serpent’s Tooth: Leo McCarey’s ‘My Son John,’” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1980), 44.

community.²¹⁷ John's refusal confirms his distinctiveness, and his eventual death at the hands of his communist handlers seals the film's ideological lesson.²¹⁸

One of the main characteristics that embodies this melodrama as hard propaganda is its explicit and unambiguous message. In this case, sport is presented as a civilising and immunising force, capable of producing manliness, faith and patriotic virtue, in contrast to communism, which is depicted as hostile to all of the three. In this configuration, athletic culture does not merely reflect national values, as it protects them in an active way, functioning as an antidote against political, social and sexual deviation. These representations serve as an example of hard propaganda in its most explicit form, where sport is stripped of ambiguity and mobilised as a moral weapon in the broader struggle against the ideological enemy.²¹⁹

As mentioned beforehand, not all the screen productions of the United States in regard to the Cold War portrayed the country as a passive or vulnerable target of espionage. Alongside narratives centred on infiltration and internal threat, a parallel strand of popular culture increasingly depicted U.S. agents as proactive actors who carried the conflict into enemy territory and prevailed in what came to be framed as the so-called global "spying game"²²⁰. In these representations, the work of the intelligence was no longer confined to secrecy, as it became a space of action.

A particularly significant example of this trend can be found in the aforementioned television series "I Spy", which represents one of the most popular espionage programs of the mid-1960s. The series followed two agents of the Pentagon, played by Robert Culp and Bill Cosby, who travelled internationally under the cover of a tennis player and his coach, explicitly linking athletic performance to intelligence work. Even if the series is portrayed as hard propaganda, the tone of its dialogues is mostly adopted as light and

²¹⁷ Ibid. 43.

²¹⁸ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 166.

²¹⁹ Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan: The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 240-246.

²²⁰ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 167.

ironic, especially in comparison to other contemporary productions, such as “The Man from U.N.C.L.E.” (2015).²²¹ The narratives in “I Spy” regularly emphasise the harsh and morally ambiguous realities of espionage, including the routine use of lethal force against enemy agents, particularly those that are associated with Communist states.

Sport occupies a central narrative function in this context as well. Several episodes explicitly engage with the geopolitical dimensions of athletic competition during the Cold War, presenting sport as both a cover for espionage and a terrain of ideological struggle. As an example, the pilot episode, titled “So Long, Patrick Henry”, focuses on the defection of an African American athlete to China and explores Beijing’s attempt to extend its influence across the developing world by sponsoring a Communist alternative to the Olympic Games.²²² The pilot episode further reveals how issues of race were folded into Cold War propaganda narratives. By focusing on the abandonment of national loyalty of the African American athlete to China, the series implicitly acknowledges racial inequality as a potential point of ideological vulnerability for the United States, a topic that got a central position in the U.S. counterpropaganda, after receiving numerous accusations from the Soviet Union of being racist.²²³

Through these storylines, the TV series managed to connect athletic mobility, international competition and ideological alignment, underscoring, in this way, the strategic importance of sport within global Cold War politics. Moreover, “I Spy” distinguishes itself by going into politically sensitive topics, such as Vietnam, especially in a moment when the conflict remained highly contentious and largely avoided by American television drama. Setting one episode in Vietnam, titled “The Tiger”, the series anticipated a broader cultural shift, bringing the realities of Cold War interventionism into the sphere of popular entertainment well before the war became a central subject of cinematic representation. This choice marked a willingness to frame U.S. intelligence and

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Cushman, Mark. *I Spy: A History and Episode Guide to the Groundbreaking Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 46.

²²³ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 73.

military presence in Southeast Asia as both legitimate and necessary, reinforcing the idea of American agency and moral responsibility in global ideological struggles.²²⁴

A phenomenon that deserves to be noted is the consistent triumph of the protagonists of the series over their adversaries, achieved thanks to a combination of qualities that are implicitly associated with sporting excellence, such as intellectual flexibility, physical agility and improvisation. This narrative logic aligns closely with the persuasion promoted by the United States during the Cold War, especially in the case of hard propaganda. Western athletes were portrayed as autonomous individuals, competing freely and ultimately for themselves, while their Communist counterparts were depicted as components of an apparatus controlled by the state.²²⁵ This contrast can be seen frequently and serves multiple functions. For example, it highlighted the pervasive control exercised by communist regimes over individual lives, while simultaneously obscuring the growing professionalisation of Western sport and the involvement of Western governments in its political instrumentalisation. At the same time, it devalued the sporting achievements of communist states by suggesting that success was the product of coercion or systemic cheating, in contrast to talent, and it reduced communist athletes to almost mechanical figures, who had to win at any cost.²²⁶

During the last decade of the Cold War, American sports cinema increasingly embraced openly confrontational narratives that translated Cold War ideology into accessible and emotionally charged stories. In this period, film directors took advantage of a well-established dichotomy opposing the free, creative individual to the rigid and mechanised collective, an image that resonated strongly with the political climate shaped by Ronald Reagan's depiction of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire"²²⁷. Sport provided an ideal arena for staging this opposition, allowing ideological conflict to be rendered visible through competition shown as a spectacle.

²²⁴ Carruthers, Susan. *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 160.

²²⁵ Crawford, Russ. *The Use of Sports to Promote the American Way of Life during the Cold War: Cultural Propaganda, 1945–1963* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2008), 286.

²²⁶ Ibid. 292.

²²⁷ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 199.

A paradigm example of this trend is “Miracle on Ice” (1981), a drama based on real-life events of the U.S. men’s ice hockey team’s unexpected victory over the Soviet Union at the 1980 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, in the state of New York. The film was initially broadcast on television and later released in theatres, and it managed to transform a sporting event into a national allegory. The match itself was already framed by the American media in explicit mythic terms, most notably as a confrontation compared to David and Goliath, and it was later consecrated as the “Top Sports Moment of the 20th Century” by Sports Illustrated.²²⁸

“Miracle on Ice” amplifies this narrative by amplifying the asymmetries between the two teams. In this three-hour-long drama, the American players are repeatedly described as “a bunch of college kids”²²⁹, emphasizing youth, their amateurism and almost ingenuous spontaneity, while, on the other hand, their Soviet opponents are portrayed as the highly disciplined “Red Machine”²³⁰ supported by the state. In this case, the accentuated differences in age, experience, training facilities, and institutional backing are central elements of the film’s ideological structure. Therefore, the athletic competition is used as a symbolic struggle between freedom and individualism versus control and collectivism. This representation carries significant gendered and militarised implications. Similar to the aforementioned films and series, the victory of the American team is framed as a reaffirmation of national masculinity and especially moral superiority, at a moment of renewed Cold War aggressiveness, with the only difference that this case is based on real events. In this sense, “Miracle on Ice” exemplifies hard propaganda in its most refined form, devaluing the Soviet system explicitly and portraying its athletes as products of an inhuman and oppressive machine.²³¹

²²⁸ McDonald, Mary G. “‘Miraculous’ Masculinity Meets Militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-USA Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey Match and Cold War Politics”, in Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds., *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2007), 224.

²²⁹ Seifried, Chad. “An Exploration into Melodrama and Sport: The ‘Miracle on Ice’ and the Cold War Lens,” *Olympika*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2010), 137.

²³⁰ Ibid. 138.

²³¹ McDonald, Mary G. “‘Miraculous’ Masculinity Meets Militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-USA Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey Match and Cold War Politics”, 225.

Some scholars argue that this symbolic vocabulary, established during the 1980s, was so effective that it never really expired. As a matter of fact, there exist some later cinematic reworkings of the event, such as the post-Cold War film “Miracle” (2004), which demonstrates how this type of propaganda continued to shape representations of American identity long after the formal end of the Cold War.²³²

In addition to the aforementioned narratives, the logic of hard propaganda during the 1980s was also articulated through a series of productions of smaller scale, which have received fewer views, but have nonetheless contributed to consolidating a sharply antagonistic image of the communist bloc. These films, while differing in genre and narrative ambition, share a common tendency to portray socialist sporting systems as coercive and dehumanizing, reinforcing the broader ideological dichotomy of the period.²³³

A revealing example is the film “Nadia” (1984), which dramatises the life of Nadia Comaneci, a Romanian gymnast whose perfect score at the 1976 Montreal Olympics had made her an international icon, since she was the first female athlete to score a perfect ten. Although the film is centred on an individual success story, it places strong emphasis on the extreme physical and psychological pressures exercised on young athletes within communist sport systems. Nadia was filmed in the former Yugoslavia, and it describes the coaches as authoritarian figures and training regimes as relentlessly punitive, suggesting that athletic excellence in the socialist world was achieved at the cost of personal freedom and childhood itself. In this sense, the film aligns with a recurrent Cold War trope that framed the sporting achievements of the Eastern bloc as the product of coercion, opposed to Western talent and freedom of choice.²³⁴

Another example is the film “No Retreat, No Surrender” (1986), which is characterised by a more overtly confrontational tone. This narrative managed to blend

²³² Silk, Micheal; Bracey, Bryan; Falcous, Mark. “Performing America’s Past: Cold War Fantasies in a Perpetual State of War,” in Wagg and Andrews, eds., *East Plays West*, 289; and Silk, M. Schultz, J. and Bracey, B. “From Mice to Men: Miracle, Mythology and the Magic Kingdom,” *Sport in Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2–3 (Spring 2007), 297.

²³³ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 168.

²³⁴ Kell, “Nadia,” *Variety*, May 16, 1984, 31–32.

martial arts cinema with Cold War antagonism, casting Jean-Claude Van Damme as a former Soviet martial arts champion who has defected to the U.S. West Coast only with the aim of becoming an enforcer for a criminal organisation. The plot is not unusual, as the protagonist eventually gets defeated by a young American karate student, who is represented as independent and idealistic, and is inspired by the legacy of Bruce Lee. In this context, again, the disciplined but morally corrupt fighter from the communist world is overcome by a free, authentic Western counterpart. “No retreat, No Surrender” utilises martial arts as a metaphorical extension of ideological struggle, with physical domination standing in for moral and political superiority.²³⁵

During the same year, “Streets of Gold” (1986) was released. In this drama, a more reflective approach can be noted, compared to the previous example, which operates within the same ideological framework. The film shows a retired Soviet boxer who was excluded from the national team because of his Jewish identity, and, as a consequence, he emigrated to the United States. In the new free country, he trains two young and amateur fighters. The narrative culminates in a symbolic reversal when one of them defeats the reigning European champion, who is a physically imposing Soviet boxer. “Streets of Gold” introduces themes of discrimination and exile. Additionally, it ultimately reinforces the contrast between an oppressive Soviet system and the United States as a space of redemption and full of opportunities. In this case, once again, athletic victory becomes a proxy for ideological vindication.²³⁶

Finally, if the earlier examples of the period of the Cold War had already consolidated an antagonistic portrayal of the communist bloc, the most explicit representation and visually codified articulation of hard propaganda in American sports cinema can be found in “Rocky IV” (1985). More than any other Cold War sports film of the decade, this film transforms ideological confrontation into bodily spectacle, reducing the geopolitical

²³⁵ Goldstein, Patrick. “Movie Review: No Rhyme, No Reason in ‘No Retreat,’” *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1986, 5.

²³⁶ Brit, “*Streets of Gold*,” *Variety*, 12 November 1986, 14.

struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union to a single, extremely symbolic boxing match.²³⁷

The film stages the conflict through an almost schematic opposition. The Soviet fighter Ivan Drago, interpreted by the actor Dolph Lundgren, is constructed as the embodiment of mechanised collectivism. He is introduced more as a product than a personality. As a matter of fact, he is physically engineered, chemically enhanced and monitored by scientists in a sterile laboratory environment. His training is also observed through computers, surveillance screens and even biometric data. These characteristics are so exaggerated that even in public, his behaviour appears controlled and emotionless. Therefore, in this context, the soviet athlete is less an individual than an instrument, seen as an extension of the state apparatus.²³⁸

In contrast, Rocky Balboa, played by Sylvester Stallone, exercises in a completely different environment, if not opposed: his trainings must be in isolation and within a snowy rural landscape. Differently to his Soviet counterpart, he rejects technological mediation, preferring to only rely on physical endurance, as well as manual labour. His workouts include improvised natural exercises such as chopping wood, lifting stones, or running across the frozen terrain up the Ural Mountains. In this case, it can be noticed that this contrast is specifically studied to show technology as a synonym of artificiality and coercion, while nature, on the other hand, is aligned with authenticity and moral integrity.²³⁹ According to Professor Susan Jeffords, this film translates the broader dichotomy of the Reagan era, which puts freedom versus control into a language dictated by muscle and sweat.²⁴⁰

All of the public scenes represented in the movie reinforce this binary logic. The press conferences, which are anticipating the fight, devolve into overt ideological exchanges in

²³⁷ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 168.

²³⁸ Taubman, Philip. "Soviet Pans 'Rocky' and 'Rambo' Films," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1986, C1.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 189.

which communism and capitalism are explicitly compared as systems capable of producing stronger and morally superior men. Moreover, there are numerous visual motifs that support the confrontation within the symbolic vocabulary of the Cold War, such as flag imagery of the United States, nationalist magazine covers, shots of Soviet surveillance and bureaucratic inaccuracy. Even the soundtrack contributes extremely to the ideological framing, as various songs function as cultural affirmations of American vitality, such as “Living in America” by James Brown.²⁴¹

The propagandistic force of “Rocky IV” is so strong that even critics of the time could recognise it. As reported by The New York Times, cultural officials from the Soviet Union publicly denounced the film as crude anti Soviet propaganda. In the United States, different commentators described it as one of the most strident cinematic expressions of the rhetoric against communism during the Reagan years.²⁴² The commercial success of the film further amplified its cultural impact. Its budget reached approximately \$28 million, and its profit grossed around \$300 million worldwide, becoming the most profitable instalment in the Rocky franchise and one of the most commercially successful boxing films of all time, recognised by Box Office Mojo in 2015.²⁴³

Beyond its immediate political context, “Rocky IV” also clarifies a deeper narrative structure already present in earlier films, which is the opposition between the free, self-made individual and the dehumanised product of a totalitarian system. Unlike “Miracle on Ice”, which framed victory as collective and national, “Rocky IV” personalises the conflict to an extreme degree. The culminating fight unfolds as a moral trial, ending in Rocky’s speech to a Soviet audience about the possibility of change, which can be interpreted as a symbolical moment, even if almost impossible, in which sport is imagined as capable of transforming geopolitical hostility. In this sense, this film represents the highest point of hard propaganda in American sports cinema. It abandons ambiguity and

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Taubman, Philip. “Soviet Pans ‘Rocky’ and ‘Rambo’ Films,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 1986, C1.

²⁴³ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 169.

shows explicitly the implications of the Cold War. If earlier films prepared the terrain, “Rocky IV” consolidates it into an icon of the cultural confrontation of the Reagan era.²⁴⁴

3.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined how sport functioned as a powerful cultural instrument of ideological competition during the Cold War. As discussed in the first section, athletic competition became a symbolic arena in which political systems measured themselves against one another, trying to project moral superiority onto the international stage. In this context, cinema further amplified this dynamic by transforming sporting events and athletic bodies into narrative vehicles of persuasion.

The analysis of Soviet sports cinema has shown that propaganda operated through both subtle affirmation as well as more explicit confrontation. In its soft form, Soviet films emphasise discipline and sacrifice. Athletic achievement was framed as the product of cooperation and ideological commitment, even if the films can be described more as individualistic. During the Stalin leadership, at the beginning of the Cold War, comedies such as “The Reserve Player” and “Champion of the World” reinforced discipline, presenting sport as a channel of moral development and social mobility.²⁴⁵ During the Thaw era, sports films became less central, reflecting shifting artistic priorities and greater thematic experimentation.²⁴⁶ Under Brezhnev, sport became more visible on screen, promoting traditional values again.²⁴⁷

Propaganda existed in its harder form as well, but it remained relatively limited. Especially for what regards the films produced during moments of heightened tension, sport could also become a site of explicit ideological opposition, though often without the

²⁴⁴ Palmer, William J. *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

²⁴⁵ Youngblood, Denise J. *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

²⁴⁶ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 3.

²⁴⁷ Edelman, Robert. *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 240.

same degree of personal accusation visible in American productions. Competition was present, but it was frequently subordinated to the broader goal of internal cohesion and moral education.²⁴⁸ An example can be found in the films “Sporting Honour”, “Third period” and “A Cool Guy”, which introduced a clear antagonistic representation of the West. However, even in these narratives, the main message was regarding moral education and collective resilience.²⁴⁹ Moreover, their standards of modest production reduced their cultural impact, suggesting in this way that the message did not always translate into effective persuasion.

As for the American case, a different configuration can be noted. Drawing on Ellul’s distinction between sociological and organised propaganda, Hollywood sports cinema moved along a spectrum from soft affirmation to open confrontation. Soft propaganda relied on narratives of meritocracy and individualism, reinforcing what Aaron Baker and Ron Briley identify as the enduring belief in sport as a model of social mobility within capitalist democracy.²⁵⁰ These films contributed to the consolidation of American ideological self-understanding, even when not directly addressing the Soviet Union.²⁵¹

By contrast, hard propaganda emerged more visibly in periods of intensified geopolitical tension, such as the McCarthy era, full of moral binaries, and the period of the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The latter contributed to a period of exaggeration of symbolic confrontation, which can be noted in films such as “Miracle on Ice” and “Rocky IV”.²⁵² These films transformed athletic competition into an explicit allegory of systemic struggle.²⁵³ In these narratives, the Soviet athlete was often represented as the product of a mechanised and coercive system, while the American protagonist embodied freedom

²⁴⁸ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 140.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Baker, Aaron. *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 22.

²⁵¹ Briley, Ron. “Sports in Film, Television, and History: Introduction,” *Film and History*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2005), p. 17.

²⁵² McDonald, Mary G. “‘Miraculous’ Masculinity Meets Militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-USA Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey Match and Cold War Politics”, in Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds., *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2007), 224.

²⁵³ Palmer, William J. *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

and authenticity. In Shaw's opinion, the cinema during the Reagan era frequently translated political confrontation into accessible cultural mythologies.²⁵⁴

Taken together, the Soviet and American cases demonstrate that sports cinema participated in the construction of Cold War politics. The representation of the training regimes, as well as the moments of victory, was utilised to articulate broader claims about morality. However, the intensity of these images also reveals their fragility. The insistence on ideological opposition suggests underlying anxieties and unresolved tensions.²⁵⁵ These tensions will be addressed in the next and final chapter of this thesis. Having analysed how hegemonic narratives were constructed through sports cinema in both the Soviet Union and the United States, the thesis will now concentrate on dissent and counterpropaganda.

²⁵⁴ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 199.

²⁵⁵ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 172.

CHAPTER IV

DISSENT AND COUNTERPROPAGANDA IN COLD WAR SPORTS CINEMA

The previous chapter examined how sports cinema was used as a vehicle of ideological affirmation during the Cold War. However, propaganda did not operate in a uniform manner, as, within both the contexts of the United States and the Soviet Union, sports films also became a space in which tensions and contradictions emerged.²⁵⁶ For this reason, the present chapter shifts the analytical focus from the consolidation of hegemonic messages to their contestation and reconfiguration, exploring two phenomena that are interconnected: dissent and counterpropaganda.

As it will clearly appear in the following sections, dissent does not necessarily imply open political opposition. In some case it may be the opposite, taking the form of ambiguity, or even irony. In the case of the Soviet Union, dissent often surfaced through stylistic experimentation or through narratives that disrupted the optimistic resolution typical of socialist realism.²⁵⁷ The sports films in question exposed problems or inefficiencies, such as moral compromises or the personal costs of athletic success. On the other hand, in the United States, dissent frequently emerged through critical representations of institutional problems, such as corruption. In this context, sport became a lens through which film directors questioned broader cultural assumptions, including the cult of victory and the pressures of Cold War conformity.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, 58.

²⁵⁷ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 14.

²⁵⁸ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 238.

By contrast, counterpropaganda functioned in a more outward-oriented manner. Rather than exposing internal weakness, it responded to external representations and aimed to reshape international perceptions. In Soviet sports cinema, this involved constructing an alternative image of the athlete that rejected Western stereotypes of mechanisation and artificial enhancement.²⁵⁹ The Soviet sports hero was presented as disciplined and morally grounded, and his success was framed as the outcome of guidance and state support. In comparison, in the American context, counterpropaganda focused particularly on the issue of race. Feature films and documentaries sponsored by the state showed African American athletes as symbols of mobility and democratic inclusion, thereby addressing Soviet claims that the United States was structurally racist.²⁶⁰

The aim of this chapter is to examine the complexity of Cold War cultural production, which did not simply follow the official ideology, as the previous chapter may give the impression. On the contrary, a number of sports films questioned or reinterpreted it, or even deployed it in response to foreign criticism. In both systems, sport served as a powerful symbolic arena in which national identity and social values were negotiated.²⁶¹

4.1 Dissent in Sports films

The United States and the Soviet Union had almost opposite views for what regards dissent. In the first case, film directors operated within a far less restrictive institutional framework and were therefore able to produce a significantly higher number of films that could be described as dissenting. At the same time, in the second case, a limited number of narratives on the topic of sports can be found. However, the very existence of catalogues of banned films demonstrates that the boundaries of permissible representation were constantly being tested, as even during the most rigid phases of censorship, certain

²⁵⁹ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, 57.

²⁶⁰ Kemper, Kurt. *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 6.

²⁶¹ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, 60.

filmmakers tried to obtain some spaces of relative autonomy.²⁶² Nevertheless, dissent did not manifest itself exclusively through prohibition. In some cases, it could be noted in films that were officially released, though sometimes in ambiguous or informal ways.

4.1.1 Dissent in Soviet Sports Cinema

One of the earliest post-war Soviet sports films to depart from established generic conventions was the film “Sport, Sport, Sport” (1970), by Elem Klimov, best known internationally for his later film “Come and See” (*Idi I smotri*, 1985).²⁶³ The film adopts a highly experimental structure, as it combines staged sequences with documentary fragments in a loose parody that does not follow a clear chronological progression. The plot, inspired by a screenplay written by the director’s brother, challenges the traditional narrative coherence typical of the Soviet sports genre. It revolves around the reflections of an elderly sports masseur, Uncle Volodya, whose anecdotes provide a minimal narrative framework.²⁶⁴ On the surface, the film appears to support the official understanding of sport as a means of moral improvement and as proof of the strength of the Soviet system. However, there seems to be a certain distance from the message that it seems to convey, probably given by its unusual style and its ironic tone. In this context, dissent does not take the most obvious form of explicit ideological opposition, but it is still expressed through a subtle questioning of genre conventions. Yet, the critical reception of the film was largely negative, and it failed to reach a wide audience outside film festivals.²⁶⁵

As mentioned before, by the end of the 1970s, the control exercised by the Brezhnev regime over the film industry had become less consistent.²⁶⁶ This situation allowed directors to address the themes that implicitly questioned the emphasis placed by the party on victory in international competitions. A significant example is “The Girl and the

²⁶² Margolit, Evgenii; and Shmyrov, Vyacheslav. *Iz yatoe kino* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1995).

²⁶³ Gözl, Christine. “Sport, Sport, Sport, or a Cinema Experiment with the ‘Formula of Harmony,’” in Katzer et al., eds., *Euphoria and Exhaustion*, 339.

²⁶⁴ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 188.

²⁶⁵ Gözl, Christine. “Sport, Sport, Sport, or a Cinema Experiment with the ‘Formula of Harmony,’” 347-349.

²⁶⁶ This concept is explained with greater detail in this thesis. See Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2, page 33.

Grand” (*Devushka I Grand*, 1980). The film tells the story of a young woman who trains a talented but difficult horse, named Grand. After the horse is sold to a British sportsman, the protagonist later travels to England to assist a Soviet competitor in an international horse race. During the steeplechase, Grand’s rider falls, and the young woman mounts the horse and completes the competition, securing victory for the British owner. In an unexpected gesture, the owner returns the horse to her, and the film concludes with her participating in a dressage event.²⁶⁷

In this film, the narrative reduces the ideological dimension of Soviet Western competition and places greater emphasis on personal determination and emotional attachment. At a time when international sporting rivalry remained intense, the film presents an image of cooperation and mutual recognition. Its tone is closer to popular entertainment and reflects the growing influence of American cinema on Soviet production during this period.²⁶⁸ Although it achieved only moderate success, attracting around eleven million viewers, its significance lies in the way it redefines the meaning of competition.²⁶⁹

In these examples, dissent appears more as a gradual shift in narrative priorities within the limits of an officially accepted genre, in comparison to other films with a direct confrontation with state ideology. There are two examples that challenged the conventions of Soviet sports cinema in a more explicit manner. One is “A Race without a Finish” (*Gonka bez kontsa*, 1977), which can only partially be described as a sports film, but it offers a particularly revealing perspective. The narrative follows a group of Soviet engineers attempting to design a racing car capable of competing successfully with Western models. Unlike earlier productions in which Soviet technology is portrayed as exemplary, here domestic automobiles are clearly shown to be inferior. The factory responsible for production suffers from serious quality control problems, largely due to worker negligence. A young female inspector attempts to raise concerns, but the factory

²⁶⁷ Youngblood, Denise J. “Americanitis: The Amerikanshchina in Soviet Cinema,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 1992), 221.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 226.

²⁶⁹ Zemlyanukhin, Sergei and Segida, Miroslava. *Domashnyaya sinemateka: Otechestvennoe kino, 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl-D, 1996), 111.

director refuses to acknowledge the structural deficiencies. In contrast with the conventions of socialist realism, the conflict is not resolved through collective reform or moral awakening. The race ends in failure, as the Soviet cars break down before reaching the finish line. This unresolved ending represents a significant deviation from the optimistic tone traditionally associated with the genre.²⁷⁰

An even more critical example of dissent is “Viktor Khrokin’s Second Try” (*Vtoraya popytka Viktora Krokhina*, 1977), a film that ultimately exceeded the limits of permissible criticism and was later banned.²⁷¹ The story centers on a young boxer whose life is shaped by deprivation and by an obsessive dedication to his sport. The film traces his trajectory from a harsh childhood in the impoverished districts of postwar Leningrad to his later status as a successful champion, although still morally degraded. As an adult, he is portrayed as arrogant and vulgar. The narrative offers a clear representation of social hardship and deliberately avoids the uplifting resolution which usually characterises Soviet sports films.²⁷² The film’s ban, as demonstrated by different documents, shows how this pessimistic image of Soviet life was perceived as deeply problematic and disturbed the official reviewers. Compared to the usual narrative, the protagonist is not heroic, or even sympathetic. He embodies a profound disillusionment that directly contradicts the celebratory image of the athlete as a moral exemplar.²⁷³

The 1980s produced even more critical works than the preceding decade, characterising the period of *glasnost*,²⁷⁴ during Gorbachev’s leadership (March 11, 1985

²⁷⁰ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 189.

²⁷¹ *Zapreshchennye filmy: Dokumenty, svidetelstvo, komentarii* (Moscow: NII Kinoiskusstva, 1993), pt. 2, 154.

²⁷² Youngblood, Denise J. “Americanitis: The Amerikanshchina in Soviet Cinema,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 1992), 231.

²⁷³ *Zapreshchennye filmy: Dokumenty, svidetelstvo, komentarii* (Moscow: NII Kinoiskusstva, 1993), pt. 2, 161.

²⁷⁴ Glasnost (literally “openness”) was introduced by Michail Gorbachev in 1986 as part of a broader reform agenda that also included the perestroika. It was conceived as a strategy to revitalize Soviet socialism through increased transparency, and it progressively reduced censorship and encouraged critical reflection on previously taboo aspects of Soviet history. In the cultural and cinematic context, this shift enabled more explicit forms of dissent and facilitated the emergence of films that engaged with systemic contradictions and historical reassessments. For a more detailed analysis see *Torri, M. M.S. Gorbaciov: Opinione Pubblica di un Leader* (BA thesis, Luiss Guido Carli, 2023).

- August 24, 1991), as the most visible phase of cinematic dissent. As Professor Anna Lawton argues, this era was characterised by a widespread reassessment of Soviet history and by uncompromising critiques of contemporary life.²⁷⁵ In this context, sport was not a central theme, given the magnitude of the political and social crises confronting the country. Nonetheless, some films addressed the darker aspects of the Soviet sporting system.

The most controversial film is “The Dolly” (Kukolka, 1987), which Shaw and Youngblood describe as a “devastating, highly sensational”²⁷⁶ critique of women’s artistic gymnastics. The film is about a teenage champion gymnast who continues to compete despite a severe back injury, which her trainers know about. Once her health is irreparably damaged, she is forced to abandon her athletic career and return to a family environment she barely recognises. She must also confront the unfamiliar reality of a regular high school, where her status as a celebrated “master of sport”²⁷⁷ isolates her from the other students. As a consequence, she finds herself unable to adapt to life outside the institutional structure that had defined her identity, and she becomes increasingly resentful and aggressive. At the end of the film, she commits suicide, presenting a devastating accusation of a system that exploits young athletes and then abandons them.²⁷⁸ In the opinion of Russian critic Segei Tsyркun, the film resonated strongly with young sports practitioners, in particular because it exposed the conditions under which they trained and competed.²⁷⁹ In this case, dissent is no longer subtle. It openly questions the moral legitimacy of the Soviet sports machine and challenges the idealised image of athletic success that had dominated previous decades.

²⁷⁵ Lawton, Anna. *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 184.

²⁷⁶ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 190.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Lawton, Anna. *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 184.

²⁷⁹ Tsyркun, Sergei “Ultra si: Sportivnoe kino kak chast sovetskoi mifologii,” *Iskusstvo kino*, No. 11 (November 2007), 7.

4.1.2 Dissent in the Sports Cinema of the United States

If Soviet dissent often emerged within narrow institutional limits, the case of the United States developed in a different political and industrial context. Hollywood did not operate under a centralised system of state censorship comparable to that of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it functioned independently from the ideological climate of the Cold War. To a significant extent, the U.S. film industry shared the broader worldview of political elites and contributed to the defence of democratic capitalism. The alignment between Hollywood and Washington was less the result of direct governmental control than of a common understanding of national interests and ideological priorities.

At the same time, American cinema was not completely uniform. A number of films diverged from Cold War orthodoxy, including several that address sport. In these productions, sport became a space in which tension within the U.S. society could be explored. Like in the case of the Soviet Union, some films introduced moderate criticism of dominant narratives about national virtue and moral superiority, while others adopted a more explicit and confrontational tone, exposing contradictions within the social and economic system.²⁸⁰

As a matter of fact, the early years of the Cold War coincided with a series of scandals in American sport, many of which revolved around bribery or gambling, and sometimes even corruption. These controversies received wide media attention and could not be ignored by filmmakers, even in a period marked by pressure to present positive images of the good American way of life. In addition, part of the Hollywood community had moved toward progressive political positions during the Great Depression and the Second World War. As Lary May has shown, the political climate within the film industry in the 1940s included strong currents of social criticism.²⁸¹ This background influenced the treatment of sport on screen.

²⁸⁰ May, Lary. *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 53.

²⁸¹ Ibid. 55.

Several films of the late 1940s and early 1950s offered a critical examination of the relationship between money, ambition and athletic success. Some examples are the films “Body and Soul” (1947), “Champion” (1949) and “The Set Up” (1949), which regarded boxing, and they did not present anymore the sport as a heroic arena of individual triumph, as most of the U.S. sports film used to do, but as an environment shaped by exploitation and moral compromise.²⁸² The protagonists are often talented athletes who are trapped in systems controlled by managers and promoters with criminal interests. The films highlight how economic pressures distort personal integrity and transform sport into a commodity. Contemporary reviews noted the dark tone of these works and their focus on the corrupt side of professional competition.²⁸³

Other sports were treated in a similar manner. As an example, “The Big Fix” (1947) addressed gambling networks linked to college basketball, suggesting that commercial interests had infiltrated amateur sport.²⁸⁴ Then, “Under My Skin” (1950), adapted from a story by Ernest Hemingway, implied that horse racing was marked by dishonesty and manipulation.²⁸⁵ Finally, “White Lightning” (1953) examined bribery and betting within ice hockey, a sport often associated with wholesome entertainment.²⁸⁶ In these films, the critique does not target the U.S. political system directly. Instead, it exposes structural inequalities and moral failures that complicate the image of the United States as a model society.

These cited films demonstrate that dissent in American sports cinema operated primarily through social realism. These narratives revealed the tensions inherent in a capitalist framework where success is closely tied to profit, instead of celebrating sport as evidence of national virtue, as most of the sports films of the time were doing. In this sense, they offered a form of internal criticism that coexisted with the broader Cold War

²⁸² Ceplair, Larry; and Englund, Steven. *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 24.

²⁸³ Ibid. 25-56.

²⁸⁴ Briley, Ron. “Review of ‘The Big Fix,’” *Film Daily*, 9 May 1947, 8.

²⁸⁵ Briley, Ron. “Review of ‘Under My Skin,’” *Motion Picture Herald Digest*, 11 March 1953, 221.

²⁸⁶ Briley, Ron. “Review of ‘White Lightning,’” *Motion Picture Herald Digest*, 7 March 1953, 51.

consensus. Sport became a lens through which filmmakers could examine greed and vulnerability without openly challenging the legitimacy of the political order.²⁸⁷

In contrast, among the films that most openly questioned the relationship between sport and capitalism, a significant position is occupied by “Saturday’s Hero” (1951). The film is written by former Communist Party member Sidney Buchman, and it presents a story focused on the transition from youth to adulthood that exposes the economic logic underlying college football. The protagonist is a young Polish American immigrant played by John Derek, and he manages to receive a scholarship to an elite Southern university. Formally, the scholarship is awarded on academic merit, but, in practice, his grades are artificially inflated so that he can dedicate himself entirely to football and to secure financial gains for a wealthy benefactor who places bets on the team’s victories.²⁸⁸

The clear message of the film, which is placed at the centre of the narrative, is structural manipulation. In this context, college sport is represented as a system sustained by hidden economic interests and by the exploitation of socially vulnerable students. The critical dimension of the film became even more pronounced when the Production Code Administration intervened.²⁸⁹ Some internal correspondence labelled the project as anti-American and demanded modifications to its plot. In particular, the objection was to its representation of “class divisions and institutional hypocrisy”²⁹⁰. These reactions reveal how sensitive the connection between sport and national identity had become during the early Cold War years.

This controversy was intensified because the film was released at the same time as a real scandal at West Point, where tutors were discovered to have assisted football students improperly during exams. In this context, “Saturday’s Hero” was interpreted by some critics as a legitimate contribution to the scandal. Nonetheless, Senator J. William

²⁸⁷ Ceplair, Larry; and Englund, Steven. *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 77.

²⁸⁸ American Film Institute Catalog, “Saturday’s Hero”. Available on: <https://catalog.afi.com/Film/53423-SATURDAYS-HERO?sid=cd675e19-6b45-408a-88c7-ae74830c8a42&sr=10.393275&cp=1&pos=0> (last accessed: February 15, 2026).

²⁸⁹ Bernstein, Matthew. ed., *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 34.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

Fullbright, who had proposed different reforms of the educational system of the U.S. Military Academy, publicly supported the film's message. By contrast, conservative groups organised protests outside theatres, accusing the film of promoting disruptive propaganda. The political consequences for the screenwriter were severe. Sydney Buchman was later cited for contempt of Congress by the House Un American Activities Committee after refusing to identify alleged communists in the film industry. As a consequence, he spent most of the 1950s on the Hollywood blacklist.²⁹¹ In this case, dissent in sports cinema moved beyond indirect social commentary and entered the field of explicit institutional critique.

In the following decade, criticism of the Cold War atmosphere often adopted a different tone. During the 1960s, satire became a more frequent strategy for addressing the symbolic overlap between sport and national defence. The most significant example is "Dr. Strangelove or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964), by Stanley Kubrick. This is not a sports film in the conventional sense, but, according to Shaw and Youngblood, the narrative systematically appropriates the language and imagery of sport in order to undermine militaristic rhetoric.²⁹²

As a matter of fact, in this film, nuclear strategy is described by political and military leaders, who use metaphors drawn from competitive games. The large display in the White House situation room resembles a scoreboard and is referred to as the "Big Board"²⁹³. In addition, military actions are described using the abbreviation "TD"²⁹⁴, using the terminology of American football.²⁹⁵ When major King Kong addresses his crew before carrying out a catastrophic mission, his speech resembles that of a coach

²⁹¹ American Film Institute Catalog, "Saturday's Hero".

²⁹² Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 174.

²⁹³ Kramer, Peter. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 33.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ In American football, the abbreviation "TD" refers to the touchdown, which is the primary scoring action in the game. In the film the expression is used ironically, and it refers to a rescue mission or military maneuver, reducing a potentially catastrophic event to the logic of scoring points.

motivating his team before a decisive match. The final image of Kong riding the bomb toward its target transforms apocalypse into a grotesque parody of a rodeo spectacle.²⁹⁶

Through these choices, the film establishes again a connection between sport and the logic of the Cold War. Nuclear war is presented as if it were a competitive event governed by rules of scoring and victory. The effect is ironic: “Dr. Strangelove” exposes the absurdity of reducing global annihilation to the language of play by exaggerating the sporting metaphors embedded in political discourse. In this way, it offers a powerful critique of the cultural framework that connected competition and military supremacy.²⁹⁷

Finally, during the 1970s, numerous films began to question the aggressive spirit that had characterised both national and sporting culture. Some of these critiques took the form of dystopian science fiction. As an example, the film “Death Race 2000” (1975) imagines a transcontinental car race in which drivers score points by killing pedestrians, transforming competition into a literal spectacle of violence.²⁹⁸ A related film is “Rollerball” (1975), which presents a future society dominated by multinational corporations, where an extremely violent sport replaces both traditional team games and open warfare. In this case, sport is designed to channel aggression and maintain social control. In both films, athletic competition becomes connected with organised brutality, at a point where it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. Therefore, the suggestion is that the logic of victory has overtaken ethical restraint.²⁹⁹

A more intimate exploration of this theme appears in the film “Drive, He Said” (1971), directed by Jack Nicholson. The film follows a college basketball player who becomes involved in campus protest movements during a period marked by opposition to the Vietan War. Compared to the previous cited films, “Drive, He Said” was produced with a more modest budget and aimed at a younger audience. Additionally, it reflects the sensibilities of the New Hollywood generation, presenting sport as part of a broader social

²⁹⁶ Crawford, Russ. *The Use of Sports to Promote the American Way of Life during the Cold War: Cultural Propaganda, 1945–1963* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2008), 30-35.

²⁹⁷ Ceplair, Larry; and Englund, Steven. *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 382.

²⁹⁸ Combs, Richard. “Death Race 2000,” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1976, 26.

²⁹⁹ Canby, Vincent. “Futuristic World of ‘Rollerball,’” *The New York Times*, 26 June 1975, 37.

environment marked by disillusionment and political unrest. The spectator could interpret the protagonist's uncertainty as a mirror to the anxieties of a generation questioning both military intervention abroad and traditional models of masculinity at home.³⁰⁰

However, the most forceful condemnation of the connection between militarism and sport can be found in the film "Hearts and Minds" (1974), which is an Academy Award winning documentary directed by Peter Davis. The director had already drawn attention previously to the propaganda practices of the U.S. Department of Defence in his television investigation "Selling the Pentagon" (1971), but in "Hearts and Minds" he adopts a different strategy. The film offers a reflection of two hours on the origins and consequences of American involvement in Vietnam, using interviews, combat footage, television broadcasts and excerpts from older films. In this documentary, there is no guiding narration; instead, it relies on the comparison and contrast of the presented images.³⁰¹

One of the central claims advanced by the film is that the Cold War fostered a culture obsessed with victory. The documentary suggests that this mentality was sustained by a close relationship between military ideology and sporting values. Several sequences highlight this connection without explicit commentary. In one moment, a U.S. Colonel praises his troops as effective killers. This scene is immediately followed by a football coach addressing his players before a crucial game, invoking themes of faith and patriotism. Elsewhere, a college coach urges his team to defeat and destroy the competition, employing language that echoes military rhetoric. In another segment, a former prisoner of war, Lieutenant George Coker, defends American actions in Southeast Asia by recalling a maxim from his high school sports coach about perseverance under pressure.³⁰²

Through these parallels, "Hearts and Minds" suggests that American sport has contributed to shaping a generation accustomed to viewing conflict through the lens of competition. Images of cheering crowds and aggressive players reinforce the idea that the

³⁰⁰ Canby, Vincent. "Screen: Nicholson's 'Drive, He Said,'" *The New York Times*, 14 June 1971, 31.

³⁰¹ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 238.

³⁰² Ibid. 239.

pursuit of victory has been normalised and celebrated.³⁰³ The film also implicates Hollywood itself in the construction of this culture, referencing works such as “My Son John” to underscore how cinema helped promote a confrontational, patriotic narrative.³⁰⁴ Upon release, the documentary provoked strong reactions. Some critics described it as courageous and insightful, while others dismissed it as misleading. Debates over its interpretation continue, yet many scholars regard it as one of the most significant cinematic reflections on the Vietnam War.³⁰⁵

4.2 Counterpropaganda in Cold War Sports Films

4.2.1 Counterpropaganda in Soviet Sports Cinema

If dissent revealed internal tensions within the Soviet system, counterpropaganda operated on a different level: the concern was not on self-criticism anymore, but with responding to external representations and defending the legitimacy of the socialist project. During the Cold War, cinema became one of the spaces in which symbolic confrontation was articulated.

In comparison to the United States, the Soviet Union never possessed a great capacity for international distribution of films. The only guaranteed foreign market was the countries of Eastern Europe, but that did not translate automatically into genuine popularity. Soviet films were screened across the bloc, but they rarely achieved the kind of audience success enjoyed by American production. Film exchange agreements with countries such as the United States and India produced limited results, mostly because Soviet films struggled to attract significant box office appeal abroad.³⁰⁶ Even during the Thaw, when a small number of Soviet films circulated successfully in international

³⁰³ Kemper, Kurt. *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2.

³⁰⁴ This film is discussed in greater detail in this thesis. See Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2, page 50.

³⁰⁵ Kemper, Kurt. *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 6.

³⁰⁶ Krukones, James H. “The Unspooling of Artkino: Soviet Film Distribution in America, 1940-1975,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 29, no. 1 (March 2009), 79.

festivals, sports films were not among those that crossed borders. They were conceived primarily for domestic consumption.³⁰⁷

This limited international visibility did not mean that Soviet sports cinema lacked a dimension of counterpropaganda. On the contrary, many of these films can be read as an indirect response to Western representations of Soviet athletes. Unlike certain American sports films that sought to address racial tensions within the United States, Soviet cinema did not produce a direct equivalent focused on correcting foreign criticism. Instead, it worked more subtly. Through recurring narrative patterns, it challenged what it perceived as distorted images promoted by Hollywood.³⁰⁸

The contrast is particularly evident if compared to the American cinematic construction of the Soviet athlete. In films such as “Rocky IV”, the Soviet competitor appears as a mechanised and exaggerated figure, defined almost exclusively by physical strength and emotional coldness. The character of Ivan Drago embodies this stereotype. His body is presented as the product of scientific manipulation, and his personality seems reduced to discipline and aggression. Soviet sports films offered a different model. Physical ability was never the sole defining trait of the athlete. When bodily strength was emphasised, it was often accompanied by irony or by moments that humanised the character. In “Champion of the World”, for example, the wrestler’s extraordinary physical capacity is treated with humour, rather than admiration.³⁰⁹

In a more general overview, Soviet sports films consistently portrayed athletes as complex individuals subject to doubt and personal conflict. Even when they do not openly question their own competence, external circumstances force them to confront limitations and setbacks. Therefore, they are not shown as flawless champions. Another difference can be found in romantic representations. In comparison to many Hollywood narratives in which athletic success automatically attracts admiration, Soviet films frequently depict sportsmen who must earn emotional recognition through patience and moral growth. In

³⁰⁷ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 14.

³⁰⁸ Ibid. 15.

³⁰⁹ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 187.

several productions of the 1970s, athletic fame does not guarantee romantic fulfilment. On the opposite, it becomes another field in which responsibility and maturity must be demonstrated.³¹⁰

Soviet counterpropaganda also addresses Western accusations that Soviet athletes were professionals disguised as amateurs and sustained by artificial enhancement. American Cold War rhetoric often suggested that Soviet competitors benefited from state support that compromised the fairness of competition. In response, Soviet sports films regularly highlighted the athlete's primary occupation outside sport, as for factories or, in general, collective workplaces, which are repeatedly shown as integral parts of the athlete's life. The presence of factory directors or committee members reinforces the image of sport as compatible with productive labour. This narrative strategy sought to affirm that Soviet athletes remained, firstly, workers, and, only secondly, competitors.³¹¹

At the same time, it is equally significant to mention the emphasis placed on discipline and personal conduct. In Sports films, Soviet heroes are consistently portrayed as restrained and committed to a healthy lifestyle. There are different scenes which represent other people consuming alcohol, contrasted with the athlete's refusal to participate. This is also particularly stressed by coaches, who highlight the importance of self-control and responsibility. Through these recurring elements, Soviet cinema constructs an image of athletic virtue that counters the Western portrayal of the Soviet sports system as artificial or corrupted by the enhancement of drugs.³¹²

Nonetheless, in an almost paradoxical way, the Soviet sports hero shares several traits with the American athletic ideal. In both cinematic traditions, athletes are hardworking, loyal and devoted to their family and country. The crucial difference lies in the role of guidance and transformation. As a matter of fact, in Soviet films, the development of the athlete is rarely presented as the result of individual initiative alone, as the coach occupies a central position and often represents institutional authority. His mentorship symbolises

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 57.

³¹² Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017), 187.

the supportive function of the state, and the athlete's success emerges through collective discipline and structured training. This pattern of the narrative reflects the principles of socialist realism, where personal achievement is inseparable from social organisation and ideological commitment.³¹³

In conclusion, counterpropaganda can be attributed to Soviet sports cinema, but not in the most common way, by attacking the Western system directly, but by constructing an alternative moral universe. Soviet athletes are presented not too differently from American ones. Their main characteristics are humanity and discipline, as well as social integration. In this way, the Soviet Union responded to external criticism through sports films, while reinforcing domestic legitimacy.

4.2.2 Counterpropaganda in the Sports Cinema of the United States

In comparison to the Soviet Union, U.S. filmmakers paid more attention to the internationalisation of their production. This orientation reflected Hollywood's global distribution networks and the economic importance of foreign markets, as well as the awareness that cinema could serve diplomatic purposes. During the Cold War, U.S. authorities frequently considered film as a useful instrument for shaping perceptions abroad, and sports films, in particular, were seen as particularly adaptable to transnational audiences, as they put emphasis on physical action and made them accessible despite every possible language barrier.³¹⁴

This strategy is confirmed by the international success of certain films. An example is "Rocky IV", which achieved considerable informal circulation in the Soviet Union, where numerous copies were requested at the black market. In addition, some decades earlier, during the Stalin era, the swimmer Johnny Weissmuller acquired unexpected popularity in the USSR through his representation of Tarzan in Hollywood films. As a

³¹³ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, 58.

³¹⁴ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," 169.

matter of fact, his image resonated strongly with Soviet viewers, and, according to Professor Frederick White, even Iosif Stalin admired the character in private.³¹⁵

However, this popularity was not always intended in a positive way. On the contrary, certain films were released internationally with the purpose of giving a specific idea, as an answer to different attacks. In this matter, the most serious issue for the image of the United States was racial inequality. As the scholar Mary Dudziak has shown, the treatment of African Americans became a central obstacle in the international contest for moral authority during the Cold War.³¹⁶ After the Second World War, different Soviet films repeatedly highlighted segregation and discrimination in the United States, presenting them as evidence of the hypocrisy underlying American claims to freedom and equality. Some examples are the previously mentioned “Meeting on the Elbe” (*Vstrecha na Elbe*, 1949) and the film “Silver Dust” (*Serebristaya pyl*, 1953).³¹⁷ As a response, American sports cinema developed a propagandistic function, starting to produce films which foregrounded narratives of integration.

As a consequence, during the 1950s and the 1960s, a number of productions represented Black athletes achieving national recognition and professional success. These films suggested that American society offered opportunities for advancement based on merit. However, none of these works dominated the box office individually, but taken together, they contributed to a cinematic narrative in which sport appeared as a sphere of inclusion and progress. In doing so, they implicitly countered Soviet allegations that the United States remained fundamentally racist.³¹⁸

Among these films, “The Jackie Robinson Story” (1950) has a central position. It is a film produced by Jewel Pictures, and it recounts the career of the baseball player who broke the colour barrier when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. The narrative

³¹⁵ White, Frederick H. “Tarzan in the Soviet Union: British Lord, American Movie Idol and Soviet Counterculture Figure,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2015), 85.

³¹⁶ Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³¹⁷ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War*, 171.

³¹⁸ Thomas, Damion. “Playing the ‘Race Card’: US Foreign Policy and the Integration of Sports,” in Wagg and Andrews, eds., *East Plays West*, 207.

presents Robinson's trajectory as both personal and national achievement. Unusually, Robinson portrays himself on screen, reinforcing the authenticity of the story.³¹⁹ The film emphasizes the support he receives first from the U.S. Army and later from Branch Rickey, the baseball executive who facilitated his entry into Major League baseball.³²⁰

The conclusion of the film reenacts Robinson's testimony before the House Committee on Un American Activities in 1949. In that appearance, he affirmed that democracy rewards those who are willing to defend it, and the statement was widely interpreted as a response to comments made by Paul Robeson, who had questioned whether Black Americans could support a country that denied them full equality.³²¹ As a consequence, given this last episode, it could be said that the film connects athletic integration to loyalty and civic responsibility. In this case, Robinson's success is situated within a broader narrative of democratic reform.

Contemporary reviewers confirmed the ideological significance of the film, as they aligned it with the postwar liberal consensus, which maintained that racial prejudice would gradually diminish through economic growth and institutional reform. As an example, the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender* described the film as a powerful illustration of democracy in action.³²²

Furthermore, there are two additional films released in the early 1950s, which connect sports and Cold War politics, that are worth mentioning. Both of these films place at the centre of the narrative the Harlem Globetrotters, a basketball team created in a context in which professional basketball in the United States remained racially segregated, as until 1950, this sport was exclusive to white athletes.³²³ Yet these films did not present the

³¹⁹ Briley, Ron. *The Baseball Film in Postwar America: A Critical Study, 1948–1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2011), 12-15.

³²⁰ *Ibid.* 57.

³²¹ Raengo, Alessandro. "A Necessary Signifier: The Adaptation of Robinson's Body Image in 'The Jackie Robinson Story,'" *Adaptation* 1, no. 2 (March 2013), 79.

³²² *Ibid.* 83.

³²³ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers," 169.

Globetrotters as evidence of exclusion; on the contrary, they framed their success as proof of the opportunities available to minorities within American society.

The first one is “Go, Man Go!” (1954), which is distributed by United Artists, and it reconstructs the rise of the team from modest beginnings to national recognition. The film follows their journey from playing in small rural venues to performing in major arenas across the country. As in “The Jackie Robinson Story”, the narrative assigns an important role to a white mentor figure, Abe Saperstein, portrayed as the individual who helps the players achieve visibility and financial stability. The relationship between Saperstein and one of the athletes, played by Sidney Poitier, is represented as a partnership based on mutual respect. As film critic Bosley Crowther wrote in *The New York Times*, the climax of the film, in which the Globetrotters defeat an all-white championship team, offers a symbolic reversal of racial hierarchy.³²⁴

The second film, released earlier and named after the team “The Harlem Globetrotters” (1951) has a similar message. It adopts a lighter tone and focuses on the dilemma of a talented college student who must decide whether to pursue higher education or join the team. Contemporary reviews emphasised that the film avoided explicit references to racial discrimination and presented the Globetrotters simply as an accomplished and admired team.³²⁵ This narrative choice was significant, as the film suggested that integration and professional success were already normalised within American society by minimising direct discussion of prejudice.³²⁶

The international circulation of these films confirms their diplomatic value. The U.S. state department supported the global distribution of “The Harlem Globetrotters”, particularly in regions where Soviet propaganda had portrayed African American as victims of systematic oppression. Officials from the United States Information Services argued that the depiction of Black athletes as respected professionals, earning stable salaries and moving comfortably in integrated public spaces, would counter negative

³²⁴ Crowther, Bosley. “The Screen in Review; Harlem Globetrotters Perform in a Sports Romance, ‘Go, Man, Go!’ at the Globe,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1954, 17.

³²⁵ Harrison’s Reports, 20 October 1951, 168.

³²⁶ Motion Picture Herald Picture Digest, 27 October 1951, 107.

representations promoted by the Soviet bloc. Scenes showing the protagonist interacting with white professors, studying at university, and forming relationships in integrated settings were interpreted as visual demonstrations of social mobility and inclusion.³²⁷ This is another example of how cinema sought to project an image of racial progress and institutional openness through sport.

By the late 1950s, and until the end of the Cold War, this strategy evolved into a more structured form of audiovisual diplomacy. The United States Information Agency began producing short documentaries dedicated to prominent Black athletes. These films were less expensive than feature productions and easier to circulate internationally. They presented concise narratives of achievement that aligned athletic success with democratic values. Among the most notable examples were “Althea Gibson – Tennis Champion” (1957),³²⁸ which focused on the first person of colour to win a Grand Slam title, as well as “Wilma Rudolph – Olympic Champion” (1961), which told the story of an athlete who overcame illness to become an Olympic gold medalist.³²⁹

Taken together, these films illustrate how American sports cinema and state sponsored documentaries operated as instruments of counterpropaganda, trying to offer a visual narrative of inclusion and civic participation. Sport functioned as a stage on which the United States could present itself as a society capable of reform and opportunity. In the symbolic competition of the Cold War, athletic achievement became evidence of physical strength as well as democratic legitimacy.

The importance of countering Soviet accusations of racism was not limited to sports cinema. American cultural diplomacy extended to other fields, including music. In particular, jazz became a powerful symbol of American creativity and pluralism. As a matter of fact, in 1962, the first official jazz concert was held in Moscow, marking a

³²⁷ Thomas, Damion. *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 70.

³²⁸ Schwenk Borrell, Melinda M. “Selling Democracy: The US Information Agency’s Portrayal of American Race Relations 1953–1976,” PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004, 100-134.

³²⁹ Ibid. 168-170.

significant moment in cultural exchange between the two superpowers.³³⁰ With this event, the United States had the objective of challenging the accusation of being an individualistic and racially divided society. For this reason, African American musicians were presented as representatives of a nation capable of producing artistic excellence across racial lines. On this matter, The New York Times once described jazz as one of the most effective American weapons in the Cold War, referring to a “blue note in a minor key”³³¹ as an instrument more powerful than conventional arms.

In a broader context, sports films can be interpreted as part of the same strategy. Just as jazz ambassadors embodied racial integration and artistic freedom, cinematic representations of successful Black athletes projected an image of opportunity and democratic inclusion. Both forms of cultural production attempted to counter Soviet claims that the United States was structurally racist. Sport and music thus functioned as complementary arenas in the struggle for international legitimacy.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined the ways in which sports cinema during the Cold War functioned as a vehicle of ideological affirmation, as well as a site of tension and strategic response. By observing the methods of dissent and counterpropaganda, it has been possible to show that sports films in both the Soviet Union and the United States cannot be understood solely as instruments of state ideology. On the contrary, they participated in a more complex process of negotiation between domestic realities and international expectations.³³²

³³⁰ Passato e Presente, “Jazz Ambassadors: La musica come arma,” RaiPlay, February 13, 2026. Available on: <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2026/02/Passato-e-Presente---Jazz-Ambassadors-La-musica-come-arma--13022026-a125e6b2-7bed-48e7-bc22-d2fef2733acc.html> (last accessed: February 16, 2026).

³³¹ Davenport, Lisa E. *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 2013, 43.

³³² Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. “Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers”, 169.

In the Soviet context, dissent emerged primarily through narrative and stylistic deviations from the conventions of socialist realism. Films exposed the moral compromises and the personal costs associated with the success that athletes had to sacrifice.³³³ At the same time, Soviet sports cinema engaged in counterpropaganda by constructing an alternative image of the athlete. The films in question represented the Soviet competitors as disciplined and ethical individuals, going against the Western portrayals that emphasised their almost mechanised characteristics. Moreover, the coach still had an important role in these films, frequently representing the institutional authority, and reinforcing the idea that collective success derived from guidance, rather than from the individualistic ambition that was typically attributed to the American counterpart.³³⁴

In the case of the United States, dissent often appeared through critical examinations of corruption and the aggressive ethos that linked sport to militarised masculinity. As an example, films addressed real-life scandals and highlighted the social pressures that surrounded competition.³³⁵ However, American cinema also developed a clear dimension of counterpropaganda, in particular in relation to race. The main objective of film directors was to respond to the Soviet accusations of racial injustice by focusing on the achievements of African American athletes and emphasising different narratives of integration and opportunity.³³⁶ In addition, feature films and short documentaries also contributed to an image of the United States as a society that was capable of reform and inclusion.³³⁷

The comparison between the two systems reveals both contrast and convergence. Although Soviet and American films were produced within opposing ideological frameworks, they frequently constructed similar athletic ideals. In both traditions, the

³³³ Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, 14.

³³⁴ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers", 170.

³³⁵ Kemper, Kurt. *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 6.

³³⁶ Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³³⁷ Ibid.

sports hero is hardworking and, especially, patriotic. Nonetheless, the difference does not lie as much in the qualities attributed to the individual as in the political structure that explains those characteristics. As a matter of fact, Soviet narratives situate success within collective discipline and state mentorship, while, on the other hand, American narratives emphasise opportunity and personal advancement within a democratic system.³³⁸

³³⁸ Shaw, Tony. *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 9.

CONCLUSION

The analysis developed in this thesis has shown that sports cinema during the Cold War is regarded as a central cultural genre deeply connected to politics, functioning as a structured arena in which ideological confrontation was translated into emotionally accessible narratives. In both the United States and the Soviet Union, athletic competition became a symbolic concentration of systemic rivalry, where victories or defeats were framed as evidence of the moral and organisational superiority of an entire political order. Despite the profound differences between a cinematic apparatus controlled by the state and a film industry that is formally private but deeply interconnected with politics, both systems relied on remarkably similar narrative mechanisms; indeed, the athlete was consistently constructed as disciplined and patriotic.³³⁹

Nonetheless, the difference found in the analysed films was in the political logic that explained their success, as in the Soviet case, it was mostly given by the presence of the mentor, who often took the role of protagonist in the film, while in the case of the United States, victories came from individual initiative within a democratic framework. In this sense, sports cinema reveals how opposing ideological systems could converge in narrative form while remaining irreconcilable in political meaning.³⁴⁰

This comparative perspective reinforces a broader theoretical insight concerning the nature of propaganda in mass societies. As Jacques Ellul argues, modern propaganda can

³³⁹ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers".

³⁴⁰ Shaw, Tony and Youngblood, Denise J. *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, 40-57.

operate through explicit manipulation as well as through integrating individuals into a shared interpretative environment, utilising instruments such as repetition or symbolic simplification.³⁴¹ Sports films exemplified this dynamic, as they naturalised specific models of national identity by embedding political values within stories of perseverance and loyalty. Both the big and small screens transformed abstract ideological principles into concrete and relatable characters.

In this perspective, this distinction between hard and soft propaganda further clarifies the functioning of sports cinema. The first one relied on explicit antagonism and the clear identification of an ideological enemy, while the second one operated more subtly, inserting political assumptions within emotionally compelling narratives. Both of these forms can be noticed in Cold War sports films, sometimes even overlapping.³⁴²

Addressing these questions, the thesis situates sports cinema within the broader theoretical framework of propaganda as a mechanism of integration and identity formation. As Benedict Anderson argued, nations are “imagined communities”³⁴³, which are sustained by shared representations and communicative practices. In this context, the spectator encountered identification without noticing the doctrine relating to it, as sports cinema managed to translate political systems into narrative experiences that appeared ordinary through recurring plots and familiar archetypes. In particular, cinema in mass societies characterised what Riesman, Glazer and Denney defined as the “lonely crowd”³⁴⁴, possessing the capacity to address individuals in isolation and integrate them into contextual groups at the same time. Therefore, sports cinema during the Cold War can be interpreted as a structured communicative practice aimed at reinforcing the political “we”, while defining the ideological “other”³⁴⁵, where the American and the Soviet athlete were embodiments of competing models of modernity.

³⁴¹ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 61-87.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 37.

³⁴⁴ Riesman, David and Glazer, David and Denney, Reuel. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 13.

³⁴⁵ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 7.

Within this broader comparative picture, this thesis has advanced three interrelated arguments which clarify the political function of sports cinema. First, sports films operated as a form of sociological propaganda in Ellul's sense, shaping attitudes indirectly by embedding ideological assumptions within narratives of discipline and moral development.³⁴⁶ As a consequence, these films managed to normalise political values by presenting them as natural components of everyday life, where the emotional familiarity of the athletic story functioned as a subtle mechanism of integration, transforming ideology into narrative experience.

Second, the thesis demonstrated that both the American and the Soviet film industries relied on the construction of remarkably similar athletic archetypes despite the structural difference between the Soviet productions, which are controlled by the state, and the American cinema, formally private yet deeply connected with politics. As a matter of fact, on both sides of the Iron Curtain the protagonists were represented as hardworking and loyal. The main differences stand in the ideological framing of these virtues, as in Soviet cinema, achievement was intended as the result of discipline and institutional mentorship, while for the American counterpart, it was framed as a reward of individual initiative within a democratic and capitalist order.³⁴⁷ Therefore, it is interesting to note how the same narrative grammar legitimized almost opposite political systems.

Third, the examination of dissent and counterpropaganda complicates any interpretations of Cold War cultural production as monolithic. In both contexts, sports cinema revealed structural tensions within the very systems it appeared to celebrate. Soviet films occasionally exposed the psychological cost of discipline and the fragility of athletic mythologies, especially during the late Brezhnev era and the period of Gorbaciov's *glasnost*.³⁴⁸ On the other hand, American productions, especially from the late 1940s to the 1970s, questioned the relationship between sport and capitalism, as well

³⁴⁶ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 61.

³⁴⁷ Shaw, T. and Youngblood, Denise J. "Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis of the Superpowers", 180.

³⁴⁸ Youngblood, Denise J. "Americanitis: The Amerikanshchina in Soviet Cinema", 231.

as the effects of the military, revealing the anxieties beneath the rhetoric of victory.³⁴⁹ As a consequence, these moments of dissent demonstrated the adaptability of propaganda.

Counterpropaganda further underscores the dialogic nature of the Cold War, as Soviet films responded indirectly to Western representations of mechanised athletes, while American cinema addressed international accusations of racism by focusing on narratives of integration and opportunity.³⁵⁰ In this reciprocal dynamic, sports cinema became part of a broader symbolic exchange in which each system defined itself also through external opposition.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Cold War was also fought through images and narratives. Sports cinema staged ideological rivalry in a form that was both accessible to mass audiences and capable of generating strong emotional identification, managing to translate systemic conflict into spectacle, transforming political antagonism into competition and identity into performance.

As of today, the bipolar order that structured these representations has formally disappeared, yet the symbolic logic through which sport converts political identity into narrative spectacle is still ongoing. Contemporary forms of sport diplomacy and international competition continue to demonstrate how athletic arenas function as spaces where legitimacy and belonging are publicly enacted. The Cold War thus offers a historical case study as well as a revealing moment in the evolution of modern political communication. In this sense, this thesis demonstrated how, during the Cold War, political power in the twentieth century was exercised through narratives capable of transforming competition into identity.

³⁴⁹ May, Lary. *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*, 53.

³⁵⁰ Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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