

## Truth in sports history

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**ABSTRACT** The use of sport for media, marketing and political propaganda purposes led to inevitable distortions in sports history. The paper focuses on definition of truth and then on specific examples of propagandist abuses in totalitarian states, e.g. deleting the names of Jewish athletes from sports statistics in Nazi Germany or of politically troublesome athletes in the USSR and its satellite communist states before 1989. Another distortion in sport history can be found in modern “official” publications sponsored by various institutions, e.g. sports organizations and associations. Such sponsors choose not to publish some facts that may be inconvenient to them. Also, the media contribute to the false image of sport, e.g. by pandering to mass audiences, creating an artificial atmosphere of enormous sporting battles and tournaments to attract viewers, and presenting distorted facts from the careers of elite athletes.

**KEY WORDS** truth, distortions of truth, political propaganda, media, marketing.

What is the concept of truth? It seems to be one of the most complicated philosophical, not just historical issues. According to the classical Aristotelian definition truth is “conformity between thought and reality” – “adequatio rei et intellectus”. Definitions found in different dictionaries and encyclopedias are usually based on this rather enigmatic assumption. Webster’s explains truth as “something that is true or held to be true (...) relationship, conformity, or agreement with fact or reality” [1, p. 2457]. *Random House Dictionary* states that truth is the “true or actual state of a matter (...) conformity with fact or reality, verity” [2, p. 1521]. The *Dictionary of the Polish Language* gives similar definition: “what is in accordance with reality and is confirmed in reality” [3, p. 701].

The well known American historian, Samuel E. Morison, once expressed his opinion, which seems quite obvious, that “No person without an inherent loyalty to truth, a high degree of intellectual honesty, and a sense of balance, can be a great or even a good historian. Truth about the past is the essence of history and historical biography, the thing that distinguishes them from every other branch of literature” [4, pp. 380-381]. And Morison adds: “Everyone agrees to that; but when we come to define truth, dissensions starts” [4, *ibid*].

But right from the beginning of human events history has always been consciously or unconsciously falsified. One of the fathers of ancient historiography, Thucydides, boasted that he had introduced into his writings “fabricated and fictitious figures” because he was afraid that if he ignored such fabrication “it will diminish readers’ curiosity and interest”. As a matter of fact he added that he did so in order to emphasize the truth [5, I, 22].

If certain ancient epochs suffer frequently from lack of sources, modern times have “mountains of facts” at their disposal. As a result, historians have no choice, but “to sink a few experimental tunnels and examine what they bring up” or he “may employ a corps of miners to do the preliminary sifting for him” [4, p. 382]. Oscar Handlin, in his famous work *Truth in History*, was frightened to see that “mounting piles of printout raise a barrier between author and his subjects” [6, p. 12]. Thus, it is comparatively easy to select some facts, ignoring piles of other materials, in order to produce falsified history, comprised exclusively of one-sidedly chosen.

As F.M. Cornford once wrote, the only solution in such a situation depends on a particular historian and that “choice of facts to be recorded, his distribution of emphasis among them, his sense of his significance and relative proportion, must be governed by his philosophy of life” [7, I].

It is the life philosophy of a historian, his experience, interpretation of reality and primarily his eagerness to achieve objectivity which is the basis of any honest historical narrative. “Intellectual honesty” – Morison says – “is the quality that the public in free countries always has expected of historians” [4, p. 383]. Handlin, in turn adds that the historian succeeds “only through the creative tension that arises from exercising the full power of his imagination and understanding against the unyielding evidence that survive the past” [6, p. 22].

To what extent can and should all these principles be applied to sports history? I think in all situations. Who should employ and respect them? I think all of us.

At first glance it seems that the basic sport characteristics, its facts and factors well documented by statistical data

rather exclude any falsification of sports history. This is not entirely true, however. In Nazi Germany there were attempts to exclude from statistics and regional and national records those successes which were achieved by Jewish sportsmen. In Communist countries, if a particular person was out of the authorities' favor, sometimes even jailed or killed, his name was automatically erased from any document. Quite often, any mention of him or her was prohibited in contemporary writings, etc. This was, for instance, the case of the famous Polish fencer Jerzy Pawlowski, who was suspected of cooperation with the American CIA, then arrested, sentenced and jailed. In all subsequent Polish statistics, sport encyclopedias and other sources his name was omitted, despite the fact that earlier, due to his numerous achievements, Pawlowski's name was extensively used to prove the superiority of the Communist system. It was, by the way, very funny to see the statistics of Olympic champions beginning with a second place, just because Pawlowski was the winner who had been omitted. Soviet footballer Jurij Strelcov was, at the turn of the 1950s, the super-hero of Communist propaganda. But at the peak of his career he was accused of raping a young girl and for this reason his name disappeared from sports publications and statistics for many years. But this was, at least, to some extent understandable due to the immoral behavior of the footballer, although his name should not have been erased from official documents and not appeared in public without proper comment.

But there are more tragic events in the history of sport, which due to its nature were not included in the official history of a particular country. For instance, in Estonia under Soviet occupation (since 1940), all "bourgeois" officials of the Estonian Olympic Committee were arrested and sent to "gulags" while some of its members along with the President Joakhim Puhk were simply killed on the spot at the very moment Soviet NKVD officers entered the Olympic Office, without any trial. Later, one could hardly find any information about it in official Soviet histories of the Olympic Movement. The best athlete of Estonia was the decathlete, Heino Lipp, whose world records were much better than the results of American athlete Bob Mathias, the 1952 Olympic Champion in Helsinki. But Lipp was not allowed to start in Helsinki, because he heroically refused to wear an overall and a shirt with the name symbol of the Soviet Union. Facts of this kind rarely find any place either in Soviet or Western histories of Olympism. In the first case it was omitted due to a false understanding of the Communist system's prestige. In the second case, in the so-called Free World, it was sometimes ignored due to a lack of knowledge and in order not to irritate Soviet and later Russian members of international federations and committees. The history of sport in totalitarian countries has innumerable examples of such disfavored figures, facts and events. And there are still countries ruled by totalitarian governments, and we can be sure that such things still happen often.

Morison, whom we can hardly suspect of sympathy towards Marxism, thought however, quite in accordance with that philosophy, that in the process of writing history we should "select and arrange the facts of history as to influence the present or the future in the direction that he (historian) considered socially desirable" [4, p. 385]. Also, in his and his colleagues' opinion, a "historian's value in the long run

depends on the length and correctness of his forecast" [4, p. 385]. They differed, however, from Marxist historians, in their stricter emphasis on the idea that the "historian's professional duty is to illuminate the past for his hearers or readers; only secondarily and derivatively should he be concerned with influencing the future" [4, p. 382]. In this they displayed a different type of historical mission and hierarchy of tasks.

The historiography of "real socialism", which dominated the sciences as well as other areas of the social life of Soviet dominated countries before 1989, was in a specific way afflicted and even haunted by the mission of the ruling party system which aimed at building "the better and ideal world". In order to achieve this, the ruling party, through its propaganda system, exerted pressure on all institutions, including academic people, and consequently historians, expecting from them help in depreciating and eliminating all that was harmful or at least not useful in the process of building a new social order.

In this system "class struggle" directed against economic inequities and injustices was considered the basic mechanism of human history. The definition of "class struggle", in the later period of political development was much eased in ideological formulation but the basic division between the "right" Marxist dominated and "wrong" capitalist world remained untouched. Historiography, in the service of this system, had a special task to interpret facts in favor of the ruling party. It concerned, of course, in proper proportions, sports historiography because for the ruling party sport seemed to be an important propaganda tool not only in events which were at the time visible in the stadium or media, but also in its "properly" interpreted past and physical nature. As such, the history of sport, regardless of its real importance in overall historiography, appeared as a provider of the interpretation of "historic truth" in its part of the general "layer cake". It should be, of course, "objective truth" as understood by Marxist ideology. However, Marxist understanding of historical truth, can by no means be recognized as "universal truth", but at best, if we assume the good will of representatives of Marxist ideology, a reflection of all the typical tendencies of Communist reality and the epoch of its domination, say, in Eastern Europe and a "blind alley" in the development of civilization. The history of sport and, in a wider sense, the history of physical culture, which also contains sport among its ingredients (usually called "fizkultura" after the Russian abbreviation of "fizitsheskaya kultura"), in Soviet dominated countries, appears as a special branch of general historiography, reflecting all its characteristics and failures. The materialistic ability to render and use the human body was an important tool in proving the superiority of the materialistic concept of man. Physical culture (and consequently also sport as an important part) was automatically raised to a high level as a significant scientific argument proving the fundamental assumption of the Marxist concept of nature, so-called dialectical materialism, and at the same time the area of a sharp fight against any other concept of human development including, of course, its historical past. The consequences for all humanistic sciences, including those associated with physical culture and sport studies were very simple. For instance, in Poland before 1989, as well in other countries under Soviet domination, acceptance of Marxist ideology and its scientific methodology,

or at least restraining from criticizing it, was a basic condition of working at any university, including schools of sport and physical education. Marxist historiography wanted, with the help of historical facts, to build the future "better world" on the basis of denying much of the negative, especially feudal and capitalist past experience of humanity by bending and adapting it to the needs of the future system according to the ideological assumptions of dialectically understood reality instead of mere shedding light on the past in order to better understand it.

It was, among many other statements, explained by Polish Marxist scholar Julian Jonkisz, as late as in 1986, shortly before the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe: "The future of humanism of physical culture is conditioned by axiological assumptions of Marxist ethics, which clearly leads us towards proper activity in the process of upbringing and educating young generations" [8, p. 8]. No wonder then, that such tendentious assumptions were realized even at the bottom of academic works, where political servility was very frequent. One rather young scholar wrote that a teacher of sport and physical education should represent "complex personal characteristics consisting of personality of the good citizen, patriot and Communist (...) he should also possess valuable qualities such as materialistic orientation, non-religious (atheistic) outlook on life, patriotism, ideological spirit, commitment to the processes of building socialism, a sense of identification with the working class and the Party, an international viewpoint and involvement in public and political affairs" [9, p. 74]. Does this mean that all historians of sport and physical culture of those times were involved in servile academic research? I am far from such a conviction. A number of them limited their activities to "safe" periods of sports history, such as the ancient Greek games, while others limited their pro-system engagement to a necessary minimum and tried, sometimes quite successfully, to introduce at any opportunity a more objective historical analysis of any period. A substantial group of Polish historians of sport, those such as Ryszard Wroczyński or Kajetan Hądzelek, treated ideological pressure with suspicion and considered it a kind of ritual, and under it as under an umbrella, they sometimes produced extremely valuable and comparatively objective work. Unfortunately, as they were not written in any other national languages, most of such courageous works still remain totally unknown to Western historians. I presented this problem in a paper for the "International Journal of the History of Sport" some years ago, and this time I feel obliged just to signal it [10, pp. 1-41]. This situation certainly should always raise the very important question "whence cometh the light with which he [historian] illuminates the past" [4, p. 383]. Much depends on what color of light the past will be illuminated. Will it be 'The Light of the World', as reflected by the Church? Or the red light of dialectical materialism? Or merely the klieg lights of modern publicity" [4, p. 383].

We can add even more possibilities of such different historical "illuminations". It can be, for instance, historical vengeance, visible in post-communist countries after 1989. It appeared after the period of "the only right" methodology of Marxist orientation, which dominated not only sport sciences. In reaction to it, after 1989 we observe equally one sided works but turned round 180 degrees. In fact, representatives of this

tendency started to make the same mistakes as their Marxist predecessors but in the completely reverse direction. An example of such far from objective evaluation of Communist sport after World War II can be provided in 2006 by the work of Piotr Godlewski titled *Sport in Poland in the Light of Political Reality of the Years 1944-1956* [11]. This book contains unique materials showing the unprecedented evils encountered in Polish sport, and so far it seems correct. But the author should not have omitted some positive aspects of the period, such as the centralization of the means of organizing sport in a country exhausted by war destruction and the military raids of the German Wehrmacht, or the initiation of humanistic studies, also in the history of sport, despite its ideological distortions. It is a fact that regular studies in sport history were initiated not in the West but in Communist countries where the first ever academic institutes and departments ever were established. Whatever can be said about their ideological role, they initiated a strict methodology in sports history, rather unknown in the West at that time.

Nevertheless, except for some exceptions cited above, the history of sport as practiced by Marxist scholars and their "post-1989" opponents concentrated on their preferred contrary positions which can hardly be considered objective. All bourgeois directions of sports development were condemned and censored while Soviet achievements were praised and apologized for to an unbearable level. If we consider the role of the historian in Communist reality, Morison's view on objectivity could be cited, that it "is not history in the accepted, traditional sense of the word, but at best, a sort of imprecatory preaching" [4, p. 387]. But Morison's remarks can be applied not only to Communist historians. Be aware that the Marxist attitude and methodology was not the only historical methodology which wanted to bend history in order to support the building of the "better world". Our criticism should pertain also to those historians of the so-called "free world", who do not take into consideration the full spectrum of the matter. Consciously or subconsciously, they make similar mistakes, although under pressures different from the political and ideological. The results, however, are equally non objective regardless of the reasons. Thus, Western historians especially, although free from political and ideological pressures so typical for countries under totalitarian and authoritarian rule, became subject to the economic pressures and strong expectations of the market and the media. "Who pays the piper calls the tune" as one old Scottish proverb says. In a number of such publications the word "Official" means that it is backed by a certain sports organization or institution, sometimes by publishers expecting profits from selling a book or any other publication on especially popular subjects, such as football. The word "official" means, in such cases, not only an official authority of any institution, but also something "changed to meet the expectations of the sponsor or potential reader". In many cases "official" could be substituted for by the phrase "improved and falsified according to the suggestions of the sponsor, or any other institution careful to preserve its prestige or income". Academic historians in most cases successfully avoid such pressures, but the volume and scope of their writing is much smaller than the production of massive pseudo-historical publications, written mostly by sports journalists and statisticians, unfortunately produced

sometimes with the by-participation of academic scholars. Writers of such publications are usually oriented towards praising their country's sporting glory or local, sometimes international, sports organizations which are sponsored by certain institutions or sports associations usually order or indirectly "suggest" employing such an interpretation of their part in sport history. Such a "sponsoring" institution is usually interested in describing the positive elements of its development. If such a work concerns the international history of, say, football, the national institution of the country where it is written emphasizes its role at the expense of other objective historical factors. Thus, in the huge and graphically very attractive *The Sunday Times World History of Football* nearly 70 percent of the content is devoted to English football, while the role of other countries in many cases is simply diminished at the expense of obviously less important British events. This kind of history is practiced mainly by amateurs and journalists, usually having a very vague notion of writing objective history, but sometimes even professional historians undertake such tasks. Such works are saturated with non-objectively stressed achievements, omitting or diminishing failures and finally are characterized by specific apologism towards the country or sports institution which ordered the work. It is usually done via a selection of facts where positive ones prevail while negative elements are ignored or at best – diminished.

Another failure in reaching truth through the facts is what I can call "Western Bias in Sports History". So far all existing universal sports histories represent a typical bias in which sport is considered as a product of exclusively Western civilization, with an obvious negligence of other areas of the world, including Asia, Africa, South America and also Eastern Europe. It pertains not only to sport but also to general history. However, while earlier colonies of the Western powers can count on some comments and analysis in historical books, Eastern Europe cannot count on it. As British historian Norman Davies once said in an interview for the Polish weekly *Polityka*, in most Western works of history "Only the West counts (...) smaller countries, smaller states, the so-called small nations never form a description of the past. In the foreground there are the great powers; other participants are shown only when they cause trouble for the great powers" [12, my own translation from Polish – WL].

Such an attitude can be also found in cultural histories such as Peter Rietbergen's *Europe. A Cultural History* [13]. It stands out as a typical example of historical neglect of minor and suppressed nations: it focuses almost exclusively on factors, writers, artists, architects, philosophers and scientists representing mostly Western European powers plus Russia, which appear as the almost exclusive protagonists of European cultural history. Poland is represented there just by two facts; Romania, Ukraine, Estonia or Finland by none. Meanwhile Germany is represented by 86 names, England – 85, France – 81, etc. Sport historians represent a very similar attitude. Peter Mc Comb once wrote in his book *Sports in World History* that "conventions for the sports came from the West" [14, p. 3]. My personal estimation, based on such books as the *The Sage Dictionary of Sports Studies* or *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, as well as statistical research into the content of such academic

journals as "International Journal of the History of Sport" or "Sport in History" led me to an observation that the content of historical matters associated with areas other than the West represents there some 2–3 percent, and in some cases simply zero.

Meanwhile the Eastern European had their own, frequently unique, history of sport, including the origins of medieval traditional games or later the role of their sports in preserving biological and cultural identities against all historical odds and attempts by their temporal superiors to destroy their distinctive national character and uniqueness. Before William Fitzstephen described ball games of the Londoners, at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD the ruler of the First Bulgarian Empire, had sent a famous letter to the Pope Nicolas 1<sup>st</sup>, asking, among other things, whether pagan exercises and games were permitted to continue in his newly Christianised country [15, p. 39]. When the political independence and biological existence of Southern and Eastern European nations was threatened by foreign occupation and domination, they produced various means to counteract it, for instance, the Sokol Movement initiated in Bohemia and spread over all Slavic countries (except Russia where it was prohibited). There was also the so-called "dry wrestling movement" in Bulgaria directed against Turkish cultural and political domination. In Ottoman occupied Bulgaria until liberation in 1875 "traditional Bulgarian wrestling (...) came into sharp conflict with the Turkish authorities who tried to impose certain characteristics alien to local Bulgarian custom. (...) The Balkan tradition of wrestling [except the ancient Greek tradition] excluded oiling the body before a match. The Turks recognized oiling as a symbol of 'Turkisation' and even prosecuted, though usually to no effect, those wrestlers who fought 'dry'. One of the best public and popular means to demonstrate anti-Ottoman feelings in Bulgaria was 'to come out and challenge Turkish wrestlers'. The finest wrestlers in those Balkan countries under Turkish occupation were treated as national heroes" [16, p. 217]. Especially in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bulgarian 'dry' wrestlers were arrested and jailed by Turkish authorities. The national poet of Bulgaria, Christo Botev, who practiced wrestling in his youth, spent several months in a Turkish prison. This leads to a rhetorical question: Was this Bulgarian "sporting" fight for freedom less important for European sports history than, say, the early fights of James Figg in Britain? Meanwhile descriptions of the political role of "dry wrestling" in Bulgaria are nowhere to be found in any history of sport except those written and published in Bulgaria, or my own recently published *History of Sport* [17, pp. 430-432]. In Western histories of sport there are only some occasional and not very extensive information on the Sokol Movement in Bohemia and to even a lesser degree in Poland, but not in other Slavic nations [18, chapter on *Central and Eastern Europe*, pp. 391-404].

David McComb in his book *Sport in World History* (2004) once wrote that "Modern sport began in the West, especially in Great Britain and the United States" [14, p. 33]. No one wants to deny the role of these two countries in progress of modern sport. However, the fact that these two and some other Western countries dominated today's sports on international arenas does not preclude the fact that other nations

had also their own games and sporting competitions which played an equally important role to those in the West. Due to the territorial extent of Eastern Europe (it takes nearly one half of the Old Continent) as well as due to the social and political role of physical exercises there, this should not be ignored in general sports history. Traditional sports and games are for these countries as important as for any other Western nations, say Scotland, where Highland Games and Gatherings also did not achieve more extensive international recognition but due to Scotland's affiliation with Britain and thanks to her political, economic and cultural position are usually properly covered in the main stream of sports historiography. But the question is whether a simple and powerful neighbor should determine the importance of any cultural phenomena, including sports? Nobody has anything against the fascinating Scottish heritage of culture and games. But we should not ignore those nations which were not happy enough to be backed in a similar way due to their different geographical location. Ignoring them is acting against any objectivity and understanding of truth in sports history.

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