

Spartak Moscow: A History of the People's Team in the Workers' State. By Robert Edelman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. xviii, 346 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Index. Photographs. \$35.00, hard bound.

Taking his cue from Johan Huizinga, who wrote in 1938 that play, as a product of leisure, was the engine of culture, and culture was the engine of history, Robert Edelman uses this deeply thoughtful, well-researched, and entertaining history of the Moscow soccer team Spartak to explore the relationship between ordinary people and the Soviet regime. Spartak, he argues, had originated as the “people’s” team, representing common, ordinary Muscovites, a team from the mean streets of industrial Moscow. In sport, unlike other areas of Soviet life, he suggests, a person was free to choose one’s team. Unlike its great rival, the police-sponsored Dinamo, Spartak relied for its existence on the institutional support of the state retail trade organization but especially on the tickets bought by its fans. Although rivalries would change, Spartak continued to be associated with anti-authoritarianism, a rough working-class masculinity, multi-culturalism, and a certain expressiveness and liberalism on and off the field. By 1941, Edelman argues that Spartak was the “home team” of about half of Moscow’s male working class, with other teams sharing the support of the rest. After the war, Spartak also became the favorite team of the new post-Stalin intelligentsia: Edelman argues that they were attracted to this team because of its tradition and mythic spirit of independence and populism.

Edelman traces the history of Spartak from its origins in Moscow’s Presnia neighborhood in 1922, and he masterfully embeds this narrative into the larger history of

Soviet culture and society from the 1920s into the post-Soviet period. Synthetically reaffirming some interpretations, he also makes his own unique contribution to the history of Soviet entrepreneurialism through his portrait of the leading figure behind Spartak, Nikolai Starostin, who helped to create the team in 1935 and who served as its coach and later chief executive until his death in 1996 at the age of 98. Nikolai, the oldest of four Starostin brothers, stands out as the personification of the Spartak spirit. Edelman describes a man of talent and energy, who knew how to operate within the system and on its margins to provide first-class soccer to the team's burgeoning male audience. In the 1930s, he moved among Moscow's cultural elite and included his players in a cult of non-official celebrity. He took the team on numerous European tours and he barnstormed domestically, rewarding his players with the best consumer goods society could offer. His activities skirted the edge of the law, and in 1942, caused him to serve a sentence in the Gulag, but he returned to the team in 1954. When full professionalism arrived after 1991, Starostin already knew how to sign and sell contracts in the new international football labor market. Edelman acknowledges the many contradictions in Starostin's personality and operating principles, and he uses his biography as an occasion to comment on the complicated nature of the sources for understanding personal motivation as well as popular support.

Spartak Moscow is really two great books in one. Edelman takes seriously the ways in which the team's development – its strategies and techniques, training regimen, player development, scheduling, big matches, and enduring rivalries – provides the cultural matrix on which to plot the larger histories of Soviet society. He acknowledges that he was a fan of Spartak before he became its historian; the book follows the team's

ups and downs, its rising and fading stars season in and season out, but with the analytical eye of a sports historian.

Readers of Slavic Review will be especially rewarded by the way in which Edelman uses Spartak to comment on larger issues of (and historical debates about) Soviet history, such as class, uneven economic development, the peasant nature of Russian culture, the purges, the role of the intelligentsia, resistance, the meanings of the Thaw, the public-private dichotomy, the existence of a civil society, and gender and multiple masculinities. Football fandom was profoundly gendered, nearly exclusively male. On resistance, he writes, “For fans, supporting Spartak may have been a small way of saying no: but this implied a carefully modulated resistance, not outright opposition or dissidence” (156-57). He acknowledges the complexities of understanding the post-Stalin Thaw by qualifying notions of enemies or advocates of change, suggesting that “tensions existed not among various groups but rather within the minds of all citizens from the bottom to the very top of the social structure” (201). Each chapter in the history of Spartak is grounded first in the general “spirit of the age,” allowing Edelman to cement his arguments about the relationship among football, the system, and the people who lived with both.

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