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Freedom's Fury: violence, politics, and sport

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Resumo

Weeks after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the bloody water polo semi-final between the Hungarians and the Russians in Melbourne (Australia) presents a case of the physical materialization of ideological conflicts. Such Olympic events, however, were unlikely to have been the neutral field of socialization they were intended to be. This research analyzes the escalation and transposition of political events and ideological conflicts, collective memories and consciousness, and nationalism from national borders to sporting events. The narratives of the past as well as the violence and the tension between collective and individual subjectivism presented in the documentary Freedom's Fury (Gray & Aarons, 2006) are analyzed in this article from the perspective of sociology and memory studies. Considering the history of the Olympic Games during the Cold War, it is unlikely that athletes would have left their collective consciousness off the water polo court when representing the national team.

Palavras-chave: 1. memória coletiva 2. violência 3. esporte 4. nacionalismo

Keywords: 1. collective memory 2. violence 3. sport 4. nationalism

Introduction

While the 8th of May is celebrated in many places as the anniversary of the liberation of the occupied territories and the end of Nazism in 1945, the date has an ambivalent meaning for Hungarians. In addition to liberation from German occupation, the date is also the beginning of the Soviet occupation and communist regime that lasted until the transition to democracy, which started in 1989 (Eróss, 2016, pp. 238, 243; Traverso, 2017, pp. 16–17). During those years, rather than finding the longed-for freedom, the country faced oppression and violence from the Stalinist regime, the Iron Curtain, and the Cold War.

The death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953, the Soviet eviction of Austria in 1955, and the republican propaganda promoted by the West incited the Hungarian people's ambitions for freedom and culminated in the 1956 Revolution. In the same year, on October 28, the country declared itself free. A few days later, on November 4, a Soviet military counterattack, with the help of Hungarian Minister János Kádár, reinstated the occupation and removed Imre Nagy, who had been reinstated¹ to the Prime Minister's office in the early days of the revolution. Political persecution and violence escalated in the subsequent weeks, with murders, arrests, and hundreds sent to labor camps on charges of conspiring against the regime. Imre Nagy, who was later remembered as the political martyr of the revolution, and his allies, were arrested on November 22, while the Melbourne Olympics began with Hungary in attendance, but no longer as a free country.

On December 6, another violent confrontation between the Hungarians and the Soviets took place: the water polo semifinal between the two national teams. This encounter, also known as the “blood in the water” match (Knight, 2017; Olympic Channel, n.d.), should be comprehended as a case of political events transposing time and space [from national borders to the sports courts - or to a swimming pool, as took place at the Australian Summer Olympic Games in 1956] and the materialization of violence.

In this sense, this paper has chosen to investigate the version of events presented in the documentary *Freedom's Fury* (Gray & Aarons, 2006), written and directed by siblings Colin Keith Gray and Megan Raney Aarons. Not forgetting all the necessary caveats to differentiate a representation from a fact, it is possible to identify at least three factors from the movie that contributed to the violence in the pool:

- i. the intrinsic [and accepted] violence in sporting events, particularly close-contact sports where physical strength is required,
- ii. the historical conflicts within national borders, and
- iii. the ideological conflicts, collective memories, and nationalist ideals carried by the subjects.

In this sense, I intend to identify the analogies that are used by the filmmakers to create the narrative of violence and confrontation surrounding these events. I would also like to identify how the documentary presents the tension between the collective subjectivism - embedded in the status of nationality and national [sports] teams competing in the name of a whole nation - and the individual subjectivism - manifested by each athlete through the responsibilities, fears, and anxieties about their own fate. From these perspectives, I intend to problematize how an event like a sports competition and peaceful socialization among peoples, such as the Olympics, displaced and materialized confrontations of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War in time and space, as happened in the water polo semi-final in 1956.

Starting from the non-literal transcription of the documentary, the research was guided by the following steps:

- i. to search for strategies used in the film to how the historical facts, memories, and violence were represented and presented to the audience,
- ii. to analyze some of the choices made by filmmakers (beyond aesthetics) to make the film script and the subjectivism involved in the events understandable and justifiable by the twenty-first-century spectator, in Hungary and abroad, since it was an American production, and
- iii. to analyze basic data and information about the modern Olympics to demonstrate that, even on the surface, it is possible to observe how ideological conflict between nations affected the sports events during the Cold War.

Besides the theoretical framework necessary for such studies, this essay uses sources such as the documentary itself, official channels, and news agencies. This research was performed during the COVID Pandemic and online search engines and digital sources were prioritized due to sanitarian restrictions.

It is assumed that it would be very difficult for athletes to leave their collective subjectivism off the courts when representing the national team in a context such as the one presented by the documentary or the Olympics during the Cold War. The physical confrontation presented by *Freedom's Fury* is an extreme case of the physical materialization of ideological confrontations, but nonetheless showed that the Olympics was not the neutral field nor a violence-free arena that it was intended to be.

History, Memory, and Violence

Although the history of Hungarians is filled with invasions, dominations, heroes, and martyrs since their ancestors settled on the Carpathian plain, the violent and traumatic memories of the 20th century are those that continue to haunt the people (Kovács, 2016, p. 523).

Memory is socially constructed and transmitted as a representation rather than a faithful reconstitution of reality (Pollak, 1992, p. 08). According to Pollak (1992, pp. 2–3), memory is constituted by personal (or collective) experiences and "lived by proxy" and these memories can be so vivid that the subject does not distinguish between whether or not they took part in the event. Historical and political socialization contribute to the projection or identification with a past that transcends the time and space of the events. Finally, there is the underground memory, which is transmitted in privacy, and can be subversive and conflicting with the official memory (Pollak, 1989, p. 04).

Many elements of oral history cannot be confirmed in documents, but can provide us with clues as to how political regimes and their efforts to frame collective memory impacted the subjectivism (Pollak, 1992, p. 09). Myths may be incorporated into these histories to highlight certain memories or to contribute to the neoliberal narrative that the 20th century was marked by authoritarian regimes, a phenomenon that Traverso calls the *eclipse of utopias* (2017, p. 05, 2020, pp. 141–142).

Another aspect is that every individual interprets or reconstructs the past with individual and collective lenses that are closely related to the social milieu of the present (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 49; Santos, 2000; Traverso, 2020, p. 183). However, memory and history are neither lasting, continuous, nor stable (Pollak, 1989, pp. 03, 09). New facts, evidence, theories, technologies, and disturbances from the political and social dimensions of memory may affect interpretations and how history is written (Traverso,

2020, p. 29; Tucker, 2008, pp. 1–2). In this sense, Traverso (2020, p. 185) advocates for the normative debate of history to resolve disputes about the past.

This overview of memory studies is not intended to disqualify oral history or to say that it does not serve positivism but merely to confirm that narratives based on experiences could be useful to build representations of the past. Nevertheless, since they are not fact, it is important not to lose sight of the complexities, traps, and subjectivism of memory. Such reservation is necessary since *Freedom's Fury* is massively based on oral history. Despite the vast number of books, documentations, collections, and museums with specific curations on the subject, such as the House of Terror Museum in Budapest (Apor, 2014; Horváth, 2008, pp. 265–266; Pedro, 2019; Zombory, 2017), it is statements from survivors that educate the audience about the insurgency against the Soviet-Stalinist regime that took place in 1956. Statements from Hungarian and Russian athletes from the Olympic water polo team as well as many other testimonies are compiled in the film, the representation of the violence of the 1956 Revolution transposed to sports being the common thread for the individual and collective experiences of these people.

The documentary was launched in 2006, which marked the 50th anniversary of the Revolution. The people who are interviewed in the documentary lived through these events in different ways, such as:

- i. victims of the revolution: including writers (Sándor Csoóri), university students (László Papp, Béla Pomogats, Imre Mécs), a teenage rebel (János Kapcsos), an army general (Béla Király), and political prisoners (Sándor Rácz and Mária Wittner) who re-counted their own memories,
- ii. people who did not participate directly in the conflict but were eyewitnesses to or affected by its violence: such as the official government cameraman (József Mikó), the widow of defense minister Pál Maleter executed by the Soviets (Judith Gyenes), the daughter of a journalist taken into asylum by the U.S. Embassy (Kati Marton), and the son of the Soviet leader at the time Nikita Khrushchev (Sergey Khrushchev).
- iii. the players in the 1956 Olympic water polo teams: the Hungarian (8 players), Soviet (4), and U.S. (1) teams.

Although each one tells their own version of the same events with some incongruities - as happens when different people describe the origin of the flag of the revolution - the use of black and white images illustrates what is said and so the spectator can formulate his own projection of the past, even having never been there. These points of contact between memories of different sources, the repetitions, emotions, and level of detail contribute to building a bold narrative of what happened during that time. This format increases confidence among spectators but does not in fact make the representation any truer.

Doubting the impartiality of the memories and the representations created is a legitimate concern when considering events in the past. A documentary is also the result of choices (and non-choices) of the directors. To distance themselves from criticisms of bias, the filmmakers, in this case, did not only interview Hungarians, but also people of other nationalities such as Americans (athlete Bob Horn), Britons (activist Mickey Watkins), and Russians (Olympic athletes and Sergey Khrushchev).

The lives of each of these people were affected by the events of 1956 at that moment and over time. As an example, some were imprisoned, exiled, or even continued their lives and careers under the political oppression of the communist party under the leadership of János Kádár (1956-1988). Many of these experiences, memories, and wounds were kept for generations in the privacy of the home, or in confidence, but never shared in the public or collective sphere of the nation (Eröss, 2017, pp. 22, 28; Kovács, 2016; Pollak, 1989, pp. 08–09; Rinehart, 1996, p. 134; Zombory, 2020, p. 33). Watching the film, the viewer has the impression that "Pandora's box" was opened and the underground memories, feelings, and traumas of these victims and witnesses were allowed to publicly surface and materialize in those movie images.

For Bhabha (2004, p. 64), collective identity is built over time and sustained by a sense of unity, continuity, coherence, and belonging within group(s) and the construction of their (or the other's) identity. Can memory contribute to the construction of this collective identity and create social boundaries between the self and the other (Pollak, 1989, p. 09)? Potentially yes, legitimized, materially speaking, by territories and borders and, subjectively, by the idea of nation, tradition or nationalism (Anderson, 2016, pp. 03, 06–07), to name just a few examples.

"When memory and identity are sufficiently constituted, sufficiently instituted, sufficiently tied, the questions coming from groups external to the organization, the problems posed by others, are not intended to provoke the need for

rearrangements, neither at the level of collective identity nor at the level of individual identity." (free translation by the author from Pollak, 1992, p. 07)²

The construction of social or collective memory is not eventual, spontaneous, or naive. Throughout his life, the individual is actively or passively absorbing and legitimizing such identities and collective memories (Pollak, 1989, p. 10) with the help of an institutional apparatus³. Politics plays a major role in this process since it involuntarily ensures the collective "framing of memory"⁴ (Bourdier, 1981, p. 03 *apud* Pollak, 1989, p. 09). However, an artifact is incorporated into the collective memory only after completing a long process of maturation, filter, reinterpretation or transformation from the "cultural sensibilities, ethical questionings and the political conveniences of the present" (free translation by the author from Traverso, 2020, p. 20)⁵.

Symbolically, the emotional reunion between the players in the documentary shows that athletes in the Olympics were performing a task and serving ideologies, memories, and obligations assigned to them collectively by the group (nation) they represented and identified with. Such a role may be compared to those performed by soldiers during war. The festive atmosphere at the reunion of fellow athletes and the complicity bounded by their past experiences proved that individually and genuinely they were never enemies, and had it not been for the political disagreement between their countries, they may never have hurt each other on the sports court.

The following section analyzes the choices made by the filmmakers to achieve their aesthetic goals and portray the social representation and violence in another social milieu.

Aesthetics, social representation, and truth

In the 16th century, scientific rationality separated science from art (Santos, 2018, pp. 34–35), restricting the former to explaining the world and the latter to imagining it with its subjectivities (Gergen & Gergen, 2018, p. 56). Beyond its aesthetic goals, art has never ceased to be a social representation (Becker, 2007, pp. 116–117). At the same time, cinema is one of the artistic mediums that meets modern man's desire to know, beyond his personal experiences, what happened in other times and places (Becker, 2007, p. 05).

“We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. If he only shows in his work that he has searched, and re-searched, for the way to put over lies, he would never accomplish anything.” - Pablo Picasso to Marius de Zayas in 1923 (Chipp, 1982, p. 264)

In these words, Picasso explains how art convinces people of the truthfulness of its creator's lies. In doing so, filmmakers face decisions in a complex, collaborative, and specific process of creativity and legitimation with the aim of enabling the audiences to understand and comprehend their work as true (Becker, 2007, p. 116). As a result, the means, methods, and languages are strategically chosen (or excluded) by art producers. The decisions should take into consideration endogenous and exogenous factors, which influence the organizational context of creation, selections, interests, goals, intentions, interpretations, translations, execution (Becker, 2007, p. 16), and the final art product itself.

Try as he might, the artist does not control how his art will be interpreted or used by the audience (Becker, 2007, p. 18) and there is always the risk that the work will not be accepted, valued, or widely appreciated, as different publics may react in different ways (Crane, 1992, p. 07). Interpretations are influenced by the ability of producers and consumers to establish a common understanding of representations, particularly by following *conventions*.

For Becker (2010, p. 50) conventions are like "norms, rules, collective representation, custom and habit" in all areas of artistic organization and they end up leading the public to believe that some media are truer than others (Becker, 2007, pp. 116–117).

In 2006, the year *Freedom's Fury* was released, another movie called "*Szabadság, szerelem*"⁶ (Goda, 2006) premiered. The Hungarian drama, directed by Krisztina Goda, featured a cast of national stars such as Kata Dobó, Sándor Csányi, and Iván Fenyő, and is also about the bloody match and the revolution of 1956. Because this is not a comparative study, I will not be analyzing this second film, but it is important to keep in mind that any perception that a documentary is truer than a drama may be a trap: they are both representations of reality. This is confirmed by observing the disclaimer shown at the opening of the documentary saying that “the following feature documentary

contains scenes with recreated or stylized footage” which means that part of the images presented were staged, just as happens in dramas.

To reach a wider audience, however, even as a documentary, the makers of Freedom's Fury had to deal with additional challenges. New digital technologies made global film distribution possible, and anyone was a potential audience, including those who were born after the end of Cold War. But would an American production about events that affected a small country of 10 million inhabitants 50 years ago, manage to arouse public interest?

The film had to communicate with different generations globally, be considered truthful, and capture the empathy of the audience to achieve its goal of representing the violence of the events and materializing underground memories, as mentioned in the previous section. Thus, it is important to investigate the other strategies apparently used to make the film attractive to this diverse audience of non-necessarily connoisseurs of the Hungarian past.

The use of oral history as a strategy to give more credibility to what was being narrated has been explained. However, as well as the sportsmen and politicians presented in the movie, some of those voiced witnesses became professionals of great reputation in Hungary, such as the architect László Papp and the poet Sándor Csoóri, and abroad, such as filmmaker Ferenc Kosa, the Columbia University professor in the United States Béla Kiralyi and the author and journalist Kati Marton. The directors also cherry-picked the narrator: Mark Spitz, the American swimmer and record holder of Olympic medals at the time of the premiere. In the movie, it is said that his coach as a teenager was the Hungarian athlete Ervin Zádor, who was one of the protagonists of the violent scenes that made the news during the 1956 Summer Olympics. The casting is far from by chance, but rather an endorsement of the film's merit whenever any of these high-profile people are recognized in the scene.

Apparently, the filmmakers assumed that viewers might not be aware of Hungary's history or of the 1956 Revolution, the rules of water polo, or even the Olympic events. Thus, two chronological and synchronized narratives presented the political fate of the country from 1945 and the close relationship between Hungarians and water, especially water polo, to the audience. The images of the past are always shown in black and white while the present is in color.

Regarding the common thread of the country's political history, the film uses archival images and photos. A few scenes generate "recognition" for those who know (almost)

nothing about Hungary but are familiar with images of the Holocaust and of World War II. Images of the dead, skeletal bodies, war tanks, children carrying weapons, and ruins contribute to the audience's perception that they are watching a "factual", antique, and historical narrative. Many of these representations of violence already appear in the first scenes.

The main thread is sports related since ultimately the documentary is about the water polo match. During the movie, a basic introduction to the game is sufficiently explained to enable the audience to understand at least three aspects that contribute to the construction of the narrative:

- i. water polo is by default a violent modality of sport,
- ii. water polo was (and still is) among the favorites and most popular sports in Hungary⁷, and
- iii. each of those athletes, for different reasons, had chosen to be an athlete and, besides privileges such as the possibility to travel abroad, these high-performance athletes were also used for publicity during the Soviet regime.

The messages that violence and strength were common in this sport are reinforced by underwater shoots where athletes are kicking, pulling, and using force. Like the underground memories, this underground violence was out of the referee's sight and so out of their control. Robust physical training and techniques made Hungarians world-renowned athletes in water polo⁸ (Rinehart, 1996, p. 126); they also had to train their own competitors, the Soviet team, as shown in the documentary.

Black and white scenes of the sport are mixed with those in color, some recent, others old, some real, others staged. Despite the disclaimer about the use of reenactments at the beginning, it is hard to distinguish between the images and the viewer may infer that all of them are old and authentic.

Throughout the film, transition markers served as metaphors but also guided the evolution of political and sports events separately, synchronously, and interrelated without confusing the viewers.

One of these markers was the air bubbles in the water that appear in the opening scene of the documentary and used as a transitional image between political themes and sports themes during the movie. These bubbles form underwater and appear to burst whenever they reach the water's edge (surface). The bubbles represent the rising rage

and violence in politics and sports. The water is also present in the narrator's language, in expressions such as "were dead in the water", when he says that Hungary's ambitions for freedom collapsed, or that it was not only Ervin Zádor who was "creating waves in the pool", in a potential analogy for the growing political turmoil in the country.

Another marker is the traditional Hungarian poppy fields used to mark the chronological evolution of the facts. The same image appears several times, gradually evolving from black and white, in reference to the World War II period, to the full-color version when the athletes are reunited in the present day.

Another aspect that should be highlighted refers to the symmetries presented throughout the film to create the relationship between political events and their outcome in sports. The documentary shows several scenes of collective political demonstrations among civilians, such as the wrecking of the Stalin statue located in the City Park in Budapest. The monument was destroyed by anti-Soviet rebels during the 1956 revolution, and the only part of the statue to remain was his boots. Here, vandalism is portrayed as violence justified as an act of resistance and struggle for freedom and a right of the masses. Sándor Rácz, in his testimonial in the film, recalls that "400,000 people" joined together to bring the monument down in just a few hours. The number of people is exaggerated considering the size of the city, but the trade unionist used symbolic and figurative grandeur in his speech merely to express his memories which were reformulated from his collective universe and to represent the liberation of Hungarian workers.

Regarding the role of sports in that particular society, in his statement, the athlete László Jenei says that the athletes serve the colors and the flag of the country and not the government, in a reference to the use of athletes and sports achievements for propaganda during Matyas Rákosi's Stalinist oppressive regime (1947-1956) Player Nick Martin said that the team arrived at the lodge in Melbourne and changed the flag from occupied Hungary to free Hungary (without the communist symbol), even though the country was at the time once again under the Soviet intervention.

Sport was the profession of these athletes. The discourses of players referred to national symbols that can be compared to the speeches of the ordinary workers that tore down Stalin's monument a few days before the Olympics. For both groups, athletes and other workers, violence was not an end, but a means to express something noble (nationalism) and collective (group identity). Individual memories, complicity, cohesion, and even a sense of belonging (Pollak, 1989, p. 09) define the points of

contact and unite the members of the group in this image mentioned by Bhabha (2004, p. 64):

“The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image”.

In the case of athletes, however, there is a certain ambivalence: besides being subject to collective subjectivities, as a national team, the athletes encompass the symbolic representation of the nation in their role. For Matthews & Channon (2016, pp. 03–04), “when the fleshy realities of pain, injury, disability and potential death are considered alongside the increasingly spectacular nature of professional sport [or nationalism in the case of national teams], a disconnect between representation and materiality can be predicted”. However, as observed in the documentary, it seems more accurate to speak of the appropriation of the material [the bodies of the athletes] by the symbolism than talking about a disconnection.

The documentary does not escape clichés, such as the visit of the widow to the grave of her husband murdered by the Soviets, the return of the rebel to the prison where she spent 13 years incarcerated and saw her comrades murdered by the State, or even the reconciliation between the athletes, in a “happy ending” style. But one of these clichéd moments at the beginning of the film stands out: the letter "O" in the title of the film is stylized with the star of communism and slowly the letters are covered with pouring blood, alluding to the blood of Ervin Zádor and the others killed by the Soviet regime.

Despite its best efforts, the film was particularly popular among sports and history fans. The movie was streamed on TV sports channels and a non-authorized copy was available on YouTube for some time. However, at the time this essay was written, it was quite difficult to find the movie on streaming platforms, online sales or even on piracy websites in online searches performed from Europe. Coincidence or not, it is curious that this was at a time when the current government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has been accused of urging forgetting or silencing strategies that affect the Revolution and its martyrs, especially Imre Nagy. At least the three following commemorative monuments related to the 1956 revolution were removed from Kossuth Square in Budapest, the site of the massacre on October 25 1956, and installed elsewhere, out of sight of passersby (Ares, 2022, p. 21):

- i. the flame of the 1956 revolution, erected in 1996, was moved from Kossuth Square to the other side of the Danube River (Imre Nagy Square in Buda) in 2016.
- ii. the symbolic tomb of the 1956 victims, erected in 1991, was moved in 2013 from a public space on the surface of the square to an underground museum with restricted access.
- iii. the monument of Imre Nagy, erected in 1996, was moved to another location (Mari Jászai Square) to make space for the monument dedicated to the National Martyrs of 1918 and 1919.

This paper does not intend to establish a causal relationship between the current low popularity of the documentary and the current illiberal democratic politics in Hungary. However, the relation between the low accessibility to the documentary and the efforts to eclipse memories of the Revolution or the Cold War period (Traverso, 2017, p. 05, 2020, pp. 141–142) could be subject to subsequent investigations.

Collective subjectivism, violence, and sportsmanship

"Every civilized person recoils in horror at the savage slaughter in Hungary, but that is no reason for destroying the nucleus of international cooperation and goodwill we have in the Olympic Movement. The Olympic Games are contests between individuals and not between nations. We hope that those who have withdrawn from Melbourne Games will reconsider. In a perfect world, if participation in sports is to be stopped every time politicians violate the laws of humanity, there will be few international contests. It is not better to try to expand the sportsmanship of the athletic field into other areas?" – Avery Brundage (Redihan, 2017, p. 133)

In the above appeal, the President of the International Olympic Committee in 1956 tried to reverse the political use of the Olympics to protest against the occupation of Hungary. However, the content opens space to three questions:

- i. do the Olympics represent confrontations between individuals or between nations?

- ii. does the mentioned atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration really exist in the Olympic environment?
- iii. what is the sporting spirit?

Violence in sports competitions, especially in modalities that require confrontation and brutal physical contact, is relatively accepted, even as intrinsic and expected, at the same time that it is distinguished from the “real” violence that happens on the streets (Matthews & Channon, 2016, pp. 02–03). From the testimonies and in the underwater scenes in the movie it is possible to see that high-performance bodies are as important as strategy and intelligence in water polo. To make an analogy, athletes are prepared to become “heroes”, or soldiers, whose goal is to win the battle. In this context, how could it be unacceptable for someone to get hurt? Violence seems to be part of the spectacle and the price of the expected victory legitimized by the fans.

The *sportsmanship*, mentioned in Brundage's quote above seems to be an aura of values and virtues surrounding sports and athletes. Just like the demi-gods of Greek mythology, these extraordinary beings and their gifted bodies become examples of physical strength, intelligence, and even morality to society because of their ability to conquer and be resilient⁹. However, high-performance athletes are humans and, like anyone else, are not exempt from making mistakes or committing criminalized violence¹⁰ (Abrams et al., 2015), such as murder, rape, harassment, or even domestic violence. My intention is certainly not to imply that an athlete can be a potential criminal. On the contrary, according to Freud, any person, athlete or not, is not immune to the instincts of violence (*apud* Ribeiro, 2012, p. 11) and anyone may eventually face the challenge of distinguishing between the boundaries of acceptable violence in their professional from their private life.

In this scenario, there are a few rhetorical questions that contribute to the analysis of violence in sports within the scope of my research: i. what makes violence in sports tolerable in relation to other manifestations off the courts? ii. is it possible for an individual who is violent in sports competitions to be an immaculate citizen in his/her free time? iii. if injury is part of the sporting scene [and water polo in particular], why was there such euphoria about Ervin Zádor's blood?

Again, the athlete is an ordinary person trained for a professional activity that may require physical strength (even brute), but I have neither the data nor the knowledge to

answer the second question posed above. Thus, I will leave it on record for the experts to do so at another opportunity.

However, the answer to the first and third questions may be indicated in Matthews & Channon's (2016, p. 05) who see a playful and opaque veneer over violence on the courts created by the symbolisms that surround the sports. Olympic teams are themselves national symbols and it is possible to infer from the documentary that the violence that took place at the Olympic semifinal was disguised by arguments as such:

- i. water polo is a sport that requires strength, a high degree of physical contact, and even brutality,
- ii. athletes are workers who follow orders and produce results (or, in their cases, victories)¹¹,
- iii. they are human bodies that symbolize and represent their group (nations) in Olympic competitions,
- iv. the aggression that permeates the match encourages and is encouraged by the fans¹², and
- v. the blood signaled that the acceptable limit (boundary) of violence in sports was crossed in that particular match.

The match was not a metaphor, but an analogy to what was happening at home. Just as in the disputes within the national territories, once again the Soviets exceeded acceptable limits and had Hungarian blood on their hands (Rinehart, 1996, p. 127). While the Soviets guaranteed occupation in Hungary with warlike superiority (including authority and military power)¹³, the Hungarian team and its technical superiority (boosted by nationalism and a thirst for political revenge) guaranteed them at least one victory against the oppressor in the pool, as ephemeral and symbolic as the days during the Revolution when the country remained free from occupation. From the film, it is possible to say that what took place was not an ordinary sporting event, but a displacement (or an extension) of the conflict (or battle) in time and space: from the streets of the Hungarian cities in October and November to the swimming pools of Melbourne in December 1956.

The Olympics during the Cold War

The aggregate data since 1896 show us that the match may have been the most violent in its history, but the Olympics were far from being the neutral and harmonious field

intended by Brundage. Particularly during the Iron Curtain and Cold War periods, the games were a contest between nations materialized in the bodies of their individuals on a displaced battlefield, according to some evidence that I describe below.

The Olympics were interrupted during the World Wars, but from 1945 until 1989, while the ideological war without the trenches persisted, the competitions took place and became a space of disputes almost exclusively¹⁴ dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. They alternated victories, but the Soviet Union accumulated more medals (993 of which 395 were gold) than the United States (411, of which 242 were gold) during those years. As was mentioned more than once by athletes in the documentary and in this research, the superiority in sports was part of Soviet political propaganda and represented important milestones for the regime.

Stories about CIA and KGB spies and secret agents infiltrated to watch athletes or to negotiate the defection of those who were dissatisfied permeated the Olympic games during the Cold War. The International Olympic Committee has not published any numbers, but the Olympics were one of the few opportunities for athletes to defect. Many athletes from countries aligned with the Soviet regime applied for asylum during the Cold War (Mack, 2012; *Missing Athletes Join Long List Of Olympic Defectors*, 2012).

The film mentions the high surveillance during the tournaments, the secret negotiations, and the defections in 1956. Among the 175 members of the Hungarian Olympic entourage, 45 defected (Rinehart, 1996, p. 134) and mostly emigrated to the United States. Every defector, in the Olympics or otherwise, was always celebrated as a triumph in the West and fueled the American counterpropaganda with republican and freedom ideals. For example, the April 1957 *Sports Illustrated* magazine published a story with images of the tour that took the defector athletes through 59 cities and 95 performances across the United States (Neale, 1957, p. 37) allowing them to experience the American way of life.

Resistance and confrontation in the history of the Olympic games were also expressed with absences. Boycotts such as the United States in the 1980 Moscow Olympics or the Soviet Union's retaliation in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics (International Olympic Committee, 2021) worsened the already hostile Cold War environment. In 1956, Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands also boycotted the Olympics, in protest of the occupation situation in Hungary (Rinehart, 1996, p. 127). These boycotts prompted Brundage's response shown at the beginning of this section.

One can never have the same perspective as the President of the Olympic Committee in 1956 when looking from the present day to the past. It does however allow us to carry out new interpretations. As with athletes, soldiers, and heads of state, Brundage was fulfilling his professional role and making decisions in accordance with the interests of his office and the institution represented by him. It is however somewhat naïve to believe that the Olympics would not reflect the political conflicts and collective subjectivities of the groups that those athletes represented (the nations), nor to think that the spirit of sports was to pacify or to call a truce since its goal, like war, is the victory of the best (or the strongest) “players”, despite the violence.

Conclusion

The use of the documentary *Freedom's Fury* as the object of my research enabled a critical look at this artistic representation of reality focusing on the construction and content from different perspectives. The result includes considerations of the possible analogies and strategies to create a parallel between politics and sports.

Among these analogies, the most obvious was the synchronized trajectory between the water polo team and the escalation of political events in the country. These two threads intersect in the final confrontation between Russians and Hungarians in the streets of Hungarian cities and in the pools of the 1956 Melbourne Summer Olympics.

The comparison between the national territory and the pool as battlefields, the Olympic team and the flag serving as national symbols for representing the nation, and the violence as a strategy used to win a battle or a game are other possible analogies problematized here.

Other strategies used by filmmakers to gain the trust and the interest of the audience were also observed, such as the metaphor of air bubbles about to burst when reaching their limit (the surface) or the other allusions to water. The use of colors reserving black and white for the conflictive, authoritarian, violent past, and the colorful images of a present-day of freedom, memories, and reconciliation are other examples.

Such resources are associated with a chronological, well-timed, synchronized, and supposedly exempt narrative with the participation of victims and witnesses of these historical and political events narrating their versions. These versions are not precise nor linear, but consistent with what they experienced, and make the documentary a material record of those memories and a social representation of events from a past that,

although not so distant, is already being overshadowed by other collective memories in the 21st century.

Violence is represented in the film from the beginning (blood dripping in the title) end (with Kádár's death and the public commemoration of the martyrs of the 1956 Revolution). The brutality and horror shown in the film was part of its purpose since it correlated a massacre of an authoritarian regime with a bloody water polo match. However, besides the images and records from the past, the representation of violence was reinforced by staging, emotional testimonies, visits to the graves and prisons, a dramatic soundtrack, images of the bursting bubbles, color transitions, and references to the horror of the Holocaust and World War II. All these elements enabled the audience to reconstruct their individual projection of what terror was like during those years. Hence, it is important to highlight once again that the audience is continually exposed to memories and representations and not necessarily historical facts.

Another act of violence justified or at least glossed over was the collective vandalism of public monuments. These demonstrations were, for instance, justified by the spirit of liberation of the workers from an authoritarian regime and terror. The narrative turns collective violence into an act of resistance.

Another example was violence in sports, when confrontation, conflict, and even physical violence are justified by the end goal (victory), overcoming something (winner versus loser), moral values, and a sporting spirit, as if this differentiated them from other forms of violence. Sporting events and the preparation of the athletes also have things in common with the preparation of soldiers who go to war to defend their collective ideals. This tension between collective and individual subjectivisms in the athletes appears several times in the documentary, but, besides being individuals and part of a national collective, these athletes as an Olympic team became as important a national symbol as the flag.

The dispute between nations and political ideologies does not remain off the courts. On the contrary, small sporting victories are often the only ones possible for the oppressed groups (or the weaker side of the trenches), even when displaced in time and space. The Olympics in the Cold War period proved to be more than an event of international fraternization: a stage for the duel between the United States and the Soviet Union and an ammunition (propaganda) factory for their ideological war. In this context, it is unlikely that athletes would leave their collective subjectivisms (including

nationalism) off the court when given the opportunity to represent their Hungarian compatriots and seek the revenge against Soviets.

The water polo semifinal in Melbourne might be considered one of the most violent in the history of the Olympics because there was blood in the water. The red fluid seemed to prove that the "air bubble" had burst once again. Perhaps if the water had not turned red, Hungary's victory, already assured at that point of the game, would not have obtained the status of symbolic collective revenge and resistance against the Soviet power. In any case, the Olympics have never been the neutral field of socialization between individuals they were intended to be, nor is sport free from violence as it is believed to be.

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¹ Nagy was the chairman of the Hungarian Council of Ministers from 1953 until 1955.

² Free translation by the author from the Portuguese excerpt: "quando a memória e a identidade estão suficientemente constituídas, suficientemente instituídas, suficientemente amarradas, os questionamentos vindos de grupos externos à organização, os problemas colocados pelos outros, não chegam a provocar a necessidade de se proceder a rearrumações, nem no nível da identidade coletiva, nem no nível da identidade individual" (Pollak, 1992, p. 07).

³ Apparatus is:

"a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic, under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements. (...) The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation. (...) As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge" (Agamben, 2009, p. 03)

⁴ According to Pollak (1989, p. 09), the terminology is firstly used by Rousso, H. in "Vichy, le grand fosse", *Vincentième Seècle*, 5, 1985, p. 73.

⁵ Free translation by the author from the Portuguese excerpt: "sensibilidades culturais, interrogações éticas e as conveniências políticas do presente" (Traverso, 2020, p. 20)

⁶ "Freedom, love" [free translation to English by the author]. The international English version was called *Children of Glory*.

⁷ Rinehart (1996, p. 125) challenges the status of national sport since there was a great popular preference for soccer until then, although the team did not participate in the games in Melbourne. For the author, a "wrinkle in time" allowed water polo to represent the nationalistic and patriotic fervor that gripped the country in 1956.

⁸ Hungary's prominence in water polo can perhaps be considered an invented tradition (Hobsbawm, 2012), which reinforces group belonging and a sense of national sport, although the sport was actually invented by the British.

⁹ Particularly at the Melbourne Olympics, Hungarian athletes felt they should "contribute to an articulation of cultural, physical, monetary, and popular inspiration" (Rinehart, 1996, p. 127).

¹⁰ Author's note: this differentiation is necessary since crime is a social construction and there are forms of violence that are still socially accepted and not necessarily criminalized.

¹¹ Author's note: I think it is important to reinforce that there is a labor relationship, a professional obligation, and power hierarchies to be considered in this relationship as well.

¹² Rinehart (1996, pp. 130–131) mentions the role of fans and other examples of aggression before the bloodshed, corroborating with the testimonies registered in the documentary. One of the Russian players says that they had to be taken out of the stadium under police protection due to the violence with which the fans threw things at them and verbally attacked them.

¹³ In his participation in the movie, the Hungarian player Miklos Martin mentions that the Soviets "play their sports exactly as they conduct their lives - with brutality and disregarding fair-play" (Rinehart, 1996, p. 131).

¹⁴ There were a few occasions where Norway and East Germany excelled in the Winter Olympics.

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