



REVIEW ARTICLE

# Playing Across the ‘Halfway Line’ on the Fields of International Relations: The Journey from *Globalising Sport* to Sport Diplomacy

Philippe Vonnard\*  and Kevin Talleg Marston 

University of Lausanne, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Institute of Sport Sciences, Bâtiment Synathlon, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

\*[philippe.vonnard@unil.ch](mailto:philippe.vonnard@unil.ch)

Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns, eds., *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014). 496 pp. (hb), £36.95, ISBN: 978-0813145648.

Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006). 288 pp. (hb), £60.95, ISBN: 9780674023260.

Jenifer Parks, *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War: Red Sport, Red Tape* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017). 205 pp. (hb), \$95, ISBN: 978-1498541183.

Toby C. Rider, *Cold War Games: Propaganda, The Olympics and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016). 256 pp. (hb), \$95, ISBN: 978-0-252-04023-8.

J. Simon Rofe, ed., *Sport and Diplomacy: Games Within Games* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). 288 pp. (hb), £80, ISBN: 978-1-5261-3105-8.

Damion L. Thomas, *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012). 232 pp. (hb), \$60, ISBN: 978-0-252-03717-7.

## Introduction

On the still divided Joseon peninsula, a united Korean women’s ice hockey team competed at the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics. Only a few months later, the French, Croatian and Russian heads of state quite literally invited themselves on to the winners’ podium at the 2018 FIFA men’s World Cup in Moscow. Such conspicuous examples are emblematic of the role of modern sport in the realm of international relations.

The last three decades have seen an increasing interest from scholars in the place of sport in international relations. Andrew Johns – co-editor of *Diplomatic Games* – describes how sport is ‘at once parochial and universal, unifying and dividing, and has the potential to fundamentally affect relations between individuals and nations’.<sup>1</sup> French historian of international relations, Robert Frank, has explained: ‘as soon as sport arrived as an activity, and above all as spectacle, in the new culture of the masses, as soon as it internationalised, [sport] took on a political dimension, either as a weapon

<sup>1</sup> Andrew L. Johns, ‘Introduction: Competing in the Global Arena: Sport and Foreign Relations since 1945’, in Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns, eds., *Diplomatic Games. Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 3.

of *soft power* for States or as a tool for the rapprochement between peoples'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the internationalisation of sport – an on-going process throughout the twentieth century – allowed for the creation of new exchanges and bestowed more and more importance on international sporting events such as the Olympics and the men's football World Cup which sociologist Maurice Roche has termed 'mega-events'.<sup>3</sup> According to historian Gabriel Bernasconi, this has opened the possibility for international sports organisations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to assume a role as a real actor in international relations and even have an impact on global politics.<sup>4</sup> Yet sport is not alone in assuming a diplomatic role. The increasing scholarly interest in the intersection of sport and international relations is connected to the extension of diplomatic means to include what Antoine Fleury and George-Henri Soutou have called the 'new tools of diplomacy' (e.g. art, science or technology).<sup>5</sup> Over the last twenty years, research has demonstrated that during the twentieth century states wielded science, technology and culture as objects of diplomacy on the global stage. To wit, recent studies have notably recounted how the two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) invested in cultural pursuits such as theatre, dance and music during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> These are the 'fertile verges' of history, to borrow a phrase from historian Daniel Boorstin, that we aim to explore here: where sport and politics have met, when states collided in athletic competition and, perhaps, when even sport itself went beyond its boundaries and exercised a diplomacy of its own.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this context that we wish to discuss several recently published works on the place of sport in international relations. The purpose here is not to offer an exhaustive literature review – available elsewhere – but rather to reflect on several chosen works, highlighting their contribution, and identify future research questions.<sup>8</sup> This article is divided in three parts and organised thematically. We begin with Barbara Keys's book on the international sport community and consider how this publication contributed to the field and the subsequent shift towards the study of sport as an element of international relations and diplomacy. Then, we discuss books by Jenifer Parks, Toby Rider and Damion Thomas, and we advance that, collectively, they explore some of the convergences and divergences in US and Soviet superpower approaches to sport as a facet of diplomacy during the ongoing Cold War. Finally, we review two edited collections, *Diplomatic Games* and *Sport Diplomacy*, which, as we will argue, have moved research beyond the traditional US–Soviet focal point. In effect, the study of sport and diplomacy is undergoing its own globalisation.

### Between the Politicisation of Sport and the Establishment of an International Sport Community

In 2006 Barbara Keys published *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* with Harvard University Press. When it was released the book arrived at a crossroads and

<sup>2</sup> Robert Frank, 'Internationalisation du sport et diplomatie sportive', in Robert Frank, ed., *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 388.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Bernasconi, *Le Comité international Olympique, un acteur atypique des relations internationales: de l'universalisme à l'ordre transnational*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Paris I, 2009. For a more conceptual analysis of the role of the IOC in the sphere of international relations see, Aaron Beacom, *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement: the New Mediators* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). On other international organisations, see the special issue 'International Sport Organizations', *Sport in History*, 37, 3 (2017) and also Philippe Vonnard, *L'Europe dans le monde du football. Genèse et formation de l'UEFA (1930–1960)* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> 'Les nouveaux outils de la diplomatie au XXe siècle', *Relations internationales*, 121, 1 (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For instance: Simo Mikkonen and Peka Suutari, eds., *Music, Art and Diplomacy: East–West Cultural Interactions and the Cold War* (London: Ashgate, 2016); Christopher C. Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll, eds., *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Stéphanie Goncalves, *Danser pendant la guerre froide. 1945–1968* (Rennes: PUR, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *Hidden History*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xv–xxvii.

<sup>8</sup> For a review of the literature, see Barbara Keys, 'International Relations', in Steven Pope and John Nauright, eds., *Routledge Companion to Sports History* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 248–67; Heather L. Dichter, 'Sport History and Diplomatic History', *H-Diplo*, 122, 2014; Nicola Sbetti and Umberto Tulli, 'La fine di una reciproca negazione: riflessioni sullo sport nella storia delle relazioni internazionali', *Ricerche di storia politica*, 193, 2 (2016), 193–202.

was undoubtedly responsible for stimulating the debate on the role of sport in international relations. Some scholars who specialised in the field of international relations history had begun to legitimise a focus on sport. This is, for instance, the case for Peter Beck's *Scoring for Britain*, published in 1999, which remains one of the finest studies to date of a government's often complex relationship with the people's game (football) and the state's growing consciousness of sport's political relevance.<sup>9</sup>

If *Globalizing Sport* continued along prior lines of enquiry, it represented a step forward by offering a synthesis of the development of the internationalisation of sport from the late nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth century. In addition, publishing a book on sport history with the prestigious Harvard University Press not only indicated the quality of Keys's work but also the on-going process of the recognition of sport as a legitimate area of study in history and international relations. In her study Keys highlights two main points. On the one hand, she affirms that states – and not only authoritarian regimes – progressively committed more and more to sport as a vector of national prestige. On the other hand, she argues that several actors other than states played a role in this internationalisation of sport, particularly the main international sport bodies such as the IOC and the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA).

At the beginning of the book Keys crafts an account of how sport grew in importance within foreign policy and was part of the process of nation building from the turn of the century into the 1920s (chapter 1). Following Christiane Eisenberg's preliminary reflections published five years earlier, Keys shows that sport's increased relevance for states was inseparable from the development of international sporting organisations, specifically the IOC and FIFA (chapter 2).<sup>10</sup> In the manner of Peter Beck, Keys also focuses on the political investment of a democracy – the United States – in the realm of sport (chapter 3). If the investment of the US government in the field of international sport remained limited during the interwar period, Keys indicates nevertheless that the United States played a major role in the internationalisation of sport, although the process was not unidirectional. On the one hand, the country 'export[ed] training techniques, a competitive, high-achievement ethos, and a moral underpinning that helped cement a remarkably durable legitimisation for international sports contests', while, on the other hand, US involvement in international sport organisations and through international athlete tours 'pulled Americans into a multinational network, inculcating an internationalist outlook and to some extent enmeshing them in a web of international rules and norms not of their own making'.<sup>11</sup> This chapter is important because it emphasises that, despite the economic crisis and the smaller number of athletes present in Los Angeles – in comparison with the prior editions of 1924 and 1928 –, the 1932 Games can be considered as a first turning point in the development of Olympic Games as a global and commercial event, four years before the most important games of the interwar period: the Berlin Games.

By the time *Globalizing Sport* was published, what scholars had called 'The Nazi games' had already been well studied.<sup>12</sup> After reviewing the context of Nazi involvement in the field of sport, Keys offers an overview of the massive propaganda exercise of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The final chapter, a touch more speculative but arguably the most original, focuses on the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> It opens a number of research avenues on the ambivalent government attitude towards sport during the 1930s. Indeed, the Soviet Union did not participate in the activities of the international sport community

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Beck, *Scoring for Britain: International Football and International Politics, 1900–1939* (London: F. Cass, 1999). See also Martin Polley's earlier study: Martin Polley, 'Olympic Diplomacy: the British Government and the Projected 1940 Olympic Games', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 9, 2 (1992), 169–87.

<sup>10</sup> Christiane Eisenberg, 'The Rise of Internationalism in Sport', in Martin Geyer and Johannes Paulman, eds., *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 375–403.

<sup>11</sup> Keys, *Globalizing Sport*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan, eds., *Sport and International Politics: Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport* (London: Routledge, 1998). On the Nazi era see also: Hans-Joachim Teichler, *Internationale Sportpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Schorndorf: K. Hofmann, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Since the pioneering work by James Riordan and Robert Edelman, several studies have been conducted on this topic. For a recent publication, see: Sylvain Dufraisie, *Les héros du sport. Une histoire des champions soviétiques (années 1930–années 1980)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2018).

during the 1920's and sought to develop its own system (around international red sport and transnational events such as the Spartakiad organised for the first time in 1927).<sup>14</sup> However, following a change in the Soviet Union's foreign policy, the mid-1930's opened a first (but short) window of exchanges between Soviet leaders and IOC and FIFA leaders. In parallel, Soviet teams travelled abroad for the first time (notably to play football games in Czechoslovakia, France and Sweden).

Keys's study has undoubtedly stimulated wide reflection on the place of sport in international relations and still continues to inspire scholars today. What Keys's text also offered were several novel facets to the study of international sport. First, Keys's work was anchored in a cornucopia of diverse original sources. With material in three languages (German, English and Russian) and coming from diverse state archives (from Washington to Moscow via Berlin) as well as the international organisations in question (IOC and FIFA), her study also confirmed the existence of rich archives within sport federations and foreign ministries or departments of state.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, the book drew inspiration from recent historiography on international organisations with a specific focus on the emergence of a global community, as argued by Akira Irye.<sup>16</sup> Keys's core argument centres on the role of international sporting organisations, principally the IOC and FIFA, as the key actors in the internationalisation process and the emergence of an international sporting community during the interwar period. As a result, states with an interest in sport were forced into dialogue and to negotiate with those non-governmental bodies which were developing their own spheres of sovereignty. Finally, she details two, in theory contradictory, processes: the creation of an international sport community and the politicisation of sport by the nation state. Through her critical analysis she argues convincingly that the 'manipulation of the international sports system for nationalist ends came at the price of opening national cultures to internationalist values and influences'.<sup>17</sup>

Since Keys's work there has been an obvious increase in interest as to the place of sport in international relations. In years that followed authors have explored themes such as the political stakes around a country's entrance into the Olympic movement, diplomatic sporting tours with athletes as national ambassadors and the use of sport as a means of recognition by the international community such as the *Symbolpolitik* around the two Germanys and their fight to represent the nation.<sup>18</sup> Several edited collections have appeared recently, and both international relations and mainstream history journals have released special issues on international sport.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, sport history journals have also dedicated special issues to the topic.<sup>20</sup>

This blossoming of the study of the rising importance of sport in international relations over the twentieth century has shaped specific areas of focus on the notion of sport diplomacy, in other words, the use of sport by the state. This gentle shift in attention has, perhaps unsurprisingly, placed greatest attention on the Cold War period.

### United States vs the Soviet Union: Cold War Games

In 2001 Tony Shaw noted that during the Cold War 'everything, from sport to ballet to comic books and space travel, assumed political significance and hence potentially could be deployed as a weapon

<sup>14</sup> André Gounot, *Die Rote Sportinternationale, 1921–1937. Kommunistische Massenpolitik im europäischen Arbeitersport* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Heather L. Dichter, 'Diplomatic and International History: Athletes and Ambassadors', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32, 15 (2015), 1741–4.

<sup>16</sup> Akira Irye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Keys, *Globalizing Sport*, 188.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance: Gerald R. Hughes and Rachel J. Owen, "'The Continuation of Politics by Other Means': Britain, the Two Germanys and the Olympic Games, 1949–1972", *Contemporary European History*, 18, 4 (2009), 443–74.

<sup>19</sup> *Journal of Global History* 8, 2 (2013) 2; *Zeitgeschichte* 42, 4 (2015); *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, 2 (2016) and *Hispania Nova* 17 (2019).

<sup>20</sup> Notably in *Stadion, Sport in History, Journal of Sport History* and *The International Journal of the History of Sport*.

both to shape opinion at home and to subvert societies abroad'.<sup>21</sup> Building on preliminary work realised during the 1980s and 1990s around the boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games, a number of studies have been produced on what we might call the 'Sporting Cold War'. We focus here on three books published between 2012 and 2017.<sup>22</sup>

The first book by Damion Thomas, *Globetrotting*, originally published in 2012, addresses the evolving relationship between the US government and sport between 1945 and 1968 through the examples of African American sporting ambassadors who were not official diplomatic envoys even if their tours often benefitted from state support. The second text, Toby Rider's 2016 *Cold War Games* chronicles how the US government, at the height of the Cold War, sought to use the Olympics as a forum to spread ideas of democracy. The third book discussed here, *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sport Bureaucracy, and the Cold War*, published by Jenifer Parks in 2017, explores the Soviet state's growing interest in international sport between the 1940s and the 1980s. She focuses on the whole process (idea, candidacy and organisation) of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.

All three rely on a mixture of state and private archives – the latter two complementing this with the IOC archives while Thomas draws from the Avery Brundage collection – and reveal the intricacies between the two competing superpowers' political use of sport.<sup>23</sup> If – as shown by Keys – the United States was already present in the international sporting community in the interwar period, the Soviet Union's later entry signalled an important change (chapter 2 in Rider, chapter 1 in Parks), also embodied in booming Soviet investment in sport tours as cultural diplomacy (chapter 3 in Thomas). Desiring to beat the capitalists on the sports field, victory in the Olympics took on new meaning, one which would serve *in fine* to demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet model. After their first Olympic appearance in 1952, which saw the Soviets finish behind only the Americans in the medals' race, the Soviet Union topped the 1956 Melbourne Olympics medals table – the first time the United States dropped to second in the Summer Olympics since 1908 save for the 1936 Games – threatening US hegemony in sporting, but also metaphorical, terms.

A comparative reading of these three books reveals both areas of convergence and divergence in terms of how the two rivals approached sport within the context of diplomacy. In terms of convergence, both superpowers viewed sport as a means to demonstrate the superiority of their society – either the capitalist model or the communist one. While this is not necessarily a new thought, the three authors bring to light diplomatic documentary evidence – as yet largely underused in this field – from both states which stresses what was at stake in their investment in sport. Their research details the myriad of institutions and individuals behind many of the decisions and significant events. Throughout the Cold War, one of the major goals of the two countries was to host the Olympics. Its appeal to the Soviet Union forms a significant part of Parks's research covering the original inspiration for the 1980 candidacy (chapter 3), the failure to host the 1976 Olympics (chapter 4) and, finally, the successful bid and organisation of the Moscow Games (chapter 5). While Rider's research does not go beyond 1960 – nor include an explicit discussion of bidding on the US side despite a plethora of US summer and winter bids led by perennial loser Detroit – it does lay the foundation for a better understanding of Jérôme Gyax's research on US government involvement in sport during the following twenty-plus years.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, Thomas, Parks and Rider all underline the fact that the ideological battle was not only waged on the sporting fields. Both sides used other means off the court. On the US side, the State Department supported the Union of Free Eastern European Sportsmen (UFEES) (chapter 4 in

<sup>21</sup> Tony Shaw, 'The Politics of Cold War Culture', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 3 (2001), 59–76.

<sup>22</sup> There is other recent work on this topic. See, for example, Erin Elizabeth Redihan, *The Olympics and the Cold War, 1948–1968: Sport as Battleground in the U.S.–Soviet Rivalry* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017). For a more complete review of the literature, see the bibliography at the end of: Philippe Vonnard, Grégory Quin and Nicola Sbeti, eds., *Beyond Boycotts: Sport During the Cold War in Europe* (Oldenburg, De Gruyter, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Avery Brundage was IOC president from 1952 to 1972.

<sup>24</sup> Jérôme Gyax, *Olympisme et Guerre froide culturelle. Le prix de la victoire américaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012). See particularly chapter 4.

Rider) which orchestrated, with the help of journalists from *Sports Illustrated*, the defection of Hungarian athletes during the Melbourne Olympics of 1956 (chapter 6 in Rider). In addition, the Freedom Tour that travelled through US cities with athletes who had defected was essential in reinforcing the role of the United States in its fight for freedom and democracy.<sup>25</sup> Rider's silence on any efforts to induce defection during the 1960 Winter Olympics suggest that there were no covert operations around the Games – despite their hosting on US soil in Squaw Valley and the obvious opportunity that this would have presented. Perhaps tensions had lowered during the Thaw and the US government did not seek as actively to be involved backstage, or there was simply no government interference – although either would run counter to Rider's thesis. Beyond hard measures such as defections, the sporting combat throughout the period was also a matter of communication between the government-supported United States Information Agency and sport officials who coordinated to spread a message against the communist threat. As Thomas astutely shows, sport exchanges and tours were, in the words of USIA director Theodore Streibert, 'the most effective thing we are doing in the Orient'.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that both the United States and Soviet Union adopted some similarities in their approach to sport as a diplomatic instrument should not diminish the differences between the two superpowers. The fundamental sporting models were starkly opposed; one being a matter of the state (Soviet Union) while the other was anchored in civil society (United States). Rider's research underlines the US model of sporting diplomacy as one that was based on a 'state-private network' of communication and coordination between government entities and private associations. The spectrum was wide – some private actors operated entirely independently while others benefitted from direct US government funding – but ultimately the government's actual involvement was limited. Even Thomas, who places perhaps greater emphasis than Rider on the State Department's role in promoting sport tours, admits that the Harlem Globetrotters' tours abroad – albeit promoted and supported – were never funded by the government since these were private ventures and a product of the free-enterprise system.<sup>27</sup> This was, of course, vastly different from the monumental state investment in cultural exchange programmes by the Soviet Union. To wit, in 1950 the Soviet Union supported tours to France alone to the tune of 150 million US dollars, a sum which represented more than what the United States spent on all cultural exchanges globally.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, this lack of reliance on government support was reflected in athlete preparation for the Olympics during the early part of the Cold War. Despite moral support and encouragement by President Eisenhower, who called for citizens to donate during 'Olympic weeks' organised in the months building up to the 1956 and 1960 Games, the US team received less state support than their Soviet counterparts (Rider, chapters 5 and 8). It is hard not to see the drop in US Olympic medals in this period as a direct result – as well as being directly connected to the ongoing amateurism debate – with the Soviet Union topping the table in Summer Olympics medals until 1964 and, even then, continuing to dominate the Winter Games.

A second divergence lay in the countries' international links. In fact, the United States and Soviet Union did not occupy the same place in the international sport system. The Soviets were less dominant in the administrative arena of international federations and specifically the IOC which, as argued by Patrick Clastres, maintained at least a slight – if not all-out – pro-Western stance.<sup>29</sup> This predominance of the United States was largely due to their historical presence within the IOC in the prior decades, as explained by Keys. As a result, from the 1960s onwards the Soviet Union sought to

<sup>25</sup> Rider, *Cold War Games*, chapter 7.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas, *Globetrotting*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> The Harlem Globetrotters were a team composed of African-American players founded before basketball integrated in 1950 who then travelled around the world during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. It was considered as one of the best teams of the world.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas, *Globetrotting*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Clastres, 'Paix par le sport et guerre froide : le neutralisme pro-occidental du Comité international olympique', in Jean-François Sirinelli and Georges-Henri Soutou, eds., *Culture et guerre froide* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Paris-Sorbonne, 2009), 121–37.

play catch up in international sport governance, as Parks demonstrates, through a policy to ‘democratised’ the IOC (chapter 3). The Soviet regime actively sought to reform the structure of the IOC and other sporting organisations by providing more space to non-European voices, for example through sporting assistance and development to third world countries.<sup>30</sup> This tactic allowed the Soviet Union to affirm its authority within the IOC based on its alliance with African and Asian countries. While ultimately unsuccessful in shifting the balance of power, this did nudge the IOC to a variety of reforms in the 1970s.

A third US–Soviet difference was that the Olympic movement was governed by two official languages (French and English), resulting in a linguistic disadvantage for Soviet sporting administrators who had to rely on translators. Unfamiliar with the inner workings of the organisation and its customs, Soviet leaders were penalised and limited in their participation. When affiliating to the international sporting community’s multiple federations, the Soviet representatives often tried (and failed) to include Russian as an official language, something not unique to sport as evidenced by Elena Aranova’s work on similar tensions around official working languages inside the United Nations.<sup>31</sup> At the start of the 1970s a new sporting leadership arose in the Soviet Union, including younger Anglophone administrators like Vitaly Smirnov, who were able to lead the Moscow candidacy for the Olympic Games and, more generally, increase the influence within the IOC and international federations.<sup>32</sup>

When read together, the three studies reveal another important issue that confirms the general renewal in perspective of Cold War history: the fact that the two blocs were ‘divided but not disconnected’, encouraging scholars to rethink the relationship between East and West.<sup>33</sup> Sport was no different in softening – albeit not effacing – the Iron Curtain. In fact, from the beginning of the 1950s to the end of the 1980s, exchange was part and parcel of participation in the international sport system and influence could flow both ways. For instance, Parks notes the impact that organising the 1980 Olympics had on the Soviet administrative culture – how the urgency of some decision making called into question the traditional hierarchy – as well as the population itself witnessing the novelty of bountiful stores during the two weeks of the event. More generally, research contends that five years before Gorbachev’s rise, the Games opened the door to a shift in Soviet society due to the connection between Western firms (which sponsored and broadcasted the games) and Soviet leaders (not only in sport).<sup>34</sup> On the US side, when seen in a long-term perspective these regular exchanges with the Great Bear and some of the challenges revealed during the 1957 Freedom tour – Rider recounts how several athletes who defected from the Soviet bloc during the 1956 Olympic games had difficulties adapting to life in the US or returned to their country after the tour – may have fostered critical reflection in a younger generation about US society as a ‘society of freedom’. Indeed, the culture of protest born in the years following McCarthyism around the civil rights movement and against the Vietnam War illustrated the internal tensions within US society and that dissent was also present domestically. Sportingly and politically, the protests came to a head in Mexico City at the 1968 Games with the question of racial equality, discussed in Thomas’ final chapter which focuses on the Olympic Project for Human Rights.

One final area where both countries diverged was in the race debate. The Soviet Union attempted to capitalise on civil rights inequality in the United States as evidence of the hypocrisy of the capitalist system. While Thomas’s account centres on the question domestically, it might have been interesting to contextualise the race issue internationally since it reached far beyond US shores and was at the core

<sup>30</sup> Pascal Charitas, ‘La Commission d’Aide Internationale Olympique (CAIO) : Un instrument de propagande soviétique? (1951–1962)’, *Sport History Review*, 40, (2009), 143–66. See also the chapter by Jenifer Parks in *Diplomatic Games*.

<sup>31</sup> Elena Aranova, ‘Russian and the Making of World Languages during the Cold War’, *Isis*, 108, 3 (2017), 646–7.

<sup>32</sup> Parks, *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War*, chapter 5.

<sup>33</sup> Tobias Hochscherf, Christopher Laucht and Andrew Plowman, eds., *Divided, but not Disconnected: German Experiences of the Cold War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> The PhD currently being researched by Yannick Deschamps at the University of Strasbourg (under the supervision of Prof. André Gounot) should contribute to further knowledge in this area.

of the sporting boycott of South Africa.<sup>35</sup> If Thomas expends significant effort arguing that the US sporting goodwill tours of the 1950s and 1960s aimed to justify to the outside world that ‘segregation was not an impediment to the advancement of individual African Americans’<sup>36</sup> and his entire third chapter advances that the use of African American athletes as ambassadors was to ‘project an image of racial equality’<sup>37</sup> a critical reading of this part of the book leaves the reader wanting.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, all three books confirm the significant political investment made by the two superpowers in the theatre of the Cold War, albeit not always in the same manner. If the books argue for a greater attention to the role of sport within international relations in the historiography of this period, the texts, taken together and with other literature, encourage a more global analysis of the place of sport in international relations – a first conclusion. Secondly, the authors never engage meaningfully in a conceptual discussion of sport as an extension of Track Two diplomacy, defined in Simon Rofe’s introduction to *Sport Diplomacy* (discussed below) as ‘people-to-people exchanges, frequently organised by private individuals or organisations’.<sup>39</sup> Despite a brief digression on the theory of propaganda at the end of Thomas’ third chapter and Rider’s similar references to ‘psychological propaganda’, none of the authors ever mention the term ‘soft power’. While the reader can understand that all three authors maintain respect for the historicity of the terms used and thus focus on propaganda – ‘soft power’ admittedly only being coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 – it is perhaps a missed opportunity or at least something further scholars could explore, following the lead of the final two books considered here.<sup>40</sup>

### Studying Global Sport Diplomacy

The globalisation of sport increased its importance in international relations because, as Beatrice Heuser reminds us in an article reflecting on the entire period of the Cold War, the conflict concerned not only the two superpowers, but was present on all continents and was often more intense in Africa, Asia and South America.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, post-colonial scholars have shown that sport was one of the major tools for new countries to exist on the international stage.<sup>42</sup> In the last decade scholars have begun to focus more on the use of sport by states from the Third World and on exchanges between North and South, as well as between ‘Global South’ countries. This approach – which follows a general trend in other fields of study – is at the centre of Heather L. Dichter and Andrew Johns’s *Diplomatic Games*, published in 2014 and J. Simon Rofe’s *Sport and Diplomacy*, released in 2018.

*Diplomatic Games* moves away from a US–Soviet-centric approach with three chapters based on the Eastern Bloc which allow for a critical discussion of the idea of its unity as a bloc. Through the case of ice hockey, Heather Dichter explores the immediate impact of the construction of the Berlin Wall on East German travel, Evelyn Mertin proposes a general overview on the East German–

<sup>35</sup> The impact of race and sport in the global debate about apartheid has been discussed by a number of authors. See, for example, David Ross Black and John Nauright, *Rugby and the South African Nation: Sport, Cultures, Politics, and Power in the Old and New South Africas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) especially Chapter 5; Douglas Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), especially Chapters 4 and 5; Peter Alegi and Chris Bolsmann, eds., *South Africa and the Global Game: Football, Apartheid and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, *Globetrotting*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas notes the examples of various foreign tours of African American political speakers, two (white) coaches as ambassadors, but mostly makes reference to largely anonymous teams simply referring to them as ‘integrated’ though without any real examples. The diplomatic sources he cites appear to stress the fundamental political battle between democratic and communist ideologies rather than reinforcing segregation as defensible.

<sup>39</sup> Rofe, *Sport and Diplomacy*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Nye developed this concept in two publications: ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, 80 (1990), 153–71 and in his book *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* published in the same year with Basic Books (NY).

<sup>41</sup> Beatrice Heuser, ‘Looking Back: A Quarter of a Century After the Cold War’, *Cold War History*, 14, 4 (2014), 455–9.

<sup>42</sup> In the last twenty years, a number of publications have appeared on this topic. See, for instance, the special issue ‘Postcolonial Sports – International Perspectives’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32, 7 (2015).



Soviet Union sport relationship (between big brother and foe) during the entire Cold War (chapter 2) and Jenifer Parks focuses on the rising influence of the Soviet Union in the Third World from the 1950s onwards (chapter 3). The second part of the book offers a welcome geographic decentralisation and calls for more research about exchanges in the ‘Global South’. For example, studies on the Caribbean by Aviston D. Downes (chapter 4) and Antonio Sotomayor (chapter 7) contribute to expanding our knowledge in a region where generally the Cold War focus remains fixed on the Cuban missile crisis. Downes retraces the intense discussion around the possible tour of Caribbean teams (notably in cricket) to South Africa between the 1960s and the 1980s. Conflict existed between those who defended sport as another means to exercise politics and promoters of an apolitical view of sport. Sotomayor proposes a vibrant study on the conflict between Puerto Rico and the US government at the 1966 Central American and Caribbean Games and notably emphasises the tension around the question over whether or not to deliver visas to Cuban athletes (who did participate in the end). In addition, reflections on the use of sport in Peronist Argentina studied by Cesar R. Torres (chapter 5) or the study by Pascal Charitas on the French–African relationship within the IOC in the two decades after the Second World War (chapter 6) open a discussion on the use of sport by countries of the ‘Global South’.

Another significant contribution of the book actually lies in the decision of what to leave out. As underlined by Thomas W. Zeiler in his epilogue, none of the authors chose to address a sport already the object of extensive research in its relationship to diplomacy: football. In a much welcomed choice, the reader is presented with histories of other sports such as ice hockey, skiing, surfing and other international events which have not benefitted from the same amount of scholarly interest (e.g. the Panamerican Games, the Games of Friendship in Africa, the Mediterranean Games).

*Sport and Diplomacy*, published in 2018 and edited by J. Simon Rofe, is the fruit of an international conference organised in 2015 that brought together political scientists and historians with a view to unite a subfield of study ‘into larger conversations around diplomacy’ and demonstrate ‘the primacy of sport with diplomatic endeavours’.<sup>43</sup> In one sense, Rofe follows Peter Beck as a specialist first in international relations who then pursued sport as an area of study with some interesting approaches to clubs as actors in this field.<sup>44</sup> Conceived as a broad approach to Track Two diplomacy, the book, as noted in Rofe’s introduction, explains the wide focus on these other non-traditional methods since ‘not all examples of sport as a form of soft power are directed by states’.<sup>45</sup>

The book does not have a specific chronological focus but broadly covers the twentieth century to the present and is organised in three sections: several conceptual chapters are followed by a section covering sport as public diplomacy, and concludes with the sporting boycott as a(n) (unsportingly!) diplomatic act. It is a truly interdisciplinary enterprise – the authors range from political scientists to sociologists to historians – and, like *Diplomatic Games*, the collection has a wide geographical reach. For example, Laurence Cooley’s chapter on sport and divided societies covers three different countries: Bosnia Herzegovina, Cyprus and Northern Ireland. David Rowe studies the diplomatic efforts of the Australian government through football and notably the migration from the Oceania Football Confederation to the more major Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and its competition, the Asian Cup. Notwithstanding the lack of empirically grounded research in some chapters (admittedly several are deliberately conceptual), it does invite further study of these sporting diplomatic issues through a critical examination of primary sources – something which made Beck’s work on the British Foreign Office archives so pioneering.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in questioning the role of sport in relation to diplomacy under a specific state’s government or in relation to a given sporting institution, a

<sup>43</sup> Rofe, *Sport and Diplomacy*, 5–6.

<sup>44</sup> J. Simon Rofe, “‘It is a Squad Game’: Manchester United as a Diplomatic Non-State Actor in International Affairs”, *Sport in Society*, 17, 9 (2014), 1136–154.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Polley’s earlier work should not be ignored in this respect. See, for example, Martin Polley, ‘Olympic Diplomacy: The British Government and the Projected 1940 Olympic Games’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 9, 2 (1992), 169–87, and ‘The Diplomatic Background to the 1966 Football World Cup’, *Sports Historian*, 18, 2 (1998), 1–18.

consideration of primary sources is essential in balancing an overreliance on newspapers: a methodological dependency against which Martin Johnes has warned sport historians.<sup>47</sup> However, the conceptual work is praiseworthy and reads well alongside empirically solid chapters by Amanda Shuman, Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff and Umberto Tulli, among others.

These two edited collections are rather complementary and several chapters can actually be read side by side. For example, Amanda Shuman's excellent study on China's less well-known and earlier 1960s ping-pong diplomacy in Africa (chapter 6 in *Sport and Diplomacy*) reads well alongside Fan Hong and Lu Zhouxiang's broader chapter on the overlaps between Chinese general foreign policy and its sport diplomacy.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Joseph Eaton's research on the Carter administration's support to the Moscow boycott across Asia and Africa complements Nicholas Evan Sarantakes' chapter in *Diplomatic Games* on the attempts by the US administration to create an alternative to the Moscow Olympics.

As a result, *Diplomatic Games* and *Sport and Diplomacy* offer a number of new perspectives and follow the 'global turn' in history. The two publications have made a step forward with a view to develop a project on sport during the Global Cold War and contributing to a rethinking of some developments within Europe.<sup>49</sup> Both edited collections also propose to shift the focus of sport within international relations to a discussion around public diplomacy, an old concept given a new life in the last decade, and one which extends the consideration of sport and diplomacy in a larger sense.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the books open further lines of enquiry, for example, on the role of sport and diplomacy relating to the economic aspects. An interesting example here is Wanda Ellen Wakefield's chapter in *Diplomatic Games*. Wakefield shows how sport tourism played a role in the improvement of the economic situation in Austria after the Second World War, a situation largely due to US investment (notably with the Marshall plan). In her conclusion, Wakefield notes: 'Austria – a nation broken economically and socially by the Anschluss and the Second World War – successfully used American resources invested after the war to restore and rebuild, thereby becoming a stable member of the world community and one of leading tourist destinations in Europe'.<sup>51</sup> This example emphasises the central role of sport in diplomacy and the economic stakes after 1945.

### Conclusion: Exploring Across the 'Halfway Line' of International Relations

That sport has historically been an instrument of deliberate political use is beyond doubt, but these six books present a number of new perspectives on this complex relationship and offer much fodder for future historical work. Indeed, among the themes floated in Rofe and Beacom's conclusion are: declining use of soft power by states, the mega-event and fewer candidates for hosting some traditional mega-events, security, legacy and technology. It is now up to historians to frame these themes into questions and critically engage with sources. For example, as regards the role of technology/media in the area of sport diplomacy, what can we learn from the history of translation technology in diplomatic relations specifically when one considers that sport events and gatherings were summits of non-mutual language speakers, something common to both normal diplomacy and that on Track

<sup>47</sup> Martin Johnes, 'Archives and Historians of Sport', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32, 15 (2015), 1784–98.

<sup>48</sup> These two can also be read alongside a third complementary study which adds an additional layer to the affiliation question of the 'two Chinas' within the football world. Heidrun Homburg, 'FIFA and the "Chinese Question", 1954–1980: An Exercise of Statutes', *Historical Social Research*, 31, 1 (2006), 69–72.

<sup>49</sup> Notably the project 'The Global History of Sport in the Cold War', coordinated by Robert Edelman, Christian Ostermann and Christopher Young. See notably the recent: Robert Edelman and Christopher Young, eds., *The World Was Watching: Sport in the Cold War* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019). We can also note the work by the members of the Réseau d'études des relations internationales sportives (RERIS) ([www.reris.net](http://www.reris.net)).

<sup>50</sup> According to Matthieu Gillibert, public diplomacy is very close to cultural diplomacy and the first one would be more used by anglo-saxon scholars and the second would be more used by French scholars. Matthieu Gillibert, 'Diplomatie culturelle et diplomatie public: des histoires parallèles', *Relations internationales*, 169, 1 (2017), 11–26.

<sup>51</sup> Wanda E. Wakefield, 'Reclaiming the Slopes. Sport and Tourism in Postwar Austria', in Dichter and Johns, *Diplomatic Games*, 378.

Two? Alternatively, what does the history of sport within international relations tell us about the dividing line between public diplomacy and propaganda or the question of diplomatic immunity and sport?

Building on the books discussed here, it is our view that the study of international relations and sport would benefit from further development along four axes. First, a study of sport could shed more light on current debates in the history of the Cold War such as the unity of the Eastern Bloc, an idea questioned by a number of authors who have demonstrated that tensions existed internally, at various times, between the dominant superpower (the Soviet Union) and its allies. In sport, competition between allies who were invested in sporting performance is also evident, a point argued by Thomas Hunt regarding the use of doping by East Germany in its quest to surpass other communist nations, particularly the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the work by Evelyn Mertin, on relations between East Germany and the Soviet Union, and Sylvain Dufraisse, critically examines the links between the Soviet Union and fellow communist countries in the light of the circulation of athletes within the Eastern Bloc.<sup>53</sup>

Second, the role of neutral countries could also benefit from a focus on sport. For example, a country like Switzerland played a critical role in the development of international sport (international federations establishing their seat in the neutral country, the central role played by Swiss sport administrators working inside them and for the many competitions) as well as fostering international contact with countries not recognised diplomatically or even excluded from the international community.<sup>54</sup> This is an area ripe for further research drawing on the initial work by Quentin Tonnerre and Grégory Quin on the Chinese table tennis tour to Switzerland in 1972.<sup>55</sup>

A third avenue for exploration could be the economic facet of sporting diplomacy. Few studies exist in this area, and those existing studies focus largely on the economic history of IOC television rights and the marketing of mega-events such as the Olympics, individual athletes or brands.<sup>56</sup> Yet there are shared interests between the sporting and economic elites and the crossover in terms of international relations is well worth exploring; for example, how international industries such as watchmaking developed alongside Switzerland's role in the sporting, economic and political international community. Indeed, the timekeeping sponsorship of the Olympic Games allowed for a country to advertise one of its key national industries to all four corners of the globe. This was at the core of the debate in the 1960s and 1970s after the Tokyo 1964 Olympics where timekeeping had been supplied by Japanese company Seiko and, as a result, Swiss watchmakers (helped by the national economic and political elites) collectively mobilised to retain the monopoly on Olympic timekeeping.<sup>57</sup> Alternatively, questions could be asked around the economic subtext (and consequences) of sporting boycotts of which the research focus to date has been restricted to the political overtones.

Finally, a fourth line of enquiry that remains largely understudied historically is the role of international sporting organisations acting in the international sphere. Indeed, if sport has been a *means*

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Hunt, *Drug Games: The International Olympic Committee and the Politics of Doping* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011)

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn Mertin, *Sowjetisch-deutsche Sportbeziehungen im 'Kalten Krieg'* (Sankt-Augustin: Academia-Verlag, 2009) and Dufraisse, *Les héros du sport*.

<sup>54</sup> Grégory Quin, Philippe Vonnard and Christophe Jaccoud, eds., *Des réseaux et des hommes. Participation et contribution de la Suisse à l'internationalisation du sport (1912–1972)* (Alphil: Neuchâtel, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Quentin Tonnerre and Grégory Quin, 'A Forgotten "Ping-Pong Diplomacy"? About the Chinese Ping-Pong Players' Tour of Switzerland (1972)', in Vonnard, Quin and Sbeti, *Beyond Boycott*, 195–211.

<sup>56</sup> See Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn and Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002); Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999); Barbara Smit, *Sneaker Wars: The Enemy Brothers who Founded Adidas and Puma and the Family Feud that Forever Changed the Business of Sports* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008)

<sup>57</sup> Quentin Tonnerre, 'Une question de prestige dans le domaine international de l'industrie horlogère'. *Diplomatie suisse et chronométrage sportif (1964–1970)*, *Relations internationales*, 177, 1 (2019), 129–44.

for both normal and public diplomacy, sport may also have been an *agent* itself – even if sport long proclaimed a neutral and independent credo.<sup>58</sup> It may well be that the apolitical mantra long defended by sports organisations is what has allowed sporting leaders to actively engage in international relations in a peculiar fashion even to the extent of becoming a diplomatic actor. For example, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) junior committee records claim that its members were responsible for influencing the Berlin Allied Travel Office to lift travel restrictions for East Germans so that the young Germans might travel to play in an international tournament.<sup>59</sup> However, the full influence of those sporting administrators in what was, in theory, a purely diplomatic matter remains a mystery. Thus, future research might not only consider sport *as* diplomacy, but extend enquiry to consider whether sport actually *exercised* diplomacy. In this matter, and following Barbara Keys's lead, scholars could further examine the role of international sport bodies in the emergence of the global sport community, the motivations of the individual leaders, as well as the impact on the interaction (cooperation and conflict) between the organisations themselves.<sup>60</sup> Studies on topics such as these would undoubtedly continue to affirm the relevance of studying international sport as well as contribute to the debates in the history of international relations.

To conclude, we might note that if research on sport in international relations is undoubtedly a work in progress, it can follow the lead of other fields, for example histories of culture. Sarah Davies, has, for example, recently explored a 1955 Moscow tour of British director Peter Brook's Hamlet. In a fascinating study of cultural diplomacy which relies on archival material from the British Foreign Office, the Victoria and Albert Museum read alongside Russian newspaper sources, she demonstrates how the Iron Curtain (a metaphor borrowed from theatre) was not entirely impermeable. Davies argues that the 'Velvet Curtain' of the theatre could be responsible 'for all its limitations as a form of influence . . . [in] transforming perceptions in both halves of Cold War Europe'.<sup>61</sup> Similar to theatre, sport may add to an understanding of the history of international relations and the impassable 'fault line' dividing East and West. If the study of theatre reveals how the stage opened and closed a curtain whose iron nature was, at least ephemerally, velvet, we might, through the study of sport, imagine a similar metaphor of a 'halfway line' in international relations. Indeed, sport can illustrate how an undeniably separated political field still allowed countries to venture into the opposing half, both to demonstrate their superior skill, artistry and power without forgetting the ultimate objective, of course, to score against the opposition.

**Acknowledgments.** The authors wish to thank Clément Astruc, George Kioussis, Amanda Shuman and Quentin Tonnerre for their constructive criticism during the writing process. They also especially would like to thank editors Christian Bailey, Matthew Frank and Victoria Harris for their valuable support and openness in discussing this article.

<sup>58</sup> This point is notably emphasised in the conclusion of a recent paper written by Simon Rofe and Alan Tomlinson, 'The Untold Story of FIFA's Diplomacy and the 1966 World Cup: North Korea, Africa and Sir Stanley Rous', *The International History Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1593218> [published online].

<sup>59</sup> Kevin Tallec Marston, 'European Integration Through Sport – Football, Fraternity and Politics at the UEFA Youth Tournament 1957–1972', in Gilles Ferréol, ed., *Egalité, Mixité, Intégration par le Sport / Equity, diversity, integration through sport* (Brussels: EME Editions, 2016), 253. On a similar topic, see Philippe Vonnard and Kevin Tallec Marston, 'Building Bridges Between Separated Europeans: The Role of UEFA's Competitions in East–West Exchanges (1955–1964)', in Vonnard, Quin and Sbeti, *Beyond Boycotts*, 85–108.

<sup>60</sup> On leaders see the recent works by: Emmanuel Bayle and Patrick Clastres, eds., *Global Sport Leaders: A Biographical Analysis of International Sport Management* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and *Staps: Revue internationale des sciences du sport et de l'éducation physique*, 125, 3 (2019). On women leaders see also Georgia Cervin and Claire Nicolas, eds., *Histories of Women's Work in Global Sport: A Man's World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Davies, 'From Iron Curtain to Velvet Curtain? Peter Brook's Hamlet and the Origins of British–Soviet Cultural Relations during the Cold War', *Contemporary European History*, 27, 4 (2018), 601–26.

**Cite this article:** Vonnard P, Marston KT (2020). Playing Across the 'Halfway Line' on the Fields of International Relations: The Journey from *Globalising Sport* to Sport Diplomacy. *Contemporary European History* 29, 220–231. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777319000407>