Sports in the Global Cold War: A Transnational History Project

Robert Edelman
Professor of Russian History and the History of Sport, UC San Diego

Friday, September 18, 2015
12:00 p.m.
370 Dwinelle Hall
UC Berkeley Campus

During the Cold war, nations and peoples used sport to promote their political, social and economic development. Elites sought ways to confer legitimacy on their dominance. Sport was uniquely positioned between high politics and diplomacy on the one hand and mass politics and popular culture on the other. Because results could be easily measured and profound international connections were formed, sport assumed more significance during the Cold War than at any other time in its history. Success and failure seemed to be measured every four years at the Olympic Games. Yet, sport between the end of World War II and the collapse of Communism involved far more than just Olympic competition. This is a history that goes beyond the bipolar USA-USSR rivalry played out on the Olympic stage, with the two Germanies the centerpiece, and the postcolonial world sitting in an imaginary “Southern Stand” while deciding to whom they would give their hearts and minds. Cold War sport was global. It involved not only the nations of the so-called metropolis but Africa, Asia and Latin America as well.

Under the auspices of the Cold War International History Project in Washington DC, we are engaged in a multi-year, research project that will explore the multifaceted phenomenon of sport both during the Cold War. It involves scholars, and journalists, policy makers, sports officials and athletes from all over the world and take in such emerging sporting nations as South Africa, China and Brazil as well as the representatives of the Cold War heartlands. There are both academic public components to this effort. It is our belief that we have come to a propitious moment for such a project. The last twenty years have seen prodigious scholarship and rapidly opening archives. New subjects and approaches have emerged, while the familiar categories of class, race, gender, nationality and religion continue to remain relevant. This project involves seventy-seven scholars, young and old, female and male, from all over the world.