

BOOK REVIEWS

Everyone to skis! skiing in Russia and the rise of Soviet biathlon, William D. Frank, DeKalb, IL, Northern Illinois University Press, 2013, xii, 396 pp., \$28.46 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0875804767

Everyone to Skis! adds to the growing body of literature in the English language on the development of sports and physical culture in the Eastern Bloc and specifically analyzes how skiing became a national obsession in the Soviet Union and how Soviet biathlon, with its emphasis on self-defense, proletarian rootedness, national pride, collectivism, and sporting prowess, promoted the supposed superiority of the socialist system and Soviet military might. In a vast survey that is chronologically arranged into 10 chapters from imperial Russia to the creation and collapse of the Soviet Union, William D. Frank, a historian and a former US biathlete, argues that the Soviet biathlon best represented the notion of athleticism in service to the state and that the image of the ski-trooper of the Great Patriotic War is still a potent trope in Russia.

Frank reviews the development of skiing in imperial Russia that was influenced by the deployment of armed skiers to expand the empire and combat internal rebellion. External influences included Norwegian polar explorers Fridtjof Nansen, who caused a “Nansenmania” in Russia, and Roald Amundsen, who inspired long-distance ski racing. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was mandatory ski training for the imperial army, while ski clubs and the Sokol organized ski competitions. The Bolsheviks, with their preference for Nordic over “bourgeois” Alpine skiing, awarded special priority to skiing in military training. Ultra-distance ski races helped with agit-prop too, and ski festivals encouraged peasants and workers to participate in socialist solidarity. However, the severe economic hardship and concomitant shortage of skiing equipment, clothing, and boots contained the development of skiing as a winter sport. Under Stalin, collectivism and Stakhanovism in sport increased the length and speed of ski trekking. But the Finnish “White Death” on skis stunned the Soviet Red Army in the Winter War. The need to equip and train ski troops became immediate, and the ski mobilization campaign from 1940 onward helped to repel the German invaders. For this reason, as Frank argues, long-distance skiing became an integral part of the Great Patriotic War narrative, embodied with notions of patriotism, Communist solidarity, endurance, and perseverance.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union invested in sports medicine, psychology, and equipment for the benefit of Soviet skiers, especially in cross-country skiing and biathlon. Soviet biathletes needed to improve on their marksmanship but, over the years, and with a systematic and comprehensive training regimen, proudly celebrated an unbroken string of gold medal victories over six Olympic Games from the Grenoble Winter Games (1968) onwards in the 4 × 7.5 km biathlon relay. Unlike the USA, the Soviet Union purposefully heroized and handsomely rewarded their biathletes in an event understood by nearly everyone in the nation and actively watched by increasing numbers of spectators. Frank cites the example of the World Biathlon

Championships in Minsk (1974) where, thanks in part to a rabid, partisan crowd, the Soviet Union won gold in the 4 × 7.5 km relay in a thriller finish. However, as the book's last chapter details, drug use and blood doping were also an integral part of the regimen for Soviet skiers. Frank asserts that Soviet athletic success cannot simply be explained away by citing the use of performance-enhancing drugs and blood doping; however, there is no denying that the dedication and commitment of athletes, talent screening, and good technique and training alone cannot explain the country's phenomenal international success in the sport of biathlon.

Throughout the book, Frank discusses the significance of the different types of skiing races, such as long-distance or marathon skiing, converging races, relays, and military patrol competitions. The book notes the contribution of Konstantin Komets who invented and patented various ski accouterments in imperial Russia, and recognizes the accomplishments of top skiers and biathletes such as Toivo Antikainen, Dmitrii Shparo, Nikolai Vasil'ev, Dmitrii Vasil'ev, Dmitrii Sokolov, Valentin Pshenitsyn, Vladimir Melanin, Aleksandr Privalov, Aleksandr Tikhonov, Viktor Mamatov, Nikolai Kruglov, and Rinnat Safin. Frank identifies Tikhonov as one of the most recognizable and greatest athletes in the Soviet Union and devotes an entire chapter to Tikhonov's accomplishments and personality. While not the principal objective of the book, Frank does not neglect to inform on women's skiing, even noting that the Soviet Union was far ahead of the rest of the world in the growth and development of women's ski racing. Before the First World War, the Russian press advertised women's skis and accouterments, and ski clubs organized special events for women that ranged from introductory walkabouts to ski races. In the Soviet Union, state-sponsored "socialist feminism" especially encouraged and celebrated female skiers.

Frank correctly notes that the entire Soviet sports program, structured to produce star athletes upon a foundation that called for mass participation, generated continual disputes in attempting to find the proper balance between mass participation and mastery. However, Frank does not provide rich examples and details of such disputes. Where were the venues of such disputes, who were the proponents and opponents, and what were the arguments and conclusions or consequences? Frank states that the socialist state sought to curb the excesses of professionalism among sport clubs and work unions. But, here too the examples of such containment policies and practices are largely missing. Perhaps, archival data would have been useful to explore such a divide between rhetoric and reality, but the author made clear that he chose to write a book that would derive its evidence from various newspapers, journals, books, and pamphlets as sources, and not the archives. Certainly, Frank provides a thorough and engaging analysis of the importance of skiing to the Russian and Soviet states, how biathlon was used as a powerful metaphor for socialist collectivism in the realm of sport, and how and why the elite skiers were worthy of respect, praise, and gratitude. However, specialists will also demand a more critical investigation into instances of hardship and embitterment for skiers, how the reality of mass disillusionment contrasted with the celebratory images of a few elite skiers, how skiing contributed to the unraveling of the "Big Lie," and how the multiple systemic failures forced ordinary people to think more about surviving or circumventing the ineffective structures of state socialism.

Nameeta Mathur

Saginaw Valley State University

nmathur@svsu.edu

© 2015, Nameeta Mathur

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1012897>