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American Integration of Eastern Bloc Methods:
How the Cold War Shaped Women's Gymnastics

Abstract

This paper examines how the United States' desire for Olympic dominance over the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War enabled the governing bodies of women's gymnastics to neglect and obscure abuse within the elite training program for decades. Although Cold War scholarship generally tends to draw a stark dichotomy between Soviet and American cultural practices, the case of the United States women's gymnastics program demonstrates how Soviet methods were adapted to serve American ideals, forming a system that allowed the widespread abuse of athletes for decades. Recent literature has implied that these methods were a mere extension of the brutal practices already present within the US program. This paper challenges that conclusion, arguing that a distinct Eastern Bloc style of training was introduced to the United States by Marta and Bela Karolyi, but the US adapted the system to neoliberal ideals of individuality and competition. The Eastern Bloc coaching method reached its most advanced form under American capitalist standards of individual competition. This paper incorporates new analysis of media coverage from the Karolyi period of the United States gymnastics program, as well as the firsthand accounts of gymnasts from this era. Ultimately, by viewing this topic through the lens of transnational history, this paper should offer new insight as to how global powers adopt the practices of their political opponents to further expand their international power.