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Robert Edelman. "The Five Hats of Nina Ponomareva: Sport, Shoplifting and the Cold War." *Cold War History* 17:3 (August 2017): 205-221. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2016.1261114>.

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Review by **Mario Del Pero**, Institut d'études politiques/SciencesPo of Paris

In late August 1956, just a few weeks ahead of the Melbourne Olympic Games, the Soviet track and field team arrived in London for an unprecedented dual meet with its British counterpart. But the event never took place. The cause of the cancellation was the arrest of one of the many stars of the sensational Soviet team, the 1952 Olympic discus champion (and first ever USSR Olympic Gold medallist), Nina Ponomareva, for shoplifting five hats at a cheap retail clothing store (C&A Modes). After her initial appearance before a British magistrate, who set bail at five pounds and told her to return the following day, the Soviet Embassy urged that Ponomareva not be prosecuted and provided her with shelter. The magistrate issued then a warrant for her immediate arrest, while C&A's management stubbornly refused to drop the charges. Promptly denounced by the Soviets as a "dirty provocation" (224), the arrest and what ensued caused a major diplomatic rift between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. It placed the British government in the very awkward situation of either accepting an escalation of the crisis on what was, in all regards, a marginal issue, or interfering with the judiciary by challenging the role of the courts. For its part, Moscow's inflexible reaction underestimated the legal and institutional constraints Whitehall faced and led to threats of retaliation, including the cancellation of the long-anticipated British tour of the Bolshoi ballet. The British public followed events with increasing interest and curiosity, and even the Queen was kept abreast (it is a great pity that the screen-players of the Netflix series "The Crown" have not included this incident in one of the second season's episodes).

A way out was eventually found. The Soviets moderated their stance, while the British proved capable of twisting legal proceedings to political and diplomatic ends (as the Soviet had roughly demanded from day one). A scenario was devised by diplomats, the police and the magistrate "whereby Ponomareva would appear in court, stand trial, be judged, perfunctorily punished and sent home" (235). Which is precisely what happened, just in time for the discus champion to board a steamer, head home, and from there reach Melbourne, where she managed to win a bronze (followed by another gold at the 1960 Rome Olympics).

A leading authority on the Soviet Union and sport history, and author of a recent, beautiful book on the football team “Spartak Moscow,”¹ Robert Edelman tells the story of Nina Ponomareva’s five hats with both gusto and historical accuracy. He relies on a rich variety of British and Soviet primary sources as well as on the British, Soviet, and American press, which covered with increasing interest the case. Through this intelligent and original article, Edelman highlights two important lessons for Cold War historians. The first is that neat and binary Cold War partitions often gave way to much more ambiguous and opaque policies. Face-saving solutions notwithstanding, allegedly untouchable British legal traditions were in the end subordinated to politically dictated compromises; the inflexibility of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko – who strongly supported retaliating via the Bolshoi boycott – ended up being overruled by more moderate voices; despite reciprocal stereotypes and misunderstandings, a reasonable deal was in the end struck. The second lesson pertains to the many stories of the Cold War still to be told in a field – Cold War history – that, while apparently saturated with extensive, global research, continues to offer a mine of facts, events, actors, and crises waiting to be unearthed. Sport is, in this regard, an excellent example: “the softest form of hard power” (224), Edelman notes, and a terrain “on which the two main strands of Cold War historiography – the international and the cultural – can meet” (224).

Something more, however, could have been said on how a micro-historical approach as the one adopted in this article can shed light on the Cold War and its intrinsic global nature: on the connections and interdependencies between the micro and the macro, Ponomareva’s five hats, the Olympics, and the global Cold War. And Edelman could perhaps have reflected a bit more on the gender dimension of this story, on which he offers many extraordinary vignettes. “Poor pathetic Nina ... despite her bulging biceps, wanted a little of frippery over her head,” wrote the *Washington Post* business columnist J.A. Livingston, “every woman will understand Nina’s heartache ... a new chapeau, like a new coiffure does wonders, as every woman knows, for the ego” (230); in rendering his final verdict, the magistrate Clyde Wilson argued that the case proved “the fallibility of human nature. The hats at C&A Modes, displayed there constitute a considerable temptation to a number of women” (237). Womanhood, or ‘feminine fragility,’ became the lowest common denominator used to explain Ponomareva’s inconsiderate action and to justify the very lenient punishment the magistrate then chose (discharge on the payment of three guineas, little more than three pounds).

But these minor critical observations do not detract from the quality and importance of this most interesting, and remarkably enjoyable, article.

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¹ Robert Edelman, *Spartak Moscow: A History of the People’s Team in a Workers’ State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).