

SHOWING SOCIALISM THROUGH SPORT: HUNGARIAN TECHNICIANS AND TEAMS IN AFRICA IN THE EARLY 1960S

Mostrar el socialismo a través del deporte: técnicos y equipos húngaros en África a principios de los años sesenta

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Abstract

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the cultural diplomacy of the two blocs began to focus on countries emerging from the process of decolonisation. The aim was to establish economic relations and influence their future development. Sport remained a privileged field for this cultural diplomacy, especially for the Hungarian People's Republic. Nevertheless, Hungarian cultural diplomacy had clear obstacles, product of the limitations Hungary had at the time: little coordination with the other countries of the Eastern Bloc and an extremely limited spending capacity.

Keywords: Hungary, Africa, cultural diplomacy, football.

Resumen

A finales de los años cincuenta y principios de los sesenta, la diplomacia cultural de los dos bloques empezó a interesarse por los países que salían del proceso de descolonización. El objetivo era establecer relaciones económicas e influir en su futuro desarrollo. El deporte siguió siendo un campo privilegiado para esta diplomacia cultural, especialmente para la República Popular de Hungría. Sin embargo, la diplomacia cultural húngara tuvo claros obstáculos, producto de las limitaciones que tenía Hungría en aquella época: escasa coordinación con los demás países del bloque del Este y una capacidad de gasto extremadamente limitada.

Palabras clave: Hungría, África, diplomacia cultural, fútbol.

Introduction

The consolidation of the European balance after the Polish and Hungarian crises of 1956 marked the beginning of a new phase in the foreign policy of the Eastern bloc, called 'peaceful coexistence'. From the theory of antagonistic contradiction, according to which the conflict between capitalism and communism was inevitable, the Soviets shifted to the idea of possible coexistence between the blocs. The confrontation between the blocs shifted from the military to the cultural and economic

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spheres. The geographical context of the competition also changed: African and Asian countries looked to the Soviet model with great interest, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) stepped up its activities in the new states emerging from the decolonisation process. The promise of rapid industrialisation and complete liberation from the former colonial powers, as well as Soviet conquests, such as *Sputnik* - the first artificial satellite to be placed in orbit around the Earth (1957) - impressed the new states.¹

In the space of a few years, Soviet policy changed completely, from general support against imperialism to the prospect of supporting the national demands of the colonies opening new possibilities. These were years of great ferment: in 1955, the Bandung Conference had condemned all forms of colonialism - implicitly recognising that practised by the USSR in Eastern Europe² - and the USSR's attempt to organise an Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, which also increased its efforts through bilateral agreements, paid little dividends.³ Things changed quickly: the Suez crisis (1956) accredited USSR as the defender of the former colonies, and at the end of the 1950s the USSR set up a structure of linguistic and cultural expertise. At the same time, the experts of the Soviet Union established a doctrine that allowed cooperation with former colonies, even if they had a 'bourgeois' government.⁴ From that moment on, the USSR tried to establish as many relations as possible with the former colonies, proposing economic agreements and the transfer of knowledge in the economic and cultural spheres. Other people's democracies soon followed the USSR's example.⁵

Asian and African governments were not only looking for low-interest loans and economic expertise, they were also interested in other areas, such as sport. The participation of athletes and teams in international championships and tournaments provided the former colonies with a stage on which reaffirm their independence, while sporting success could help the new regimes to accumulate the symbolic capital needed to strengthen the population's sense of belonging.⁶ The result was an obvious interference by governments in the affairs of sports federations, if not a personal overlap between the two entities.⁷ For African countries, the first step was to break through the glass ceiling of international sports federations, to ensure greater representation for their continent in tournaments and on the board of bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA),⁸ and then to improve their results on the pitch by attracting coaches and trainers from abroad. The results soon arrived: Abebe Bikila's victory in the marathon at the 1960 Rome Olympics became a symbol of Africa free from European colonialism.⁹

¹ See Alessandro Iandolo, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Soviet Model of Development' in West Africa, 1957-1964", *Cold War History* 12 no. 4 (2012): 683-86.

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Legacies of Bandung: Decolonisation and the Politics of Culture", in *Making a World after Empire. The Bandung Movement and its Political Afterlives*, ed. by Christopher J. Lee. (Athens: Ohio UP, 2010), 50.

³ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea and Mali, 1955-1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2022), 46-7.

⁴ Ivi, 54-8.

⁵ See Péter Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa 1945-1968* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Constantin Katsakioris, *The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Africa in the Cold War: The Educational Ties* (Working Paper 16 (2019) Leipziger Universitätsverlag). https://research.uni-leipzig.de/~sfb1199/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/WP16_Katsakioris-et-al_web_190419.pdf; Gareth M. Winrow, *The foreign policy of the GDR in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).

⁶ Nicola Sbeti, *Giocchi di potere. Olimpiadi e politica da Atene a Londra 1896-2012* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2012), 127; Jean P. Augustin, "Sport, décolonisation et relations internationales. L'exemple de l'Afrique noire", in *Sport et relations internationales*, sous la direction de Pierre Arnaud et Alfred Wahl (Metz: Centre de Recherche Histoire et Civilisation de l'Université de Metz, 1994), 203 and Riccardo Brizzi and Nicola Sbeti, *Storia della coppa del mondo di calcio. Politica, sport, globalizzazione* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2018), 93.

⁷ Paul Dietschy, *Storia del calcio* (Vadano al Lambro: Paginauno, 2014), 293-97.

⁸ On this see Pascal Charitas, "Imperialism in the Olympics of the Postcolonisation: Africa into the International Olympic Committee, 1910-1965", *International Journal of Sport History* 32, no. 7 (2015): 909-22.

⁹ Regarding sport and the idea of Africa's redemption see Berandette Deville-Danthu, *Le sport en noir et blanc. Du sport colonial au sport africain des anciens territoires français d'Afrique occidentale (1920-1965)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 338-41.

It was not long before teams from the Eastern bloc, together with their trainers, were arriving in Africa on small tours: a little-known aspect of the USSR and other people's democracies, but a privileged field of action in those years.¹⁰ Hungary had a great sporting prestige, enhanced by its good results in the Olympic Games and international tournaments. The Hungarian government also had some experience in sending technicians and trainers to improve relations. After the 1956 uprising, Hungary used sport to overcome its international isolation, and managed to restore its relations with Western European countries rather quickly.¹¹ This article analyses the emergence of sporting relations between Hungary and some African countries in the early 1960s, highlighting the early successes and limitations.¹² Although Hungary was able to achieve some good results, by the mid-1960s the results were rather disappointing, mainly due to the lack of interest of the Hungarian sports administration in improving this 'anti-imperialist' solidarity.

Warm up: Hungary before 'Year of Africa'

In 1958, the Sports Commission of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSzMP) emphasized the role of sports as an instrument for improving Hungarian relations, and intensifying cooperation within the bloc and with other 'anti-imperialist' countries. However, the party complained that the work of the sports administration at the time was undermined by a lack of planning and little knowledge of other countries systems.¹³ The African context at the time was not ideal: apart from the former Italian colonies, only Egypt, Sudan and Ghana had gained independence from United Kingdom and Tunisia and Morocco from France, while the USA had already established links thanks to the work of Malvin Whitfield.¹⁴

Some African countries had participated in the World Festival of Youth and Students organised by the communist-led *International Union of Students* since 1951¹⁵, but their relations with Hungary were weak. Egypt was an exception. The country had a well-established sporting tradition evidenced by numerous participations in international tournaments. The first Egyptian athlete took part in the Olympic Games in 1912, and the Egyptian football team played Hungary in two official tournaments. The first was in 1924, when the *Pharaohs* surprisingly won 3-0 in the round of 16 at the Olympic football Tournament in Paris, causing a major scandal and a parliamentary inquiry by

¹⁰ See Baruch A. Hazan, "Sport as an Instrument of Political Expansion: The Soviet Union in Africa", in *Sport in Africa. Essays in Social History*, ed. by William J. Baker and James A. Mangan (New York-London: Holmes & Meier, 1987); Jenifer Parks, "Welcoming the 'Third World'. Soviet Sport Diplomacy, Developing Nations and the Olympic Games", in *Diplomatic Games. Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations Since 1945*, ed. by Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns. (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 2014), 90-107 and Victor Peppard and James Riordan, *Playing Politics: Soviet Sport Diplomacy to 1992* (London: Jai Press, 1993), 107-12; See also Julien Beauflis, "Le quotidien d'une 'école rouge'. La politisation protéiforme du sport en République Démocratique Allemande, à l'exemple de la Deutsche Hochschule für Körperkultur de Leipzig (1969-1990)" (Phd Thesis, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, 2019), 262-314.

¹¹ On the Hungarian context after 1956 see Mihály Fülöp and Péter Sipos, *Magyarország külpolitikája in XX. Században* (Budapest: Aula, 1998), 430. On the role of sport see Lorenzo Venuti, "Vasas Terni, FTC Siena e Honvéd Sassuolo: propaganda ungherese in Italia attraverso lo sport negli anni dopo la Rivoluzione (1957-1960)", in *Italia e Ungheria tra una rivoluzione e l'altra. Storia, letteratura, cultura, mondo delle idee (1956-1989)*, a cura di Francesco Guida e Zoltán Turgonyi (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2023).

¹² On general on cultural relation between communist Hungary and Africa see Gábor Hollósi, "Magyarország kulturális egyezményei afrikai államokkal (1957-1993)", *Iustum Aequum Salutare* 6, no. 2 (2012): 45-59; István Tarrósy, "Magyarország Afrika-politikája a kommunista korszakban és a postszovjet érában", in *Magyarország és Afrika 2018-2025*, szerkesztett Marsai Viktor and Nagyné Rózsa Rózsa (Budapest: Dialóg campus, 2020), 19-24 and James Mark and Péter Apor, "Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary, 1956-1989", *The Journal of Modern History* 87, no. 4 (2015): 862-91.

¹³ MOL (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Országos Levéltára), XIX (Az államigazgatás felsőbb szervei), V. osztály, J (Külgügy 1862-1995), 1 (Külgügyminisztérium), K (Általános iratok 1945-1995), 1945-1964, Végyés, box 99, folder 15/i, Resolution of the MSzMP Sports Committee, 9 June 1958, 1-2.

¹⁴ Kevin B. Witherspoon, "An outstanding representative of America': Mal Whitfield and America's Black Sports Ambassadors in Africa", in *Defending the American Way of Life. Sport, Culture, and the Cold War*, ed. by Toby C. Rider and Kevin B. Witherspoon (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2018), 133-38

¹⁵ Lidia Lesnykh, "Sport at the World Festival of Youth and Students: between Olympic Ideals and Socialist Internationalism", *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7739573/pdf/fspor-02-567095.pdf>, 10.

right-wing politician Gyula Gömbös.¹⁶ The second match took place during the 1934 World Cup in Italy, where the Magyars won a “clear rematch of the Paris Olympics”.¹⁷

The Cold War complicated Hungarian-Egyptian relations. Adhering to the principle that athletes should not play in countries where 'imperialist' influence was considered excessive, the Hungarians boycotted the World Fencing Championships and the European Basketball Tournament, both held in Cairo in 1949.¹⁸ It was only after the fall of King Fārūq I (1952) and the establishment of the Egyptian Republic, that the Hungarian national football team —at the time one of the best on the continent— travelled to Cairo for a friendly match in 1954. According to the press, the Egyptians had greeted Hungary's 3-6 victory over “imperialist” England in November 1953 with sympathy¹⁹, and the result of the match in Cairo, an easy win for Hungary, was not so important.

Sport also had the potential to promote contacts among countries with weak or no diplomatic relations, such as Tunisia.²⁰ In 1958, two years after the country's independence, the Tunisian Football Federation invited Hungary to play a friendly match, which took place in January 1959. The Hungarian Olympic team easily won 3-0, and Sándor Barcs, one of the Hungarian managers of the team was particularly pleased with the result. According to the Hungarian newspapers, 7,000 fans came to cheer on the Hungarians, who played well despite the terrible pitch.²¹ The Tunisians were not only impressed from a sporting point of view. In his report to the MTST (Magyar Testnevelési és Sport Tanács, Hungarian Council for Physical Education and Sport), the manager noted with satisfaction that although the country had chosen to remain in the capitalist economy, there was a great deal of interest in the socialist sports system. The Tunisian sports office also asked Barcs to bring its request for a volleyball coach for the Tunisian national team to the Hungarian sports²². According to Barcs, sport could be a way to get closer to Tunisia, and he asked the MTST to intensify its cooperation with the country.²³ In addition to sending Ernő Henning as a volleyball trainer to Tunis,²⁴ the Hungarian authorities also extended an invitation to the Tunisian Olympic team for a friendly match in Budapest. In pre-match interviews the Tunisian trainer explained the progress made in sport since the proclamation of the Republic, but the result was disappointing: Hungary won 10-1.²⁵

Interest in African affairs grew as the “Year of Africa” changed the political panorama of the continent, and Hungarians were ready to forge links with the new states created by the collapse of the empires.

First half: Africans abroad

Despite attempts to stop time, the French colonial empire began to disintegrate after World War II, first with the Indochina crisis (1946), and then with the Algerian one (1954). Looking for a solution that would guarantee the maintenance of its possessions, the Minister for Overseas Gaston Defferre promoted a framework law, that would guarantee the basis for genuine autonomy for the colonies. The colonies would have elected a representative body and its vice-president through universal

¹⁶ See Péter Szegedi, “A cionizmustól a futballgazdaságig. A Makkabi Brno az első világháború után”, *Múlt és Jövő*, no. 1 (2006): 77-9.

¹⁷ “Izgalmas küzdelemben vett revánsot a magyar csapat a Párisért az egyiptomiakon”, *Függetlenség*, May 29, 1934.

¹⁸ Péter Malonyai, *Aranykór* (Budapest: Novotrade, 1989), 71.

¹⁹ “A magyar labdarúgók az egyiptomi sajtó figyelmének középpontjában”, *Népsport*, February 4, 1954.

²⁰ Peppard and Riordan, *Playing Politics*, 107.

²¹ “Magyarország B-válogatott - Tunisz 3:0”, *Népsport*, January 4, 1959.

²² MOL, XIX; V,J, 1, K, 1945-1964, Vegyész, box 99, folder 15/i, Report of Sándor Barcs, January 6, 1959, 6.

²³ Ivi, 4.

²⁴ Attila Kálnoki Kis, “Elhunyt a világválogatott röplabdázónk”, *24.hu*, February 8, 2012, <https://24.hu/sport/2012/02/08/elhunyt-a-vilagvalogatott-roplabdazonk/>.

²⁵ “Budapesten Tunézia labdarúgó-válogatottja”, *Népszabadság*, July 19, 1960.

suffrage, with a president appointed by France.²⁶ In the summer of 1958, the French government asked the colonies to join the 'Communauté Française', a reform project that would have given the various West African territories full autonomy under the direct authority of the President of the French Republic. All the colonies voted in favour of the project, except Guinea, which chose to become fully independent, provoking a violent reaction from Paris. France immediately withdrew all its personnel and asked its territory to impose an embargo on Guinea.²⁷ The new republic found itself isolated and drawing closer to the Eastern bloc. In 1959, after some preliminary contacts, USSR was able to open its own embassy in the country and begin military and educational cooperation.²⁸

Other countries soon joined Guinea: in June 1960, the Mali Federation declared its independence from France. The fledgling state did not survive long: two months later, Senegal seceded from the federation, leaving the new state interested in dialogue with the Soviet Union.²⁹ The last country active in the region was the Republic of Ghana: although independent since 1957, the state remained a kingdom within the Commonwealth and only became a republic in 1960, opening itself up to greater cooperation with the Eastern Bloc.³⁰

At this stage, the Hungarian People's Republic followed the line drawn by Soviet diplomacy, and opened its own diplomatic corps in Accra (Ghana) and Conakry (Guinea). The latter also extended its activities to Bamako (Mali). Under the leadership of Foreign minister Endre Sík, an expert on Africa,³¹ the Hungarian diplomatic corps began to work diligently, signing cultural agreements with Ghana (1961) and Guinea (1960).³² In 1961, Soviet delegates to the International Olympic Committee proposed a resolution calling for assistance in the development of amateur sport in Asia, Latin America and the newly independent states of Africa.³³ It was an appeal that the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was ready to take up, especially in West Africa, an area that gave great importance to sport, especially football. Not surprisingly the MLSz (*Magyar Labdarúgó Szövetség*, Hungarian Football Association) soon received requests for Hungarian coaches from the various federations. In 1960, József Ember was appointed as the coach of Ghana, while Ferenc Csanádi and József Szépvölgyi had already worked in Guinea. They were replaced in 1961 by two prestigious figures in Hungarian sport, the former *Mighty Magyars* József Zakarias and László Budai.³⁴ Guinea also sought other forms of cooperation: in the summer of 1961, their national team visited Hungary for a month and a half. This was a valuable opportunity for the Hungarians, who showed their guests not only the high level of Hungary's sporting infrastructures, but also the general achievements of socialism. The Guineans were also taken to cities throughout the country, such as Eger, Baja, Szombathely, Debrecen, Esztergom, Csepel and Pécs.³⁵ Only in the latter, in the south of the country, did something strange happen: a local Dózsa (Pécsi Dózsa) player not only intervened very harshly against the African players, but also used the word "negro" (*néger*) to address them, causing some embarrassment among the Magyars.³⁶

²⁶ Serge Berstein, *The Republic of de Gaulle, 1958-1969* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 156.

²⁷ Ivi: 156-57. On the country's independence process see also Elizabeth Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonisation in Guinea, 1946-1958* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2007).

²⁸ Iandolo, *Arrested Development*, 83-86.

²⁹ Ivi, 87-90.

³⁰ Ivi, 97-101.

³¹ Mark and Apor, *Socialism Goes Global*, 853.

³² MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 18/b, Report on cultural relations, February 27, 1962, 1.

³³ Hazan, "Sport as an Instrument of Political Expansion", 253-54.

³⁴ F.P., "A ghanaiaiak is 'feliratkoztak'", *Népsport*, September 6, 1963 and T. Sebes, "Labdarúgás – Guineában", in *Labdarúgás* 9, no. 2 (1963): 16.

³⁵ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Vegyész, box 99, fasc. 15/1, Annotation on the experience of the Mali and Guinea formations in Hungary, annex to Letter from MTST to KÜM, October 30, 1961, 4.

³⁶ Ibid. On racism during the visits of African students to the USSR see Iandolo, *Arrested Development*, 141-43.

The experience reports also offered ideas for improving this type of experience. While the guests were taken to important historical sites, it was suggested that in the future, more time could be dedicated to exploring industrial sites such as Dunaújváros (formerly known as *Sztalinváros*).³⁷ More personal contact between coaches and managers could also have been encouraged. The Hungarians were able to create a positive atmosphere with the Guineans, thanks in part to the Hungarian coaches of the African team. At the same time, when the Mali national team visited Hungary for a week – returning from an extended visit to the USSR – the relationship between coaches and players was more problematic. One possible explanation for this is the difference in the way Guineans and Malians view sport. The former had their own concept of sport which was quite compatible with the socialist one: players had to hold a national party card, while the federation's statutes were based on a mixture of nationalism, pan-Africanism and Marxism-Leninism.³⁸

In any case, two newly independent nations had decided to send their athletes to Hungary to improve, proving the prestige that Hungarian sport still enjoyed around the world.³⁹

Second half: Hungarians in Africa

In May 1962, János Katona, the Hungarian ambassador to Guinea, proposed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the idea of sending a football club, or a national B team, on a tour to West Africa, which would include countries with which Hungary did not yet have diplomatic relations.⁴⁰

The role of sport in consolidating relations with the former colonies had already been recognized by the Political Commission of the MSzMP, which approved the project and, after obtaining the approval of the MTST, authorised the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In September 1962, the Ministry sent a letter to the missions in Ghana and Guinea and to the trade commissioner in Morocco, asking them to assess the interest in hosting a tour of the Hungarian Olympic team.

According to the plan the tour would have taken place between November 1962 and January 1963 and would have included two matches each Ivory Coast, Guinea, Ghana, Senegal, Benin, Mali and Nigeria, involving also countries with which Hungary had no relations. It was important to the Ministry that some Hungarian managers from the MTST would have accompanied the team, in order to register interest in possible agreements between Hungary and the local sports administration.⁴¹ Because of the MTST's meagre budget and the difficult economic situation of the African states, the plan was to neither make nor lose money on this tour: the costs of transport and accommodation would be borne by the respective receiving countries. According to the Ministry the operation would guarantee a diplomatic and sporting advantage. The Olympic formation would be a prestigious opponent for the African teams, and the return of the image could give Hungary an advantage in future cooperation. At the same time, the team would gain experience by facing possible rivals in the future Olympic tournament in Tokyo in 1964. Embassies soon confirmed to the Foreign Office that the proposal was welcomed by the countries, and Ohene Djan, Ghana's director of sport and a leading figure on the West African football scene, offered his help in planning the tour.⁴²

It was a complicated moment for the country, but amidst many ambiguities, Nkrumah's Ghana had links with the Soviet Union, especially in international affairs, although its 'African socialism' was viewed with suspicion in the Eastern bloc.⁴³ In sporting sphere, however, it was one of the best

³⁷ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Vegyés, box 99, folder 15/i, Annotation on the experience of the formations cit., 5-6.

³⁸ Dietschy, *Storia del calcio*, 295-96.

³⁹ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Vegyés, box 99, folder 15/i, Annotation on the experience of the Mali and Guinea formations in Hungary, annex to Letter from MTST to KÜM, October 30, 1961, 1.

⁴⁰ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K (1945-1964), Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from the Embassy in Conakry to KÜM, May 18, 1962, 1.

⁴¹ Ivi, Letter from the KÜM to the Embassy in Accra and Conakry, August 24, 1962, 1.

⁴² Ivi, Letter from the KÜM to MTST, 7 September 1962, p. 1; On him see Claire Nicolas-Philippe Vonnard, "Ohene Dijan. A Pan-Africanist Activist Taking Over Fifa?", in *Steps* 125, no. 3 (2019): 49-68.

⁴³ Iandolo, *Arrested Development* cit., 159-61.

countries in the zone: football was part of Nkrumah's strategy of using sport to represent a "pan-African" pride.⁴⁴ Between 1960 and 1962, Ghana's national team, nicknamed the "Black Star", toured several African countries, as well as Germany, Austria, the USSR and England, hosting Moscow Dynamo and Locomotiv, West Germany and Blackpool in Accra. The most prestigious match took place in the summer of 1962, when despite a boycott by some Ghanaian newspapers,⁴⁵ Ferenc Puskás and Alfredo di Stefano's Real Madrid came to Accra and played "Black Star" to a 3-3 draw.⁴⁶ Ghana were a local football power, recognized by the international press and by other African federations, so Ohene Djan's help in organizing the tour was proved invaluable.⁴⁷

The response from Guinea government was also positive: Ambassador László Gyáros praised the response from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, pointing out that the match against the Hungarians would have been a good test for the team before the African Games in Senegal. The only problem was timing: the country did not yet have a national stadium, so the tour had to be postponed until after January 1963.⁴⁸ In short, Budapest was forced to rethink the journey, and move Guinea to the final leg of the tour: but as Gyáros reiterated, excluding Conakry from the tour would not have been a good choice either from a sporting or a political point of view.⁴⁹ The diplomat also assured the Ministry that the tour would also be welcomed in Mali, and that local sports leaders had expressed interest in hosting the Hungarians.⁵⁰

Offside: between problems and delays

After these initial steps, the project entered a deadlock phase, partly due to the lack of coordination among various actors. News came in October 1962, but they were not positive. The Embassy in Accra wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, complaining about the tone the MLSz had taken with the local authorities. As Ohene Djan had requested, the Hungarian Federation had written to him to plan the tour. However, according to the manager, they had adopted an intolerable attitude, arguing that the tour would take place "if conditions were favourable", without revealing which team would be sent to Africa, and also using a paternalistic tone.⁵¹ This was not an isolated case; a certain sense of superiority was often expressed by newspapers such as *Népsport*. Even János Kádár asked Gyula Hegyi, the president of MTST, if it was possible to soften this attitude in the press. However, Hegyi refused, stating that the sports paper had its own autonomy from the sports authorities, so it was not possible to force it.⁵²

While the tone might have been acceptable domestically, using such language against a sovereign federation like Ghana was unacceptable. The diplomatic corps in Accra quickly pointed out that the country had recently hosted major teams such as Real Madrid, Santos, and the West German national team. The West African country was already an international football stage, and Ohene Djan's disappointment was palpable. The MTST also refused to provide copies of sports films for a Hungarian sports evening during the tour, a long-standing practice of Hungarian embassies, suggesting that only one copy be provided. This would have drastically reduced the time available for screenings, forcing the diplomatic corps to find space for 4-5 screenings in the few days the team

⁴⁴ Paul Darby, "Let us Rally Around the Flag': Football, Nation-Building, and Pan-Africanism in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana", *The Journal of African History* 54, no. 2 (2013): 235-36.

⁴⁵ "Fascist Invasion' by Footballers", *The Times*, August 18, 1962.

⁴⁶ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from the Conakry Embassy to the KÜM, September 17, 1962, 1.

⁴⁷ T. Sebes, "Black star", *Magyar Ifjúság*, 7, no. 2 (1963): 8; A. Keller, "Il Ghana (5-2!) travolge", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, July 2, 1963.

⁴⁸ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from the Conakry Embassy to the KÜM, September 25, 1962, 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ivi, 1-2.

⁵¹ Ivi, Letter from the Accra Embassy to the KÜM, October 25, 1962, 1.

⁵² See T. Takács, *Büntető terület. Futball és hatalom a szocialista korszakban* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2018), 81.

would have spent in the country.⁵³ The letter expressed the disappointment of the Embassy, which had hoped for a completely different commitment, especially after the Political Commission of the MSzMP had confirmed the importance of the tour. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to the MTST, pointing out that the tone used by the MLSz was inappropriate. The dissemination of Hungarian sports culture was an important objective that would allow the creation of links with the new state institutions.⁵⁴ At least the body understood the political value of the initiative, and a few weeks later, the MTST sent a summary to the Foreign Ministry, summarising the current situation and agreeing on new initiatives on the continent.

In the introduction, the MTST highlighted the difficulties of the African situation, where the new states, liberated by the process of decolonisation, had chosen very different paths in international politics. Despite the great opportunities, Hungary had maintained a passive role, limiting itself to accepting requests from teams to be hosted in Budapest or to send trainers.⁵⁵ These were important because they became the pioneers of a wider dissemination of the Hungarian sports movement in the countries. However, they faced serious difficulties due to the lack of connection with the MTST and the limited availability of translated and accessible training materials in the languages of the local population. Finally, according to the MTST, the real problem was the total lack of coordination between the People's Democracies, China and the Soviet Union. Each actor acted autonomously without favouring or supporting the other partners.⁵⁶ This statement contradicts what the journalist Péter Malonyai wrote in the 1980s, according to which coordination among the various sports offices of the Eastern bloc federations had improved after 1956.⁵⁷ The Hungarian sport office, therefore proposed the creation of a commission for sports contacts with African countries, composed of representatives of the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Trade and MTST, with the latter being responsible for the publication of propaganda works adapted to the context. As a short-term strategy, the council proposed that the team managers should be empowered to negotiate agreements with the local authorities. As cooperation with the other countries of the bloc remained poor, it was also necessary to put pressure on Hungarian trainers working in countries with greater contact with African states to report on their experiences and provide the council with valuable information. Finally, the MTST proposed that a special fund be set up to promote sporting contacts with Africa, so that efforts could be rationalised by favouring concrete initiatives.⁵⁸

The proposal was examined by Deputy Foreign Minister Károly Szarka, who approved it as an attempt to bring order to a context in which the various bodies had previously operated in a chaotic and disorderly manner. Szarka agreed that a more proactive attitude should not have led to a loss of prestige for Hungarian sport, which needed to be protected and maintained, but he called for greater coordination between the MTST, the missions and the trainers, which he considered to be insufficient, while giving the permanent commission a veto.⁵⁹

Finally, on the subject of initiatives, the deputy minister agreed with the MTST's plans to promote exchanges of trainers and sports meetings:

I would like to emphasise several times the great role of sport in foreign policy. In Africa, and not just in one nation, through sport the way is opened to economic and political relations,

⁵³ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from the Embassy in Accra (October 25, 1962), cited above, 1.

⁵⁴ Ivi, Letter from KÜM to MTST, s.d., 1.

⁵⁵ Ivi, Proposal of the MTST to the KÜM, s.d., 1-3.

⁵⁶ Ivi, 3-5.

⁵⁷ Malonyai, *Aranykór*, 71.

⁵⁸ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Proposal of the MTST (s.d.), 6-7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter from the KÜM to the MTST, November 8, 1962, 1-2.

and the performances of our sportsmen and women can win respect for the homeland and can contribute to the awakening of interest in Hungary.⁶⁰

The ambassadors and the diplomatic corps have a lot of business to attend to, not only sports, but Szarka assured them that they would be able to prepare a preliminary report on the sporting context, thus securing his support in promoting greater interaction between the people's democracies.⁶¹

The good intentions remained on paper. Having decided in mid-November to postpone the tour until January 1963, the MTST announced on 29 December 1962 that it would have to postpone it again. A disaster, according to the Embassy in Guinea, since the affair had undermined its credibility with the local authorities.⁶²

The tour project was revived in October 1963: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the diplomatic corps in Accra that the tour was certain and that the national team would have played in various cities from the end of November, along a route that would have included Dakar, Bamako, Conakry, Abidjan, Accra, Kumasi and Lagos. In short, it was a prestigious project that would have allowed the Hungarian team and Hungarian managers to reach Nigeria from Senegal, via Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Ghana.⁶³ As the MTST was unable to solve all the organisational problems, the sports office asked a French impresario to take charge of the logistics of the initiative. Consequently he was responsible for effectively planning of the initiative, and his negotiations with the various African federations were not always successful. On 28 October 1963, the Embassy in Guinea wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to express their dissatisfaction with the actions of the MTST. According to the Embassy, the impresario had made an economically unsustainable request to Guinea and Mali, leading them to decline the offer. This was another setback for Hungarian sport and for the ambassador, who once again found himself excluded from the decision-making process.⁶⁴

The Embassy wrote again in November 1963, when the ambassador to Guinea, Győző Kárász, presented a new report on the state of Hungarian-African sporting relations. In the text, the diplomat listed the problems on the Hungarian side, recalling the consequences of the failed tour in 1962. He also argued that more attention should have been paid to the political differences between the countries and that entrusting the coordination of the organisation to a French impresario was a significant mistake. According to the Embassy, the impresario's main aim was to make a profit, which he achieved "at the expense of Hungarian footballers' efforts". The impresario favoured economically capable capitalist states like Senegal over politically close countries. The ambassador confessed that Conakry had been asked to pay 1.2 million Guinean francs, an unaffordable sum for a country struggling to even organise a one-week training camp for the West African Games final.⁶⁵ Instead of visiting friendly countries, the Hungarian team ended up touring "pro-imperialist" states like Senegal, Ivory Coast and Togo, which was a significant political disaster. This was exacerbated by the fact that other Eastern bloc teams that had come to Africa, such as the DDR, showed less interest in making money and focused only on demanding reimbursement for their stay.⁶⁶ In conclusion, Kárász made a final appeal to the MTST to correct its mistakes. During their stay in Hungary in 1961, the Guinean leaders had cultivated friendly relations with their Hungarian

⁶⁰ Ivi, 3.

⁶¹ Ivi, 2-3.

⁶² Ivi, Letter from the Conakry Embassy to the KÜM, February 2, 1963, 1.

⁶³ Ivi, 1-2.

⁶⁴ Ivi, From the Conakry Embassy to the KÜM, October 28, 1963, 1.

⁶⁵ Ivi, From the Conakry Embassy to the KÜM, November 27, 1963, 1-2.

⁶⁶ Ivi, 3.

colleagues, and it was difficult to find an acceptable explanation for this new attitude on the part of the sports managers.⁶⁷

This was not the first time that the MTST had turned to an entrepreneur with disastrous results: in the summer of 1957, the sport office had organised a tour of Turkey for Budapest Dózsa with the assistance of a local impresario named Ibrahim Curuksulu. When the last scheduled match was cancelled due to bad weather, he withheld £10,000 from the training fee. This resulted in months of negotiations, during which Curuksulu tried to bring the team back to Turkey, even promising a tour of Anatolia and Israel for a second-tier club like Szeged or Salgótarján.⁶⁸ A year later, the ambassador was acquainted with local managers who explained that Curuksulu was an entrepreneur prone to such scams, and that it was improbable that the Hungarians had received the money back.⁶⁹

In the African case, however, money was only part of the problem; the reputation of Hungarian embassies was also at stake. When the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became aware of the situation, it immediately wrote to the MTST. In its letter, the Ministry pointed out that the sport administration's actions had tarnished the Hungarian name in Mali, Guinea, and Algeria, which were excluded from the tour for economic reasons. To remedy the situation, the Ministry offered to contribute to the expenses and demanded that the three countries be reinstated, emphasizing that the tour served a political purpose.⁷⁰ This was not the first clash between the sports administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1958, the MSzMP Sports Commission had already noted a strong antipathy between the two bodies, pointing out that there was resistance even in the exchange of information.⁷¹ To deal with this situation, it was proposed to increase the autonomy of the sports office by granting the MTST *de facto* sovereignty over sports matters.⁷² While this simplified the balance of power between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the MTST, the latter's neglect of the propaganda potential of its actions also had unpleasant consequences.

Although the Hungarian newspapers announced that the African tour of 1963 would include Mali and Guinea,⁷³ it was not possible to extend it: in November 1963, the MTST informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that it could not include the three countries, defending the choice it had made. It was necessary to enlist a professional impresario because the MTST lacked sufficient knowledge of the African context and sporting possibilities there.⁷⁴

In December 1963, the Olympic team travelled to Africa and landed in Dakar, where they played against Senegal, winning 8-3. The team then travelled to the Ivory Coast, where, despite the warm weather, they defeated the local national team 4-1.⁷⁵ They later moved to neighbouring Togo, where they narrowly defeated the locals in Lome. This match proved to be a significant test for the Hungarians, who won 3-2, with the visitors congratulating and pointing out that it was the toughest match of the tour.⁷⁶ Finally, the team travelled to Ghana, the only country with two matches scheduled. The first stop was Kumasi, where the Hungarians faced the prestigious Asante Kotoko, defeating them 4-1. They then travelled to the capital, Accra, where they beat the national team

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Vegyés, box 99, folder 15/i, Letter for the Dózsa, May 18, 1957, 1 and Letter from the Istanbul Consulate to the KÜM, September 22, 1957, 1.

⁶⁹ Ivi, Letter from the Istanbul Consulate to the KÜM, June 25, 1958, 1.

⁷⁰ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from KÜM to MTST, November 28, 1963, 1.

⁷¹ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Vegyés, box 99, folder 15/i, Resolution of the MSzMP Sports Commission, cited above (June 9, 1958), 2.

⁷² Ivi, 3.

⁷³ "Sikerült edzőmérkőzést játszott az NDK ellen készülő labdarúgó-válogatott", *Magyar Nemzet*, October 31, 1963.

⁷⁴ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Vegyés, box 99, folder 15/i, Letter from MTST to KÜM, November 28, 1963, 1.

⁷⁵ "Mérkőzések negvenfokos hőségben", *Népszabadság*, December 14, 1963.

⁷⁶ "Magyar labdarúgó-csapatok külföldön", *Magyar Nemzet*, December 10, 1963.

2-1.⁷⁷ The tour garnered significant coverage in Hungarian newspapers, with players sharing their positive experiences in Africa and describing the development of football on the continent.⁷⁸ According to the Hungarian embassies, local newspapers closely followed the tour. The only downside was Ohene Djan's attitude, which did not foster an atmosphere of cooperation and cordiality. Nevertheless, the team succeeded in winning over the Ghanaian public and deserved to be on the front page of local newspapers such as the *Daily Graphic*.⁷⁹

Regarding Algeria, Mali, and Guinea, the three countries excluded from the tour, the MTST adopted two different strategies. It was easy to reach an agreement with the Algerian federation, also because the limited travel costs, and the Hungarian Olympic team travelled to Algiers at the end of December 1963, defeating the locals 3-0.⁸⁰ The same solution was not feasible for Mali and Guinea due to the greater distance and cost, so a compromise was proposed. A tour was planned by the Vasas of Győr, the recent winners of the Hungarian championship. The terms dictated by the MTST were clear: the Hungarian team would play five matches between 20 February and 10 March, with the total cost of 360,000 forints to be covered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸¹ In January 1964, however, the situation changed and the Győr team cancelled the trip.⁸² Undoubtedly, the prestige of Hungarians in the region suffered: while Guinea had visited Budapest twice (1960 and 1961), no Hungarian team had ever played in Conakry, although there had been two Hungarian trainers since 1959. This was a paradoxical situation, especially as Guinea had already been visited by other socialist teams. Local authorities blamed the Embassy for this difficult situation.⁸³ The diplomatic corps, for example, pointed out that Spartak Brno's visit had significantly improved the Czechoslovak relations with Guinea, despite the Czechoslovak team not being one of the best at home, and only achieving a draw and a defeat in Africa. The important thing was that they were there.⁸⁴

Eventually, the Hungarians fulfilled their promise, but not until October. Instead of sending the prestigious Vasas, they sent the much more modest Csepel, a team in the bottom half of the league. Nevertheless, the Hungarian team participated in the international football tournament held in Conakry to mark the 6th anniversary of the country's liberation. They defeated Sierra Leone 7-0, beat the hosts 3-2, and defeated Banin 4-0 to win the tournament.⁸⁵

The event also marked the end of Guinea's honeymoon with the Eastern bloc. Relations had already been critical, but in 1964 they entered a crisis. The Congo crisis revealed the limits of the USSR's influence in Africa and the United State's constraints on the expansion of communism.⁸⁶ Despite these problems, the Hungarian embassies in Africa and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs attached great importance to the African tour, highlighting the lack of coordination between the Eastern bloc on sports policy, especially towards African countries. The breakdown of cultural relations between Guinea and Hungary had little to do with the international situation, and more to do with the fact that MTST had a limited budget and showed little interest in developing relations with African countries.

⁷⁷ "Olimpiai válogatott - Ashanti Kotoki 4:1", *Népsport*, December 14, 1963 and K. Lakat, "Olimpiai válogatott - Ghana 2:1", *ivi*, December 17, 1963.

⁷⁸ "Egy hónap Afrikában", *Népszabadság*, 3 January 1964 and "Kitűnő alkalom volt az afrikai portya az olimpiai csapat összeváltására", *Labdarúgás* 10, no. 1 (1964).

⁷⁹ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from the Accra Embassy to the KÜM, January 17, 1964, 1-2.

⁸⁰ "Olimpiai válogatott - Algéria válogatott 3:0", *Népsport*, December 28, 1963.

⁸¹ MNL OL, XIX-J-1-K, 1945-1964, Afrika, box 1, folder 15/i, Letter from MTST to KÜM, January 2, 1964, 1.

⁸² *Ivi*, Letter from KÜM to MTST, January 8, 1964, 1.

⁸³ *Ivi*, Letter from the Conakry Embassy to the KÜM, January 21, 1964, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, 2.

⁸⁵ "7:0-ra győzött a Csepel Guineában", *Népsport*, October 6, 1964 and *Csepel - Guinea A válogatott 3-2*, *ibid.*, October 8, 1964; "Nemzetközi labdarúgó mérkőzés", *ivi*, October 11, 1964.

⁸⁶ Iandolo, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Soviet Model of Development'", 95.

Three whistles: athletes or ambassadors?

The case of Hungarian cultural diplomacy in Africa in the early 1960s illustrates both the achievements and limitations of governments using sport as a vehicle to foster relations with newly decolonised countries. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the diplomatic corps were aware of the political implications, and made efforts to promote exchanges between countries, the MTST showed little interest. This lack of enthusiasm stemmed from absence of compelling incentives for Hungarian athletes to engage with Africa and the constrained budget of the Hungarian sport administration. Sending trainers and staff to the continent was not too demanding, nor was hosting African teams in Hungary. However, managing the tours proved to be prohibitively expensive, both logistically—given the lack of knowledge of the African reality—and financially. Many countries seeking financial support from the Eastern bloc were unwilling to pay the sums promised by “pro-imperialist” states, and the Hungarian sports offices could not organise the tours without the help of impresarios who were primarily interested in making a profit.⁸⁷ The persistent lack of funding for sport became a consistent feature of János Kádár's government, and it deteriorated over the years. This decline resulted in a reduction in the number of sports clubs and athletes during the 1970s.⁸⁸ While other people's democracies, such as the DDR, were dedicating significant efforts to engage with Africa, Hungary turned away from the continent.

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⁸⁷ Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999): 401.

⁸⁸ See Katalin Szikora, “Sport and the Olympic Movement in Hungary (1945-1989)”, en *The Shadow of Totalitarianism: Sport and the Olympic Movement in the Visegrád Countries 1945-1989* (Prague: Charles University, 2015): 170-71.

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