

SOVIET SOCCER PROPAGANDA

A Soviet Union team toured Canada in 1956 — the final game took place in Toronto and marked Varsity Stadium's first-ever nighttime match

BY EDWARD BROWN



The 17-member Soviet soccer squad aboard the Trans-Canada Air Lines flight approaching Montreal's Dorval Airport in the summer of 1956 anticipated anti-communist demonstrators at the arrival gate. Instead, a friendly reception including a delegation from the Soviet Embassy, Football Association of Canada officials, and a contingent of media awaited. The USSR team posed for photographs and exchanged Russian cigarettes for Canadian brands with reporters.

Sixteen years before the celebrated 1972 hockey Summit Series, the Soviet Union accepted an invitation from the Football Association of Canada, precursor to today's Canadian Soccer Association, for an elite Soviet team to play exhibition games against Canada's best. It was first time a Soviet athletic team had competed in Canada. The two-week tour featured hospitality, demonstrations, and lopsided games until the final match in Toronto, when the Canadians finally gave the Soviets a serious challenge in a rain-soaked evening encounter.

In the autumn of 1955, relations between Ottawa and Moscow were delicate. Negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement between the countries were almost complete, but the Soviets viewed Canada's integrated nuclear-defence alliance with the U.S. with hostility.

Soviet officials recognized the benefits of a goodwill visit but initially demanded Ottawa provide assurances anti-communist demonstrations wouldn't occur during the trip. The refusal to meet this request from Lester B. Pearson's Department of External Affairs did not prevent plans from advancing, however. To concerned voters, Ottawa stressed that the cost of the visit, roughly \$45,000, would be covered by the Football Association of Canada, not taxpayers.

Feted at an Alouettes-Roughriders exhibition game in Montreal the day following their arrival, the Soviets then flew to Ottawa for a reception at the Soviet Embassy. While in the capital, University of Ottawa officials informed the visitors that the Varsity Oval was unavailable due to construction, forcing the cancellation of their match against a local all-star team. The decision appeared to be more based on anti-Russian sentiment when a university spokesperson admitted "We feel it is just as well not to have any Russians, soccer players or otherwise, around our school."

Ticket sales in Montreal were brisk for the first game against the Quebec All-Stars at Delorimier Stadium. A heavy police presence greeted 12,000 cheering fans. The home team wore blue shirts, the visitors red. A smattering of boos accompanied the USSR's national anthem.

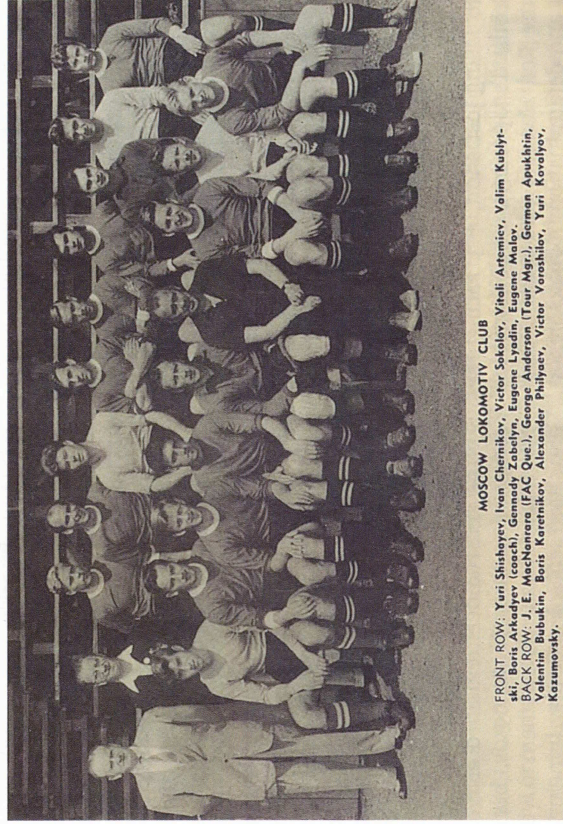
The visiting team struggled to adjust to a peculiar field condition. Groundskeepers at Delorimier Stadium, home of the Montreal Royals baseball team, refused to remove the pitcher's mound, an unfamiliar obstacle that the Lokomotivs quickly adapted their play around.

The Soviets trounced the Quebec team 9-0. At the game's conclusion, fans charged the field to congratulate the Soviets, catching police off-guard.

Lokomotiv coach Boris Arkadyev told a reporter after the match "We hope future games in Canada will not be played in baseball parks."

The next game, against the Manitoba All-Stars in Winnipeg, was a lopsided 10-0 in favour of the visitors. Outcomes were similar in Vancouver and Calgary, where the USSR team beat the B.C. All-Stars 5-2 and the Western All-Stars 6-4, respectively.

Commentators noted differences in the teams' playing styles. The Soviets



MOSCOW LOKOMOTIV CLUB
 FRONT ROW: Yuri Shishayev, Ivan Chernikov, Victor Sokolov, Leonid Kuznetsov, Valim Kublyev, Valim Kublyev
 BACK ROW: J. E. MacNair (FAC Que.), George Anderson (Tour Mgr.), German Apukhtin, Valentin Babukin, Boris Keretnikov, Alexander Philyaev, Victor Voroshilov, Yuri Kovalyov, Kazumovsky.

The original invitation would've matched the USSR's best soccer team, Moscow Dynamo, against a top-tier Scottish or English team in a match in Toronto. By August 2, 1956, when Soviet players Lokomotiv would tour the country playing matches against teams comprised of each region's best players. At the Soviets' insistence, Ukrainian nationals weren't permitted on the Canadian rosters.

played a swift game with little body contact, rarely substituted players, and executed intricate passes. Canadian players struggled to keep pace with the speedy opposition.

Demonstrators appeared at venues, but not nearly in the numbers anticipated. With a mandate to free their homeland from communist rule, members of the Canadian League for the Liberation of Ukraine followed the Soviets across the country, protesting their presence. In Montreal, a member climbed onto the stadium roof, littering the bleachers with anti-Russian pamphlets. They shouted slurs at the Soviet squad at the Winnipeg airport and dispersed leaflets. Officials prevented them from purchasing a block of 1,000 tickets for the game at the city's Alexander Park. During a scrum with reporters, Coach Arkadyev claimed he couldn't understand opposition to their visit, saying "We are only here to play soccer."

The tour culminated with a match at Toronto's Varsity Stadium against

a national rather than regional team, although the Canada All-Stars roster was almost identical to the team that had competed in Calgary and Vancouver. In the lead-up to the game, the Soviets dined on borscht served at a luncheon hosted by Mayor Nathan Phillips at the Royal York Hotel and visited Niagara Falls.

Approximately 18,000 fans filled Toronto's Varsity Stadium for the final game on August 18. At the behest of the Canadian League for the Liberation of Ukraine, Toronto's Ukrainian community boycotted the match.

It was the first sporting event at Varsity Stadium to be played in the evening, using the floodlights that had just been installed. The Soviets found this timing surprising. A Lokomotiv player observed "At home, the evening hours are reserved for theatre, the ballet, and other relaxing recreation."

At the insistence of Coach Arkadyev, the Soviets demanded that a FIFA-recognized referee officiate the game to meet international regula-

tions. Two Canadians had graduated from the FIFA referee school in Switzerland, and one, Ray Morgan, conveniently called Toronto home.

Rain began before kickoff and didn't let up. Initially, Lokomotiv's play was lacklustre, while the Canadians swarmed the Soviets' zone. The game was close, tied 1-1, until the closing minutes when the Soviets got the winner past Canada's goalkeeper.

Before the Soviets' departure, players, organizers, and government officials unanimously agreed on the success of Lokomotiv's visit, noting a nationwide surge in interest in the beautiful game. The Football Association of Canada accepted an invitation for a rematch the following year in Moscow.

The Soviet Union's violent crack-down on the Hungarian uprising later that autumn upended those plans and delayed the rematch by four years — when the Canadian team that visited Moscow in September 1960 would lose four consecutive games. †