

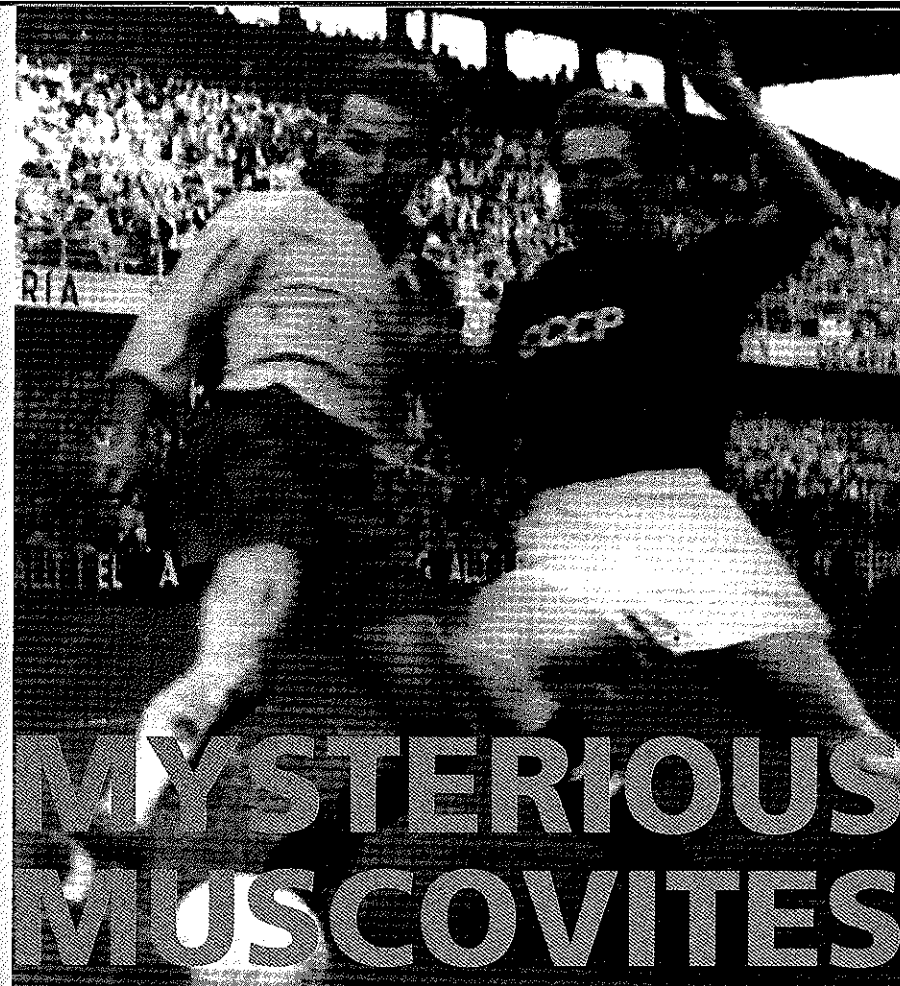
'Some people think football is a matter of life and death... I can assure them that it is much more serious than that'. Bill Shankly's often-quoted words were sheer exaggeration and remain so. But there are times when football is a very serious business. The four-match British tour undertaken in November 1945 by Moscow Dynamo, champions of the Soviet Union, was in this category.

Sport and politics

It is important to set the tour in the context of British-Soviet relations as the wartime alliance crumbled into suspicion and hostility. The idea of matches between British and Soviet teams had first surfaced in 1944 when war against a mutual enemy meant that there was every reason to promote British-Soviet goodwill. Stanley Rous, secretary of the Football Association, made the first approach when he told Maisky, the Soviet ambassador, that he would be pleased to make arrangements for matches between English and Soviet sides. The idea resurfaced during Mrs Churchill's visit to Moscow in May 1945, but it was not until October that it was finally agreed that Dynamo should make the tour. By then British-Soviet relations were entering an unhappy phase, prefiguring the onset of the Cold War.

From the start sport and politics were entangled. Dynamo's tour, as Robert Edelman has argued, was 'the first example of the Soviet regime's use of sport for diplomatic and political purposes'. To maximise the propaganda benefit it was important that Dynamo should return from Britain with its formidable reputation enhanced or, at least, intact. As the tour progressed there was no shortage of British commentators willing to put an ideological slant on Dynamo's performance both on and off the field. This was more than a game, it was political football.

Even without the political dimension Dynamo's visit was an important milestone. Matches between British and foreign club sides were rare events. The British associations had become isolated



MYSTERIOUS MUSCOVITES

Moscow Dynamo's British Tour 1945

Ronald Kowalski and Dilwyn Porter

place a famous series of football matches into the context of sports history, politics and international relations.

from the world game, having withdrawn from FIFA (the International Federation Football Association) in 1928 and turned their backs on the World Cup. There had been no previous sporting contact with the Soviet Union at any level. Though its propaganda boasted of progress in sport under socialism, the Soviets had shown very little inclination to put this to the test in international competition. All this added to Dynamo's mystique and helped to generate enormous interest in the matches they played against Chelsea, Cardiff City, Arsenal and Rangers.

As far as the Soviet Union was concerned the decision to send Moscow Dynamo to fly the flag in Britain was highly political. Dynamo were the current champions but they were also closely associated with the NKVD, Stalin's secret police, and its chief, Beria, who used ruthless methods to advance Dynamo's cause. Star players from Moscow Torpedo, Dynamo's principal rivals, had been sent to the Gulag on trumped-up charges in 1942, clearing the way for his favourites. There is some evidence to suggest that Dynamo players who underper-

formed could expect similar treatment. The Daily Express reporter who observed that the players gave the impression 'that if they are beaten they will get six months hard in Siberia' stumbled on an important truth.

The tour

With these pressures to contend with it was hardly surprising that preliminary exchanges with the Football Association were somewhat tetchy. Late notification of their arrival made it impossible to reserve hotel accommodation so the Dynamo party spent its first night in England in Army barracks. Rous conceded that these temporary quarters were 'bare and uncomfortable'; a Soviet official described them as 'feudal'. It was not the happiest of beginnings. A subsequent meeting with FA officials to agree Dynamo's itinerary and other matters dragged on for a tense five hours.

Much was made of the conditions which Dynamo officials insisted were met before their players would kick a ball in anger. Most of these, as FA records reveal, were uncontentious. But, in view of the controversies which were to erupt later, Dynamo's insistence that they should meet only club sides and that they should be given early notice of the teams selected to play against them was especially important.

With the awkward preliminaries out of the way the football could begin. Dynamo had been disappointed that their hosts had been unwilling to disrupt domestic schedules to allow them to play on Saturday afternoons. Any anxieties about gate receipts evaporated when 74,496 people paid to see them take on

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A Soviet portrayal from 1947 of Stalin's soccer soldiers.

Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on a Tuesday afternoon, 13 November. It is clear that the actual attendance that afternoon was higher, perhaps 85,000 or more. Stewards were overwhelmed when the crowd broke down the gates before the start; and some spectators broke into adjacent houses to view the match from the rooftops. Semichastnyi, Dynamo's captain, later observed that safety had been sacrificed to the profit motive. Dynamo were clearly a huge attraction. So, too, was Tommy Lawton, England's centre-forward, signed by Chelsea from Everton for £14,000 a few days previously.

Dynamo went 2-0 down but recovered, delighting spectators with controlled passing and movement off the ball. Having pulled back to 2-2 the visitors went behind before equalising in the closing minutes. There was, it seems, a suspicion of offside about Dynamo's third goal. Lawton, who protested, was unimpressed when the referee mumbled something about 'diplomacy'. 'You've done us out of our bonus', he complained. Despite this controversy the sports pages glowed with praise for Dynamo's performance. Charles Buchan, former England captain, writing in the *News Chronicle*, was typical: 'No team has ever given a better exhibition of class football and failed to win'. The view comes across that Dynamo had put on a display of soccer arts that had been largely forgotten in the English game. They were compared to the legendary Corinthians

or to Scottish teams of some lost golden age before the more physical, long-ball game had come to predominate.

A few days later Dynamo travelled to Cardiff. The party was in a more relaxed mood. They visited the docks and a coalmine before taking Cardiff City apart 10-1 in front of 45,000 spectators. Readers of some Soviet newspapers had every reason to get excited, having been told that Cardiff, then in the Third Division South, were currently placed above both Chelsea and Arsenal in the First Division! Even so it was an impressive performance. 'If British football is to compete with this spectacular stuff', observed the Cardiff-based *Western Mail*, 'we shall have to revise our views on tactics and training'.

It was at this point that the British press began to wake up to the idea that national prestige was at stake. There was an increasing tendency to write about the football in ideological terms, contrasting the virtues of British 'individualism', as epitomised by Stanley Matthews, with Soviet 'collectivism'. The Communist *Daily Worker* was happy to make mischief. Its reporter told how a cheerful Muscovite had stopped him in the street to suggest that Britain might trade its atomic weapons secrets for some Russian footballers. The right-wing press in Britain responded by calling for a representative side, preferably England, to take on the Soviet champions. Not surprisingly, Dynamo, for whom the tour had been an outstanding success to date, con-

'Dynamo won 4-3 but in farcical circumstances, fog having descended before the kick-off. "It was", wrote the *Daily Mail*, "...one of the most exciting games 54,000 people have never seen".'

firmed the intention to adhere to their agreed schedule. It would not have made sense to put hard-won propaganda gains at risk in such a match.

The Arsenal and Rangers matches

In these circumstances the match against Arsenal, then the most famous of English clubs abroad, assumed a special significance. With many of his players still in the armed forces, Arsenal's manager had a genuine problem in assembling a team. He borrowed players from other clubs, a common expedient in the first post-war season. Dynamo protested loudly when it was announced that the 'guests' would include Matthews and Mortensen, both current England internationals. As the astute Rous observed later, 'they wanted Moscow and the world to know that it was not the Arsenal they were playing'. Dynamo were taking out an insurance policy. If they lost, it would be no disgrace to have been beaten by 'England'; if they drew or won, the prestige of Soviet football would advance by leaps and bounds.

Dynamo won 4-3 but in farcical circumstances, fog having descended before the kick-off. 'It was', wrote the *Daily Mail*, '...one of the most exciting games 54,000 people have never seen'. The weather and some indifferent refereeing contributed to an ill-tempered game. Ronnie Rooke, Arsenal's centre-forward, borrowed from Fulham, complained that he had been on the wrong end of several late tackles by Semichastnyi; Yakushin, Dynamo's coach, complained in turn that 'the English' had been 'unsporting'. The post-match atmosphere may have been sour but there is no doubt that this victory was especially sweet for Dynamo and for the propagandists back home. Soviet newspapers referred to Arsenal as if they were the English national team.

Controversy followed Dynamo to Glasgow for their final match against Rangers, though they made some effort to cultivate local goodwill by visiting the Clyde shipyards. The major pre-match argument concerned Jimmy Caskie, signed by Rangers from Everton two days before the game. Dynamo simply refused to play if Caskie was included. With

90,000 tickets already sold, Rangers capitulated. By this stage of the tour British press coverage had become noticeably more hostile. The 'mysterious' Russians had been transformed by the *Daily Mail* into the 'silent' Russians who had 'nothing to say - even through their interpreters'. They were much criticised for what the *Daily Mirror* called their 'Greta Garbo act'. Like the famous Hollywood star they just wanted to be left alone.

The match itself was a very physical encounter, with Rangers responding robustly after Dynamo had taken a two-goal lead. An element of farce intruded when, for a few minutes, the visitors had twelve players on the field, the referee being unfamiliar with the 'foreign' practice of substitution. Rangers' second-half performance earned them a draw, though the visitors were handicapped by an injury to 'Tiger' Khomich, their goalkeeper. Dynamo, like many away sides at Ibrox before and since, vigorously disputed the penalty award that led to Rangers' late equaliser.

Results of the tour

Dynamo returned home undefeated. Their success was assiduously exploited by the Soviet regime for home consumption. Special film reports were prepared for cinema distribution across the country. *Krasnyi sport*, the leading sports paper, observed that the tour had been 'a triumph for our school of football, which is based on collectivism, organisation and the unbending will for victory, the characteristic qualities of the Soviet man'. The impact of this barrage of publicity, especially on those who did not count themselves amongst the supporters of the 'gorodviki' ('the secret policemen'), is impossible to assess.

What impact did they make on their hosts? The quality of Dynamo's performances was sufficient to disturb, for a time, the complacency of Britain's football industry and those who ran it. Some football writers of a leftist inclination, notably Clifford Webb in the *Daily Herald*, believed that there were lessons to be learned from the 'scientific' approach to diet and training from which Dynamo appeared to benefit. But it required more

Books and Articles on Dynamo's tour

Robert Edelman, 'Stalin & his Soccer Soldiers', *History Today*, February 1993

Ronald Kowalski and Dilwyn Porter, 'Political Football: Moscow Dynamo in Britain, 1945', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, August 1997

Simon Kuper, *Football Against the Enemy* (Orion, London), 1994

John Moynihan, *The Soccer Syndrome*, (Simon and Schuster, London, 1987)

Rogan Taylor and Andrew Ward, *Kicking and Screaming: An Oral History of Football in England* (Robson, London 1995)

shocks at international level, administered by Eire in 1949, the United States in 1950 and, especially, Hungary in 1953, before England began to adopt a more technocratic approach to the national game.

As for British-Soviet relations, there is little to suggest that Dynamo's visit made any difference. Sport, however high the stakes may appear to be, is not the real substance of international relations. Opinion polls suggested that the British public became less sympathetic towards the Soviets after 1945 but, as East-West relations were deteriorating generally, it would be simplistic to attribute this to football. Some, like George Orwell, took a pessimistic view, claiming that the tour had created 'fresh animosities on both sides'. But he was not a man of the terraces and took an exaggerated view of 'the vicious passions which football provokes'. The London window-cleaner, happy to talk to John Moynihan about his afternoon out at Stamford Bridge - 'he said it was the greatest match he had ever seen, and the crowd the biggest ever' - was probably a more reliable witness. Such memories ensured that Dynamo's place in British football folklore was secure.

Ronald Kowalski's latest book is *The Russian Revolution* (Routledge, 1997). Dilwyn Porter has recently contributed to *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain since 1939*. Both teach History at University College Worcester.