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Stamps Don't Lie: Sports, Military, and National Identity Postage Stamps As a Mirror of Aggressive Soviet and Russian Propaganda

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Abstract

During the 20th century, authoritarian regimes willingly embraced sport as a vivid arena for demonstrating their superiority. Prior research on postage stamps issued by such regimes revealed certain patterns associated with periods of aggressive internal and external rhetoric, whereby postage stamps served as a channel for government propaganda. In the current study, we looked at sports, military, and national identity stamps. Applying the social-semiotic method, we first examined the messages sports stamps have conveyed in Soviet Union and Russia. Then, the quantitative paradigm was employed to evaluate the trends in the issuance of propagandistic stamps by post-WW2 USSR and Russia. Finally, we expanded the scope by looking at stamp issuance in Germany, Italy, and USSR in pre-WW2 and WW2 years. This heavily militaristic "landscape" was used mainly as a basis for comparison with the issuance policy of Putin's Russia. The results shed light on some striking similarities across the different countries and periods. These findings are discussed in the context of the recent geopolitical situation.

Keywords: Postage stamps, Russia, authoritarian regime, propaganda, Cold War

Introduction

Scholars see stamps as tiny, printed ambassadors, broadcasting a government narrative to domestic and international audiences (Brunn, 2000). Over the past two decades, stamp-bearing letters have become increasingly rare. Nevertheless, many countries continue to issue stamps far beyond their actual usage (Lachover & Gavriely-Nuri, 2013). This is mainly due to the important role stamps play as a unique channel for government messages. Stamps are bearers of symbols (Reid, 1984) and public manifestations of nationality; moreover, they are also emblematic of political affairs (Altman, 1991).

Stamp issuance policies have been studied in geopolitical (Brunn, 2000; 2011; Frewer, 2002; Raento, 2006; 2009; Raento & Brunn, 2005), sociological (Lachover & Gavrieli-Nuri, 2013) and historical (Child, 2008; Jeffery, 2006) contexts. Stamps can be used to forge a desired national identity, a tactic applicable in both democratic and authoritarian regimes (Frewer, 2002; Raento & Brunn, 2005). For instance, British imperial iconography sends its message of greatness by "silence" – the name of the state (UK or GB) is simply absent from its stamps. There is only a portrait of a queen or a king, and this has been a tradition of British stamps since the 19th century (Jeffery, 2006). Portugal's postage stamps convey a message of former greatness with

reminders of its prominent colonial past, its naval conquests and its "terra nova" geographic discoveries (Cusack, 2005).

New and redefined states engage in both internally and externally directed propaganda (Gelber, 1992; Reid, 1984; Stoetzer, 1953). For instance, Grant (1995) analysed stamps in order to show the way the Soviet regime conceived the structure of its new socialist society during the 1930s. Brunn (2011) pointed out similarities between the Soviet stamp issuance policy of the 1930s and the enhancement of national identity through stamps in post-soviet Russia. The same tendencies of evolving national and ideological messages were found in the stamps that were issued by Arab countries during their periods of self-determination from 1920s through 1970s (Grant, 1995). A deliberate policy of redefinition can also be traced in Japanese stamps after WW2 (Dobson, 2002; Frewer, 2002).

The Cold War is a global historical period beginning after the WW2 and ending with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. This period is identified by the rivalry between two nuclear-based superpowers and their camps, and by the superpowers' competition for hegemony over the decolonizing world. The Soviet Union's communist propaganda during the Cold War was soaked with sharp ideological confrontation against the capitalist West, manifested by increased nationalism and militarism (Duara, 2011). Over the last 20 years, and especially since Putin's 2007 speech in Munich (Shanker & Landler, 2007) and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has embarked on a new round of the Cold War against the West (Karaganov, 2018).

Sport has long been mobilized to advance political and social agendas (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010) and, without exception, played a pivotal role in the ideological battle during the first (Riordan, 1977; 1996) and the second rounds (Altukhov & Nauright, 2018) of the Cold War. In this respect, the sport-stamp combination emerges as a relevant and interesting domain for sociological and communication research.

It seems that sports stamps, which display the themes of strength, struggle, and triumph in competition, can package messages in clear and direct forms. Our aim is to understand to what extent sports stamps were and continue to be used as propagandistic instruments. First, we focused only on sport and qualitatively examined sports stamps issued throughout the history of the Soviet Union and Russian Federation. With the help of social-semiotic analysis, we addressed nuances in the messages sports stamps have conveyed across the different historical periods.

Then in the second stage, to locate sports stamps in a proper context, we have broadened the canvas and looked at national (ideological) identity and military stamps as well. We quantitatively compared the Russian Federation issuance policy with that of USSR during the Cold War.

To complete this investigation, we decided to compare the recent Russian issuance policy to a prominent historical reference point – three European authoritarian and nationalistic states that relied heavily on visual propaganda during the pre-WW2 period (Frazer, 1980). We have conjectured that Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, and Stalin's Soviet Union issuance of propagandistic stamps on the verge of WW2 can serve as an illuminating mirror.

The Social-Semiotic Framework as a Method

First, we present the social-semiotic framework (Impara, 2018; Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) as a tool for understanding social dynamics through an analysis of symbols (e.g. stamps). Each postage stamp is a concentrated sign carrying a certain symbolism. Cultural semiotics (e.g. Eco, 1977; Lotman, 1990; Peirce, 1938) and social semiotics (Kress, 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Lemke, 1997; 2009) are methodological tools for interpretation of this symbolism. The cultural-semiotic framework is inclined to see human culture and society as "the memory of a community" constructed as a "system, of some rules for translating direct experience into text" (Lotman, Uspensky, & Mihaychuk, 1978, p. 214). Almost a century ago, Ogden and Richards (1923) suggested the theory of a triangle "referent-reference-symbol", where "referent" is an object of the material world, "reference" is a human thought (or transmitter), and "symbol" is a word or other codified pictogram. According to Eco (1977), the information sent by the referent can go back and forth between transmitter and receiver in three possible ways:

1. "information ↔ reference"– a direct channel through which the receiver has the possibility to adequately refer to other causal relations of information without its symbolization;
2. "information ↔ symbol"– a direct channel through which information is received "truly" – as is – without reference that imputes one's relation to a message in its codified (symbolic) form;
3. "information ↔ reference ↔ symbol"– a two-stage channel through which the receiver has the possibility to correctly refer to information by its referring, and after that by final symbolization.

Peirce's (1938) concept of index vs. symbol is related to the above-mentioned triangle, whereas "index" can be interpreted in terms of referent-reference non-symbolic message (i.e. text), and "symbol" can be viewed as non-textual message. Social-semiotic theory elaborates on this model in a way that is quite useful for the practical analysis of multimodal "texts" (Lemke, 2009, p. 284), such as music, visual and other combined non-linguistic translators of information. Consequently, stamps, cartons, leaflets, and posters possess the ability to convey governmental messages as they depict both direct texts (i.e. index) and

indirect (cartoonish or conversely heroic) symbols. Postage stamps in particular are exceptionally identified with the state, since they carry the name of the country, the national emblems, and in some cases a portrait of the monarch.

In application of the theory, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) developed the multimodal method for social-semiotic analysis of symbols stemming from the seminal work of Michael Halliday (e.g. Halliday, 1978). Implementation and elaboration of this method enables an analysis of symbols from three dimensions (Impara, 2018; Jewitt, 1997; Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Van Leeuwen, 2001):

1. Representational meanings that can be divided into: (a) narrative representations (there is connection between participants by common actions or essential vectors of actions); and (b) conceptual patterns (no actions nor vectors connect participants, which are represented as timeless essences)
2. Interactive meanings that explore how viewers of a stamp can receive the image. Three aspects inform interactive meanings: (a) distance (objects and subjects in the image can be close to or far from a viewer); (b) contact (people inside the picture look directly at viewers); and (c) the point of view (for example, the view of image from above, from the side or facing the viewer).
3. Compositional meanings refer to the way the content of an image is structured: the location of different images on the picture information (top, bottom, centre, depth); presentation of participants together (belonging to…) or separate, the background of a picture joined to the main message or neutral.

As Jewitt explained (1997, p. 2):

"*The method makes explicit how people produce and communicate meaning through the spatial configurations of visual elements in western societies. Meaning is encoded in the structures of images: the form of representation; the presentation of people, objects and landscape; the composition; and its modality and medium*".

Consequently, the multimodal method was employed to identify and categorize propagandistic stamps according to themes and the social or political messages they convey.

Sports Stamps

The propagandistic value of sports stamps can be divided into two main channels. The first relates to competitive sport and international sport achievements, through which the state demonstrates its general competitiveness and its ideological, political, and potential military superiority over its opponents. This kind of national superiority is demonstrated by stamp issues dedicated to: (1) games and sports competitions (traditional, national, or international); (2) great national athletes; (3) prominent persons promoting sport; (4) sports associations, memorable dates, signs, symbols, and emblems.

The second channel of sports stamps propaganda is mass sport, physical education, and active leisure. The propagandistic task of such issues is in demonstrating the high standard of living enjoyed by the citizens of the country. Those stamps (especially characteristic of countries in the former Socialist bloc) depict three main topics: (1) mass sports events (such as parades and sport processions, public marathons, etc.); (2) active rest and leisure, including hunting, fishing, mountain-climbing and hiking; (3) sports facilities, inventories, and transport. Alongside the internal significance, transmitting a certain (good) standard of life through such stamps also conveys an international propagandistic message to richer countries.

An important notion here is that Russian cultural interpretation of sport includes chess competitions and different technical sports (e.g. radio-controlled model races).

Sports Stamps in USSR and Russia: Social-Semiotic Analysis

Although sport has been a tool used as political propaganda in authoritarian regimes as early as the 1930s (e.g. "Mussolini's FIFA World Cup" 1934 and "Hitler's Olympic Games" 1936), the use of sports stamps remained quite limited during this period.

The USSR was founded in 1922, but the first sports stamps series was issued in 1935. It comprised of 10 large, artistically accurate rhomb stamps dedicated to the *Worldwide Spartakiada*, an international sporting event organized by the Red Sport International (Sportintern). Each stamp depicted a specific popular competitive sport (see Figure 1, left).

The last and the most expensive stamp in this series (Figure 1, right) depicts the united world proletariat: a parade, a column of marching athletes, led by a Soviet athlete with a red flag; following close behind him is a German comrade with a clenched fist and the greeting "Roth front!", followed by the other representatives of the Sportintern.



Figure 1. Examples from the first sports stamps series from 1935

The word itself, "Spartakiada", is not dervied from the word "sport", but from the famed *Spartacus* (Spartak in Russian), who was the leader of a rebellion of gladiators and slaves in Rome. In the forming of the new Soviet "mythology" during the 1920s and the 1930s, this rebellion was considered as a dialectical threshold for the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors (Dombrovsky, 1978). Spartacus became the ultimate symbol of struggle and masculinity. Consequently, one of the largest sports unions of USSR, established in 1935, was "Spartak". Naturally, stamps dedicated to the *Worldwide Spartakiada* aimed to confront the ideology of the bourgeois world.

Looking at this series through the prism of social semiotics, we can apprehend it in a broader context. The young Soviet regime negated the bourgeois world and its values. Therefore, the International Olympic Movement, which symbolized the so-called "bourgeois gentlemen's sport", became a target of opposition and boycotting. In 1921, the III Congress of the *Comintern* (Communist International Union) united the workers' sports organizations of Russia, Italy, Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, Scandinavian countries, and Holland and had established the "Sportintern" (Goloschapov, 2001). This organization became a part of the physical culture movement in Soviet Russia, focused on the physical preparation of young people for productive labour and military service (Kun, 1978). In this vein, on the right-hand stamp in Figure 1 we can see the abbreviation "GTO" on the shirt of the Soviet athlete (in free translation "I am ready for labour and defence!").

The first "GTO complex" (see Figure 2, middle stamp) consisted of 21 tests, most of which were of a practical, physical, and military nature (see https://www.gto.ru/history): running 100, 500 and 1000 meters; long jump and high jump; throwing a grenade (Figure 2, left stamp); pull-ups; rope- or pole-climbing; lifting and moving with a 32-kg box; swimming; riding a bicycle or motorcycle; driving a tractor or car; rowing for 1 km; skiing 3 and 10 km (Figure 2, right stamp); horse-riding and moving with a gas mask for 1 km.



Figure 2. Examples from the 1940 "GTO" stamps series

The orientation of the Soviet, and later, Russian propaganda clearly related to the physical military essence of the mandatory youth GTO test. It seems that during the pre-WW2 period it stemmed mostly from the ideology of "all-world revolution" which was a key aim of Stalin's regime (e.g. Klepinin, 1930; James, 1937). Another significant facet of the Soviet agenda in pre- and post-WW2 years is "Phyzkultura". The term is an abbreviation of the German term "Körperkultur" (body culture). Stamps celebrated physical culture through the demonstration of mass processions of tall and physically strong Soviet youth.

In Figure 3, we can see four stamps of "phyzkulturnyi parad". The two stamps from the left show marching formations of young and energetic women. These vivid images of healthy and fertile Soviet people, who are ready to work and fight for the cause, correspond to what Man-



Figure 3. Comparison of symbolism in four Soviet stamps of "sports parades" before and after WW2

gan (1999) identified as Aryan-body fascist politization. The two stamps from the right belong to the post-WW2 period and convey slightly different messages. These stamps emphasize the great power of the victorious Soviet empire. The marching athletes are distant and cannot be discerned whereas the state's emblem, Stalin's portrait, the military slogans, and the flags are prominent on these stamps. The implicit message of such compositions seems to be that achieving Stalin's great cause as a collective is more important than the individual.

With the unfolding of the Cold War in the 1950s, Eastern Bloc countries developed complex sports systems and used international sports events as an arena to contest the West (Jackson & Ritchie, 2007). In this way, sports stamps were increasingly employed as a propagandistic tool by the socialist camp (Lebed, 2005). In comparison to the 1930s and 1940s, the semiotic language of sports stamps changed. The majority of the issues were now dedicated to competitive sport, particularly to the international sporting achievements of "our athletes".



Figure 4. From the left, USSR-era stamp of ice hockey dedicated to internal competition; in the middle, the same stamp has been overprinted a year later, marking a victory in international competitions; on the right, the same technique applied by the Russian Federation in 2008

The stamps in Figure 4 (left and middle) demonstrate the propagandistic use of international sporting achievements, applying what is known in philatelic language as "overprint" technique. On the left is a stamp issued for the 1962 Winter Spartakiada of the Peoples of the USSR. Next to it, the same stamp was overprinted in 1963 to mark that Soviet hockey players had become World and European champions. An important notion here is that amateur athletes were presented as common Soviet people in USSR, who allegedly worked in factories, served in the police force or operated locomotives (Edelman, 1990). Consequently, the superiority of the Soviet athlete manifested the superiority of the Soviet worker, soldier, and the regime as a whole.

Almost 50 years later, in 2008, Putin's regime overprinted a similar but also somewhat different slogan on the background of the national tricolor flag (Figure 4, right stamp): "Russia is the World Champion in ice hockey 2008". The difference lies in the use of the term "Russia" instead of the more appropriate "Russian players" or "Russian team". In Figure 5, we can see a nationalistic use of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, applying the same technique, in which the original stamps ahead of the Games were overprinted to proclaim that Russia had won in the overall medal count, despite the fact that no such count officially takes place at the Olympics.

Starting in the 1960s, the semiotic language of Soviet sports stamps becomes more direct and explicit.



Figure 5. On the left, a stamp issued for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. On the right, the same stamp was overprinted after the Games to indicate that Russia came first in the overall medal count, winning 13 gold, 11 silver, and 9 bronze medals.

Achievement-oriented slogans and images take the place of vivid scenes of unity among physically eloquent people beaming with determination to serve the great cause. The sharpness of this transition can be seen in Figure 6, where female athletes, with bodies that had been honed to athletic perfection, aimed to achieve a specific goal – a powerful and technically peerless movement that will lift their country to the top of the podium. Unlike the pre-Cold War years, this body does not portray willingness to toil on the fields of the motherland or readiness to give birth to new soldiers (see Figure 3).



Figure 6. Examples of achievement-oriented portraits of female athletes

An increase in the diversity of sports stamps is evident across the different periods. Nine sports were depicted in the first sports series in 1935, whereas the series issued ahead of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow included more than 40 summer sports. In the following section, we will expand our scope to include additional types of propagandistic stamps and will adopt a quantitative perspective in order to examine trends in the issuance policy of stamps in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

USSR and Russia in the Mirror of Sports, National Identity, and Military Stamps

National identity stamps

Like sports stamps, national identity or military stamps can also be looked upon through a geo-political prism (Osmond & Phillips, 2011). National (ideological) identity propaganda includes messages with a strong patriotic character stressing "our" positive exclusiveness and "our" special way (Centeno, 1999). Recognition of stamps of this type can be based on the approach of Lauritzen (1988), later strengthened by Grant (1995), which identifies leading national narratives: key state symbols, portraits of political leaders, significant political and ideological events, and great achievements of the country or its representatives.

For the purpose of this study, a national identity was attributed to a stamp if it had a picture, original text and/or later overprint dedicated to: regime ideology, a leading political party, national leaders, events with pan-national significance, institutes, and events stressing the greatness of the nation and its leading role in the world. For example, in the Soviet era, national identity was based on communist ideology and the greatness of the Soviet Union as the state that defeated Nazism. That is, the ideological identity predominated the national identity in USSR (Christie, 1992). Whereas is contemporary Russia the identity is based on the greatness of Russian culture, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the governing regime as the receiver and successor of this heritage (Brunn, 2011).

Military Stamps

Military propaganda stamps are characterized by excessive emphasis on national identity adorned with the glory of heroism, the sacrifices made as part of the struggle for freedom, and/or imperial achievements. Such stamps depict: (1) wars, battles, or military events; (2) different branches of the army; (3) heroic figures, groups, or cities that distinguished themselves in wars; (4) weapons, military transport, and their inventors; (5) military awards and decorations for heroism in war; (6) military uniforms and their history.

USSR vs. Russian Federation: Quantitative Analysis

Each issued stamp could be identified either as (1) sports; (2) national identity; (3) military; or (4) other type of stamp. In Table 1, we present an analysis of the issuance of national identity, military, and sports stamps by the USSR and Russian Federation for the period 1951 to April 2019.

The data in Table 1 indicates that the USSR considerably increased stamp production during the 1960s, the decade that marks the highest levels of Cold War tension. A total of 1465 stamps were issued by the USSR from 1961 to 1970. This is 59% more than in 1951–60 and 19% more than in 1971–80, when Cold War tensions were somewhat eased because of the revived political and cultural dialog between the USSR and the USA (Shaw, 2012).

Table 1. Stamps dedicated to national identity, military, and sport in respect to all stamps issued by USSR and Russia

Era	Period (10 years)	ITZ catalog Number	General stamp issue	*Identity*		*Military*		*Sport*		Sum of the three types	% of general issue
				N	%	N	%	N	%		
USSR	1951-1960	1592-2509	917	89	9.7	24	2.6	84	9.2	197	21.5
	1961- 1970	2510-3965	1455	132	9.1	125	8.6	153	10.5	410	28.2
	1971-1980	3966-5145	1179	59	5.0	70	5.9	139	11.8	268	22.7
	1981-1990	5146-6278	1132	57	5.0	40	3.5	99	8.7	196	17.3
Russian Federation	1992-2001	213 – 974	762	125	16.4	58	7.6	49	6.4	232	30.4
	2002-2011	975 -1786	811	67	8.3	118	14.5	33	4.1	218	26.9
	2012-2019	1787-2713	927	87	9.4	243	26.2	140	15.1	470	50.7

The combined proportion of the three types of propagandistic stamps – sports, military and national identify – was highest during the 1960s, with a gradual decrease from the early 1970s until 1990 (see Figure 7A). This trend corresponds with the "struggle for peace" initiated by the Communist Party and the Soviet government at the beginning of the 1970s (XXIV Congress of the CPSU, 1971). The result is the observed decrease in the representation of military and national identity symbols in comparison with the previous decade. However, propaganda of the superiority of the Soviet athlete was still considered legitimate, since the struggle for peace had not led to the weakening of the ideological dispute with the West.

US President Richard Nixon worked to create a policy called "*détente*", which meant a lessening of tensions. He attempted to bridge the gap between the two nations with an eye to easing the threat of nuclear war (Mueller, 2011; Nuti, 2009; Slanchev, 2014). The politics of *détente* were especially influential on Soviet propaganda in the 1970s. When Nixon visited the USSR in 1972, a series of ice hockey matches was held between the Soviet national team and an American-Canadian (NHL) team (1972–1975). The high point of *détente* – friendly relationships between Nixon's state department and Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet regime – was a joint "Apollo-Soyuz" space project in 1975. The Soviet postal department dedicated a series of stamps to this event[1] (Catalog ITZ: 4407, 4421-24; 109). The 1980s were marked by a continuing decline in the production of propagandistic stamps. In particular, for the first time, the issuance of sports stamps also declined in this decade to 8.7%.

The first decade of the Russian Federation was characterized by all the features of a new state engaged in redefining its national identity. From 1992 to 2001, the issuance of both national identity and military stamps increased, especially the former, with the percentage of national identity stamps rising to 16.4% compared to 5.0% during the preceding 20 years. This was the period of Boris Yeltsin's administration, which was characterized by attempts to form a democratic society and integrate it with the world of "Western" values and the global market. On the other hand, Yeltsin's administration engaged in the first Chechen War (1994–1996) and began the second war in 1999. Accordingly, this decade was marked by a growth in the issuance of militaristic stamps, up to 7.6 %, which is more than during any time excluding the 1960s – the peak of the Cold War. Overall, the proportion of propagandistic stamps during Yeltsin's period reached 30.4% (Figure 7B).

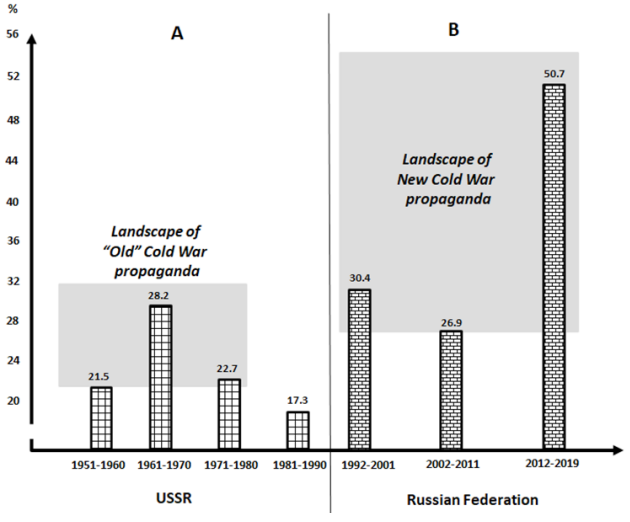


Figure 7. Proportion of propagandistic stamps in the USSR and the Russian Federation

[1] https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/stamp-apollo-soyuz-test-project/nasm_A19780369000

Vladimir Putin became the leader of the Russian Federation in 2000 and changed the general course of Russian foreign policies (Monaghan, 2008). Instead of the hesitant former empire, which sought approval and recognition from world leaders during the 1990s, the West was now faced with three main changes in Russian politics that occurred under Putin. First, western European countries and the USA were (again) viewed as an opponent. Second, propagandistic tools were used to inculcate the idea that Moscow was an ideological and cultural centre in its own right and played a significant role in the world economy and politics (Monaghan, 2008). Third, the nearest neighbours of the Russian Federation, the former republics of the USSR, were declared zones of vital national interest of the renascent Russian Federation (Light, 2003). Together, these formed what Sakwa (2008) called "Putin's new realism".

The stamp issuance policy reflected these strategic changes. We can see in Figure 7B that Putin's second decade in power was characterized by an extremely high output of propagandistic stamps (50.7%). In this regard, Altukhov and Nauright (2018) have indicated that tensions between Putin's Russia and the West have resulted in a new round of the "sporting Cold War".

The data presented in Table 1 reveals another interesting trend, a decrease in the number of national identity issues accompanied by an increase in the issuance of stamps dedicated to military topics. Therefore, if the issuance of national identity stamps exceeded that of military themes from 1992 to 2001 (16.4% vs. 7.6%, respectively), the proportions were reversed in the next decade of 2002 to 2011 (8.3% vs. 14.5%, respectively). This is the first time since WW2 that the issuance of military stamps surpassed the 10% mark.

In Figure 8, we focused on the issuance of sports and military stamps in the post-WW2 Soviet Union and Russian Federation. The first decades of the "old" Cold War (1951 – 1970) were marked by relatively stable output of sports and military stamps, including the peak years of confrontation (1960s). The following decade (1970s) was characterized by a decline in military issues and continued growth of sports issues. Since the 1980s, we can see a decrease in the issuance of both sports and military stamps.

During the 1990s, the number of military symbols and messages on stamps increased steadily, whereas the number of sports stamps decreased until 2011 (30 years of decline from 11.8% to 4.1%). The second decade of the 20th century has been marked by propagandistic stamps output which is even higher than that of the Soviet era Cold War. Increasing tensions between Russia and the West are resonating in the domain of sport as well. Arnold (2018) argues that recent sports policies in Russia have aimed to build national pride with practices reminiscent of the Soviet past. The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi served exactly this purpose – each medal won was used by Putin's regime in forging a new post-Soviet Russian

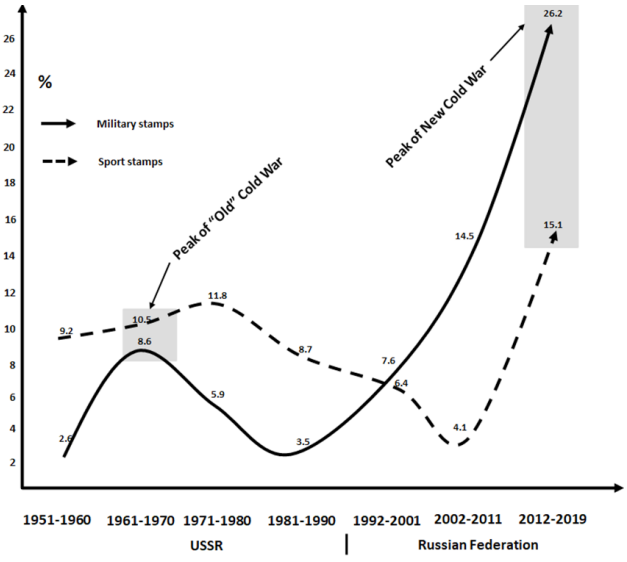


Figure 8. Longitudinal dynamics of the issuance of sports and military stamps in the USSR and the Russian Federation

nationalism (Petersson & Vamling, 2013). This political pressure "to deliver" caused a "medal rush" that led to the alleged doping improprieties on the part of the Russian state, athletes, and the anti-doping agency (RUSADA) (Denham, 2019). All in all, the proposed comparison of stamp issuance in the USSR and the Russian Federation corresponds to the recent notions about a new round of the Cold War (e.g. Charap & Shapiro, 2015; Dawisha, 2014; Galbreath, 2008; Kanet, 2007; Korinman & Laughland, 2008; Lucas, 2008; Trenin, 2007).

Comparative Analysis of Issuance Policies: Russia Federation and WW-2-period Authoritarian Regimes

In order to have a better grasp of the Russian stamp issuance policy, we have looked at the recent trends in a broader historical context. We have examined propagandistic stamps issued by three authoritarian regimes (Stalin's USSR, Hitler's Germany, and Mussolini's Italy) during two time periods: first, from the official start of the regime until the start of WW2 in 1939; second, during the years of WW2 (1940–1945) or up to the fall of the regime (as in the case of Italy in 1943).

During these two periods, the three mentioned regimes redefined their national ideology and employed aggressive and polarizing rhetoric in favour of territorial expansions alongside other manifestations of hostile conduct. Stamps were often used to broadcast those messages.

For instance, the two stamps in Figure 9, issued in Mussolini's Italy (1937), demonstrate the building of na-

tionalist and militant identity. In the stamp on the left, the boy stands proudly in front of fascist symbols in the background; in the right-hand stamp, the boy is holding a rifle.



Figure 9. Clothes and accessories as an example of the transition between national identity and military symbolism in Fascist Italy

An examination of stamps issued by Nazi Germany before WW2 (catalogue numbers: 398- 528; B 49- 293, DZG 241-254, and C 43-60) shows that the majority of the issues were dedicated to national identity themes (greatness of the Reich, governing Nazi party events, claims about purported German lands, annexed lands, portraits, and anniversaries of leaders), military, and sports topics.

Lauritzen (1988) noted that many stamps issued in Germany during that period were dedicated to propaganda, the triumphs of National Socialism and Hitler's regime, as well as the swastika and Hitler himself. Grant (1995) compared Nazi and Soviet governmental systems through the prism of stamps. He pointed out that, like its Soviet counterpart, the national-socialist government produced stamps to support its party policies and advertise its achievements.

Table 2 shows that 62.1% of all stamps issued in Nazi Germany in the period 1933–39 were dedicated to national identity, military, and sports topics. In Mussolini's Italy between 1922 to 1939, the proportion was 71.0%. Stalin's Soviet Union may not have fully joined the propagandistic efforts through stamps, as only 36.9% of its issuance were dedicated to these three themes between 1933 and 1939.

Table 2. Issuance of stamps dedicated to national identity, military and sport in three totalitarian regimes: 1920s - 1940s

Country	Period	Catalogue numbers	General stamp issue	*Identity*		*Military*		*Sport*		Sum of the three types	% of general issue
				N	%	N	%	N	%		
Nazi Germany	1933-1939	398-493; B 49- 168; DZG 241-254; C 43-60	248	118	47.6	9	3.6	27	10.9	154	62.1
	1940-1945	494-528; B 169-293	160	35	21.9	39	24.4	15	9.4	89	55.6
Fascist Italy	1922-1939	Stanley Gibbons: 129-552	424	210	49.5	81	19.1	10	2.4	301	71.0
	1940-1942	Stanley Gibbons: 553 -582	29	3	10.3	24	82.7	0	0	27	93.1
USSR	1933-1939	ITZ: 406-719	314	68	21.7	21	6.7	27	8.6	116	36.9
	1940-1945	ITZ: 720-1018	299	28	9.4	128	42.8	5	1.7	161	53.8

As opposed to the abundance of national identity stamps, militarism did not attract too much attention during the pre-WW2 years. Moreover, the Soviet postal service issued a series of five stamps dedicated to peace and anti-militarism (Catalog ITZ: 481-485), showing pictures of bombed civilian cities, refugees, disabled veterans, and the fraternization of soldiers at the front. In Germany and USSR, sports stamps received a little more attention than the military ones (10.9% and 8.6%, respectively). The topic of sport, in general, played a very moderate role in the propaganda of the three states.

As can be seen in Table 2, during the years of WW2 the picture changed radically, as all sides reduced the issuance of stamps. The most drastic reduction in stamp issuance can be seen in Italy. Before the war, the average number of issues per year was 17.7, but during the war this rate has dropped to nine, almost all of which were dedicated to the war (82.7%). In the USSR, we can witness an increase in the issuance of military stamps (6.7 % before WW2, 42.8% during WW2).

All countries reduced the quantity of national identity and sports stamps during the war. For example, Soviet

national identity and sports stamps decreased from 21.7% to 9.4% and from 8.6% to 1.7%, respectively. This trend closely reflects the well-known Soviet slogan of these times, "Everything for the front! Everything for the victory!" which was publicly proclaimed by Stalin in his radio speech to the Soviet people on July 3, 1941, two weeks after the Nazi invasion of the USSR (Kozlov, 1985, p. 184). Only Germany maintained a balance between national identity and military issues (21.9% and 24.4%, respectively).

In Figure 10, a comparison is made between the stamp propaganda of the Russian Federation and the three totalitarian regimes. It can be seen that the relative number of military stamps issued in Russia during the 2010s (26.2%) is larger than in Nazi Germany during WW2 (24.4%). The late 2000s were characterized by a continuous growth of the Russian Federation's military budget (Stent, 2008). This militarization trend manifested itself in armed conflict with Georgia in 2008 (Asmus, 2010) and continued with the seizure of Crimea and the armed conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine during 2014 (Mearsheimer, 2014; Roskin, 2014). In 2015, Russia also became involved in the Syrian Civil War. During those years, Putin and his ministers spoke out strongly against the European Union and the USA (e.g. Larson & Shevchenko, 2014; Van Herpen, 2016).

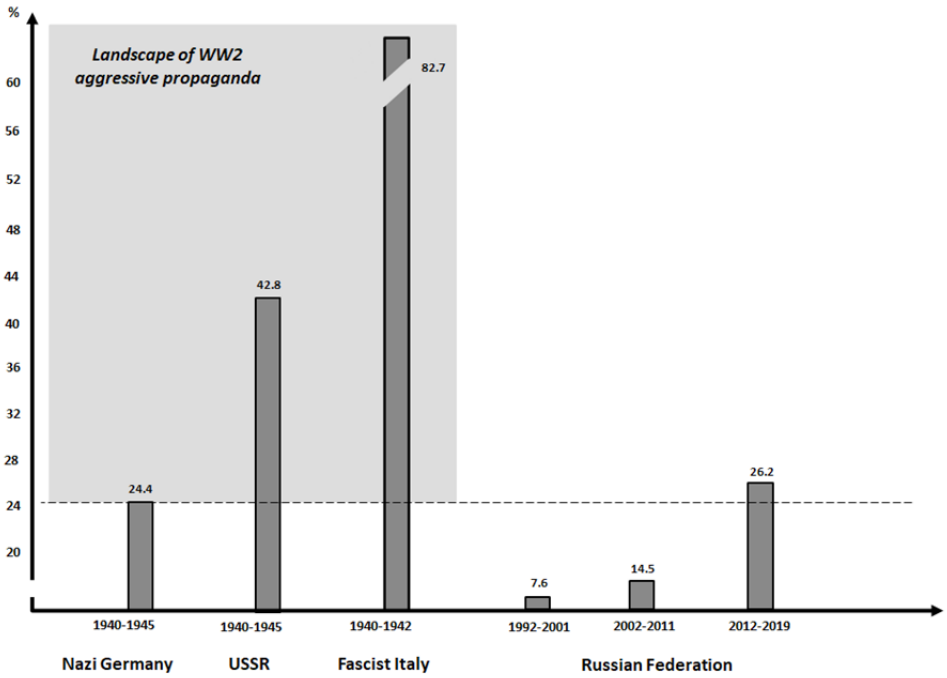


Figure 10. Military stamp issuance: comparison between the Russian Federation and WW2 years authoritarian regimes

To draw a line, the emerging pattern of stamp issuance policy in the 21st-century Russian Federation resembles that of regimes on the verge of war. Two aggressive propaganda landscapes: the cold war landscape (Figure 8) and the hot war (Figure 10) are presented in this study as reference points to better illustrate the state of affairs in Russia under Putin's government.

Discussion and Conclusions

Concluding this article is a tricky business, since back in 2019–20 when the data for this study was originally collected and analysed, we had identified that Russia's recent issuance policy resembled that of totalitarian regimes during the 1930s and the 1940s. We then concluded that where stamps are concerned, the Russian Federation seemed to be on the verge of war. At the time, such conclusion could be dismissed as exaggeration, whereas now it may seem opportunistic and populistic. Nevertheless, as the title of this article indicates, *stamps don't lie*, and the Russian Federation is now not on the verge but in a state of war.

Embedding journalists, staging showy briefings, utilizing visual and electronic media, and making good television out of it are all important for warfare (e.g. Abrams, 2016; Paul & Matthews, 2016; Torichnyi et al., 2021). Governments frame issues and build a narrative to serve their political cause. Accordingly, the 2010s in Russia were marked by high levels of propagandistic content on Russian TV news, talk shows, and historical documentaries, which were deeply imbued with unbridled

anti-Ukrainian propaganda (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2014; Ivanenko & Bidnyi, 2021).

Such propagandistic techniques aim to secure public approval for a looming conflict (e.g. Jo et al., 2008). In accordance with the Rubicon Theory of War (Johnson & Tierney, 2011), militant and boasting rhetoric leads to overconfidence regarding the enemy. As we show in the current study, postage stamps in general and sports stamps in particular are still being used to this end by Putin's regime.

We want to conclude this paper by returning to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics Games, which seem to be emblematic of Putin's non-compromise (i.e. "win at all costs") attitude we witness today. The overprint in Figure 5 proudly announces Russia to have won first place in the overall medal count at these games. Whereas we are left wondering whether the toll of arguably the most expensive Olympics ever (Golubchikov, 2017) and the revealed doping scandal that stemmed from this rampant desire to win was too great a price to pay for such an overprint. In this vein, due to heavy politization of Russian sport, it was banned from the vast majority of international competitions immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Mather, 2022).[2]

Another fundamental concern with a "win at all costs attitude", especially when combined with nationalistic ambitions, is the slippery slope these can create. Fueled by the presence of ubiquitous propaganda, these factors can create a boasting "top dog" national identity. In the current study, we have showed how propagandistic stamps in general and sports stamps in particular can both reflect and help to mould this collective mindset.

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