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Stejărel Olaru. *Nadia Comăneci and the Secret Police: A Cold War Escape*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2023.

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Between 1948 and 2020, thirty women won a total of five or more Olympic medals apiece in gymnastics, topped by the Soviet Union's Larisa Latynina (eighteen medals).¹ Twenty-five of these women were from the Soviet Union and its satellites, and five were from the US, showing the exceptional dominance of Communist countries in the sport.² But beginning in 1976, Soviet hegemony in gymnastics was broken when Romania's 14-year-old gymnast Nadia Comăneci (ko-mă-NETCH) won a total of nine medals. This was the first time a Romanian gymnast had ever medaled in the Olympics, in contrast to the preceding 20 years when all 49 medals awarded in women's gymnastics went to Soviet gymnasts.³ Comăneci's ascent to the pinnacle of gymnastics in the 1970s was epoch-making, for both Romania and the wider sports world. During those years, many considered her the greatest gymnast alive, as she dominated the competition not only at the Olympics in 1976 and 1980, but also at the World Cup, and World and European Championships, between 1975 and 1981 (45-54).

The Communist Party of Romania hoped to keep her at the top, and unsurprisingly, its method for doing so involved constant surveillance and advice from the Secret Police (Securitate), as well as other high government officials. In *Nadia Comăneci and the Secret Police*, author Stejărel Olaru details what it meant to be the Party's darling: endless telegrams and paper-streams from innumerable offices of the Party and Securitate bureaucracy concerning how to keep track of her and ensure her continued performance. Unfortunately, their attention failed to examine the price of Nadia's performance on herself, which was staggering. Her principal trainer (not to say abuser) was Béla Károlyi, who together with his wife Márta squeezed phenomenal results out of her not only by relentless practice but also by near-starvation diets. A weight gain of just a few ounces would send the coach into paroxysms of rage against the girl (137-184 *passim*). It is a tribute to her remarkable strength of character that despite the occasional sulk, she continued to excel.

When the Romanian Communist Party lost control of the country in 1989, the continued existence of the Securitate archive was imperiled. The organization was disbanded in its then-current form, and its massive archive of secret reports was turned over to a new organization, the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS). This organization administers the archive, makes it available to the public and other interested persons, and develops educational programs aimed at preserving the memories of victims of Communist repression. Anyone can discover whether they have a file there and can consult or copy it or request other files in the interest of historical research. It is a fascinating and valuable resource, which enables

¹ David Wallechinsky and Jaime Lucky, eds., *The Complete Book of the Olympics: 2008 Edition* (London: Aurum Press, 2008), 702.

² "Women's Gymnastics Career Medal Leaders," Sports Reference.com, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200417041703/https://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/leaders/GYM/medals-career-women.html>.

³ "Women's Gymnastics Career Medal Leaders," Sports Reference.com.

scholars to reconstitute aspects of the regime of General Secretary Nicolae Ceausescu and its organs of repression.⁴

Olaru's book benefits from precisely this access. As a historian and political scientist specializing in the history of Romania's secret services, he has made ample use of that archive and is thus particularly well suited to his task. Between 2005 and 2010 he and historian Marius Oprea led Romania's Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism.⁵ He then served as a state councilor in the prime minister's cabinet for problems of national security and held other significant government posts, as well as writing or co-authoring ten books about the communist period and its aftermath.⁶ In writing *Nadia Comăneci and the Secret Police*, he received informed access to internal Communist Party documents as well as to the CNSAS archives. He developed ample experience in knowing the Party's actors, reading its documents, and following their trails through the bureaucracy, skills he has used here to perfection.

The result is a fascinating, if peculiar, biography in which the central character appears primarily through her relations with her trainers (Béla and Márta Károlyi) and with various operatives of the Romanian repressive apparatus who had been charged with keeping her under surveillance. One sees from this book the tremendous importance of someone as gifted as Nadia Comăneci for the entire leadership of Romania, from Ceausescu on down. Her "trail" through the archive offers us a detailed understanding of how the Party apparatus shaped Romania's people, as well as the nature of Romanian society as a whole. What is missing, though, is deep knowledge of Comăneci herself or a sense of her character.⁷ There are no interviews with her, so we cannot learn how she withstood Károlyi's treatment, other than that she often clashed with him (we learn this from his viewpoint). At the price of a rather colorless image of this exceptionally talented young woman, we get instead an intimate portrait of the Securitate bureaucracy as it sought to control her. For scholars, at least, that is worth quite a lot, even if at times the central character herself disappears.

This remarkable book will be of special interest not only to sports enthusiasts but to diplomats and others in the foreign service, for whom diplomacy and sports often work together.⁸ It will also appeal to scholars and others eager to understand the workings of police in authoritarian countries past and present, as well as the extraordinary bureaucratic effort that went into shaping the excellence on which Soviet-type societies prided themselves.

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⁴ Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁵ See also Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism, <https://www.iicmer.ro/en/home/>

⁶ For example, Stejarel Olaru, *Rimaru, The Butcher of Bucharest: A Serial Killer in Communist Romania* (London: Profusion, 2012).

⁷ Comăneci's autobiography is Nadia Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁸ See, for example, Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee, "Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction," *Global Society*, 27:4 (2013): 521-536, DOI:10.1080/13600826.2013.827632]; Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, "Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy," *Sport in Society* 1:9 (2014); Grix and Paul Michael Branagan, "Of Mechanisms and Myths: Conceptualising States' 'Soft Power' Strategies through Sports Mega-Events," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 27:2 (2016) 251-272, DOI: 10.1080/09592296.2016.1169791.