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Sport Diplomacy: A Case Study on International Fencing and the War in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Fencing makes a compelling case study for analysis of non-state sporting actors (NSSAs) within the international political system because it is a sport whose legitimacy rests on the participants' ability to adhere to its norms. Through competition, fencers develop empathy, respect, and communication skills - all key tenets of diplomacy and conduct in the international arena. The values of sportsmanship and honor parallel the characteristics expected in international diplomacy, thereby making sport diplomacy an interesting case for future study. This thesis examines fencing in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War to examine the relationship between the role of NSSAs and international diplomacy.

Analysis of data collected on news articles, social media posts, and websites of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Fencing Federation (FIE) reveals that both organizations demonstrate a tendency to orient their policies to fit within the confines of state agendas, knowing that they receive their influence and power from the value that states place on international sport. Two participants in the international fencing community were interviewed on the issue. Based on analysis of their responses this thesis concludes that, while individual athletes have the ability to act as major players in international politics, the extent of their influence is dependent on the relationship between their state and sport institutions.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

“...In these Olympiads, the important thing is not winning, but taking part...What counts in life is not the victory, but the struggle; the essential thing is not to conquer but to fight well.”

- Pierre de Coubertin

Grecian statues pass by on the screen, their perfect bodies stuck in sporting action in Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film, *Olympia*. While this film aimed to commemorate the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, the Games live on in history as Hitler's failed attempt to prove Aryan racial superiority.^{1,2} Although the televised opening ceremony highlighted the prowess of post-war Germany, the games' actual medal results pointed to otherwise. Jesse Owens, an African American track and field athlete who competed in the games despite racial discrimination, rebuked Hitler's proclaimed Aryan prowess by winning four Olympic gold medals.³ Owens represented the power and change that is possible from a single person, inspiring future athletes and fighting racial prejudices.

Just as Owens' victorious Olympics defied racial stereotypes and debunked Hitler's racial ideology, individuals and organizations have proved to be powerful sources of international change. The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was the first televised Games, with 162,000 people tuning in.⁴ Since then, globalization and the growing influence of media gave sporting actors the publicity necessary to bring political issues onto the international Olympic stage. Famous examples of such statements include the Black Power Salute by John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Mexico Games,⁵ the Taiwanese athletes competing without an official state name in protest of the International Olympic Committee requiring them to compete

¹ Mark Golden, (2011), "War and Peace in the Ancient and Modern Olympics," *Greece and Rome* 58 (1): 1–13, 1.

² IOC, (April 25, 2018), "Berlin 1936 Summer Olympics - Athletes, Medals & Results."

<https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/berlin-1936>.

³ "Jesse Owens | Official Website | Track & Field Olympic Athlete." n.d. Accessed December 1, 2023,

<https://jesseowens.com/>.

⁴ "FicheInfo_DiffusionJO_historique_ENG.Pdf," (The Olympic Museum Educational and Cultural Services, n.d.), Accessed December 1, 2023.

https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Document%20Library/Museum/Visit/TOM-Schools/Teaching-Resources/Broadcasting-the-Olympic-Games/FicheInfo_DiffusionJO_historique_ENG.pdf. 3.

⁵ "Mexico 1968: Peter Norman – Athletics and Black Power Salute" (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia), n.d. Accessed December 1, 2023.

<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/mexico-1968-peter-norman-athletics-and-black-power-salute>.

under the name Formosa at the 1960 Melbourne Games,⁶ or American foilist Race Imboden kneeling during the 2018 Pan-American Games in Peru in protest of the Trump Administration.⁷

These examples parallel that of the current international fencing situation, in which Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Russian fencers are at even greater odds because of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the start of the invasion, the International Fencing Federation (FIE) banned Russian and Belorussian athletes from competing in any international competition. Later this ban was lifted, leading to outcries from over 300 fencers and teams worldwide. Fencers must accumulate points and demonstrate their prowess in international cups to qualify for the upcoming 2024 Paris Olympic Games. In July 2023, the leader of Ukraine's fencing team, Olga Kharlan, was disqualified because she refused to shake hands with her Russian opponent. Kharlan's refusal can be read as an act of protest against the war.

These events, where athletes are acting in response to state issues and are therefore NSSAs, inspired this thesis to investigate the intersection between sport and diplomacy, specifically fencing sport. Fencing makes a compelling case study because it is a sport whose legitimacy rests on the participants' ability to adhere to its norms. Fencers are taught the imperative of demonstrating respect for one's opponent. Through competition, fencers develop empathy, respect, and communication skills - all key tenets of diplomacy and conduct in the international arena. The values of sportsmanship and honor parallel the norms associated with international diplomacy, thereby making sport diplomacy an interesting case for future study. This thesis examines the influence of NSSAs in the international political system by engaging

⁶ "Timeline: Politics and Protest at the Olympics." n.d. (Council on Foreign Relations), Accessed December 1, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/olympics-boycott-protest-politics-history>.

⁷ Oren Weisfeld. "Race Imboden: 'I Knelt Because America Doesn't Reflect Me Anymore.'" (The Guardian, September 1, 2020, sec. Sport). <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/sep/01/race-imboden-fencing-anthem-protest-interview>.

with the political controversy of the war in Ukraine taking place in today's international fencing community and specifically looking at two major international sporting organizations: the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Fencing Federation (FIE); and interviewing individual participants of the international fencing community on the topic of fencing and politics.

This thesis concludes that the IOC and FIE are NSSAs who orient themselves to fit within stage agendas, and that individual actors' ability to influence the international political system through sport is highly dependent on the level of control that states have over their sporting organization; the more influence a state has, the less freedom individuals have to influence politics.

BACKGROUND

The IOC and FIE

The thesis references the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the Fédération Internationale d'Esime (FIE). These two organizations require definition. The IOC, established in June of 1894, is the top governing body of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement. The IOC strives to use sport to promote peace and understanding in the world, and to promote the three values of Olympism: excellence, friendship, and respect.⁸ The IOC is a privately funded non-profit organization who distributes 90 percent of its revenues to the Olympic movement and the development of sport and athletes at all levels.

⁸ "IOC - International Olympic Committee | Olympics.Com." Accessed November 24, 2023. <https://olympics.com/ioc/principles>.

The FIE is the IOC-recognized international governing body for the sport of fencing.⁹ There are 155 affiliated member federations around the world. The FIE objective is “to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity. The practice of sport is a human right.” The organization has an executive committee of 22 members, members of honor, commissions (including athletes, legal, medial, refereeing, rules, promotion, and marketing), councils (coaches, veterans, fair-play, Women and Fencing) and committees (Ethics, Disciplinary Panel, Anti-Doping Sub-Committee). Together these bodies formulate the conduct of all international fencing.

The Modern Olympic Games: Its Beginning and the Olympic Truce

The goal of the ancient Olympics was to use sport to act as a form of armistice, as neighboring Greek *polises* fought one another constantly; it offered a reprieve from warfare. What we today call the Olympic Truce, was referred to as *Ekecheira*, an ancient Greek word that translates to “*a holding of hands, a cessation of hostilities, armistice, and truce.*”¹⁰ This sacred truce not only honored the gods, but it also promoted ideas of understanding and mutual respect, so that the games could be carried out in an “...environment free of conflict, where the rule of order allows for noble competition.”¹¹

The concept of *Ekecheira* inspired Pierre de Coubertin’s dream to revive the games on this principle. In 1894 he established the IOC, with the goal of “...[building] a peaceful and better

⁹ “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - The International Fencing Federation Official Website.” Accessed November 24, 2023. <http://fie.org/fie/structure>.

¹⁰ Cindy Burleson. “The Ancient Olympic Truce in Modern-Day Peacekeeping: Revisiting Ekecheiria.” *Sport in Society* 15, no. 6 (August 2012): 798–813. 800.

¹¹ Cindy Burleson, 799.

world by educating young people through sport”¹² He created the iconic five Olympic Rings (which represent the unity of the five continents and athletes around the world meeting in peaceful competition¹³), the Olympic Charter and protocol, and athletes’ oath and main components of the opening and closing ceremonies.¹⁴ The first Olympic Games took place in 1896, with the purpose of paying homage to the ancient Greek Olympic Games. De Coubertin and his team decided that the games should be held in Athens at the Panathinaiko Stadium, in which the ancient stadium of the games was restored.¹⁵

An Olympian is anyone who competes in the Games.¹⁶ This idea promotes the importance of cultural exchanges and the building of positive relationships between all participants, as opposed to only winning. Part of being an Olympian is living in the Olympic Village, a pseudo-city built for participants in all aspects of the Games. For example, the 2012 London Olympic Village accommodated 17,000 athletes and officials. Olympic Athlete and IOC member Anita L. DeFrantz described her time in the Olympic Village as the catalyst for her realization of the Olympian as “...one who can respect every individual based on the effort that it takes to become an Olympian.”¹⁷

According to IOC president Thomas Bach (a men’s foil Olympic gold medalist from Germany), the Olympics are about sport and sport only, not politics. The athletes represent “...*this inclusiveness and mutual respect also by being politically neutral on the field of play and*

¹² International Olympic Committee. “Who Was Pierre de Coubertin,” December 20, 2022.

<https://olympics.com/ioc/faq/history-and-origin-of-the-games/who-was-pierre-de-coubertin>.

¹³ International Olympic Committee. “The Olympic Rings,” July 24, 2023.

¹⁴ The International Olympic Committee, “Who Was Pierre de Coubertin.”

¹⁵ “The Modern Olympic Games,” (The Olympic Museum Educational and Cultural Services), Accessed November 21, 2023, 5.

¹⁶ The Olympic Museum Educational and Cultural Services, 13.

¹⁷ The Olympic Museum Educational and Cultural Services, 14.

during the ceremonies.”¹⁸ At the same time, he acknowledges that athletes practice free speech and can use the Olympic platform to make political statements. The Olympic Charter Rule 50 states, “...No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas.”¹⁹ It is important to define and explore the parameters of the Olympic Truce in relation to conduct of the Games for this thesis, as it will be exploring how International Sport Federations (IFs), which are recognized by the IOC, and athletes play a role in the Games, especially the upcoming 2024 Paris Games.

Olympics as State Political Tools: The 2014 Sochi Olympic Games

This thesis examines a case on the intersection of sport and politics between NSSAs. However, most well-known politically motivated sport events have occurred when *state actors* employ sport as a political tool. Therefore, it is important to give background information on the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

It is widely believed that after Russia found economic and political stability in the early 2000s, its international political agenda shifted focus towards soft power projects. This is when Russia’s interest in hosting events such as the FIFA World Cup and Olympics began. The 2014 Sochi Olympic Games became a propaganda tool for Putin to display a vision of ‘modern Russia’ and new nationalistic identity.²⁰ The IOC awarded the 2014 Olympic Games to Russia in 2007, from which Putin began presenting himself as a fit athlete in public. Interestingly, this image parallels the perfect Soviet hero, who is “...clean and smart, healthy, and politically

¹⁸ International Olympic Committee, “Sport and Politics: My Experiences as an Athlete - Olympic News,” (June 19, 2023).

¹⁹ International Olympic Committee. EN Olympic Charter. Accessed November 22, 2023. 94.

²⁰ Kramareva, Nina, and Jonathan Grix, “‘War and Peace’ at the 1980 Moscow and 2014 Sochi Olympics: The Role of Hard and Soft Power in Russian Identity,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, no. 14 (September 22, 2018): 1407–27. 1415.

astute... [ready for] self-sacrifice and [in] control over one's emotions."²¹ This image reads similarly to the values of a 'good' fencer (more on this in the last background section).

The Sochi Games cost a whopping \$55 billion, making it the most expensive Olympic Games on record.²² Controversy shrouded this money, as opposition politicians accused Putin and his inner circle of corruption and taking \$30 billion for themselves, and human rights activists reported that the building process illegally evicted residents of the area and inflicted environmental damages.²³ Another political issue surrounding the games included the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation passed by Putin in June of 2013. These laws made the "...spreading of information directed to the forming in adolescents of non-traditional sexual arrangements" illegal.²⁴ Protests and international outrage encouraged the International Olympic Committee to forbid discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in any sporting games. LGBTQ+ Russian athletes were the spotlight of these games and referred to them as the "gay Olympics."²⁵

This event is important, as it paints a picture of Russia's attitude towards international sport as a soft power tool for garnering hard power. Most noteworthy is that the Games took place from February 7 – 23, 2014. Russia invaded Crimea on February 20, 2014. There may be a connection between the sporting event and timing of the attack. It is also interesting that the IOC released a statement on LGBTQ+ athletes and reinstated the values of the Olympics (personal strength and integrity²⁶). These games highlight the interactions between state and NSSAs, where

²¹ Kramareva, Nina, and Jonathan Grix, 1419.

²² David Filipov, "Russia Spent \$50 Billion on the Sochi Olympics. It Might Actually Have Been Worth It," (Washington Post, April 9, 2023).

²³ Filipov, David.

²⁴ Bill Bowring, "5 Reasons Why Sochi's Olympics May Be the Most Controversial Games Yet," (The Guardian, January 31, 2014, sec. Opinion).

²⁵ Graeme Reid, "The Olympics Have Left Sochi, but Don't Forget LGBT Russians," (Human Rights Watch, February 8, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/08/olympics-have-left-sochi-dont-forget-lgbt-russians>.

²⁶ "Sochi 2014: Gay Rights Protests Target Russia's Games," (BBC News, February 5, 2014, sec. Europe), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26043872>.

individual participants in the Olympic Games acted for an international cause, in this case it was LGBTQ+ rights, on a high-profile stage. These athletes positioned themselves against the policies of a state, Russia, and therefore used the Olympics to become actors in the international political system.

The Russo-Ukrainian War

Because this case study and analysis of NSSAs as diplomats within the international system is oriented around the current war in Ukraine, it is important to understand some of the history surrounding Ukraine and its attitude towards Russia since gaining independence, and the development of relations between the two states before culminating into the war we see today. This sub-section discusses Ukraine's slow dissociation from Russia after independence, and the development of the war.

Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and immediately began the process of "de-Sovietization" by renaming streets, rewriting history books, and removing Soviet symbols from public areas.²⁷ From February 20 to March 24, 2014, Russia invaded and illegally annexed Crimea on the basis of "self-defense." Crimea is an interesting region in Ukraine, as many of its residents are retired military personnel employed by the "...Russian Black Sea Fleet...[and] [o]ne-third of all of Crimea's residents were born in various parts of the former Soviet Union and settled on the peninsula after 1944..." indicating a large ethnically Russian demographic.²⁸

²⁷ Rozenas, Arturas, and Anastasiia Vlasenko, "The Real Consequences of Symbolic Politics: Breaking the Soviet Past in Ukraine," (*The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 July 1, 2022): 1263–77. 1265.

²⁸ Wojciech Konończuk, "Russia's Real Aims in Crimea," (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Accessed November 24, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/13/russia-s-real-aims-in-crimea-pub-54914>.

The conflict reignited on February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine from the north, east, and south.²⁹ Putin reasoned that this invasion was based on “denazification and demilitarization” to protect ethnic Russians and prevent Ukraine’s membership into NATO.³⁰ This invasion is seen as a proxy war in the wider West versus East struggle for power - with NATO representing the West, and Russia leading the East. Ukraine is currently the top recipient of U.S. aid, receiving a total of \$75 billion in assistance and another forty-six countries contributing to the aid package.³¹ It is also important to note that Belarus is another major player on the Russian side of the conflict, as Belarus’ opened its shared border with Ukraine for Russian troops to safely pass through the country (which allowed for invasion from the north of Ukraine). The president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, is known to have relied on subsidies and political support from Russia to maintain his three-decade control over the country. However, Lukashenko said that he is opposed to fighting in the conflict.³² This invasion is ongoing, with Ukraine attempting to mount a counteroffensive.

Fencing: History, Politics, and Rules

A brief history of the development of fencing and its norms provides context as to how the sport has been used as a political tool over time. History also identifies rules and conduct of international competition and athletes’ road to the Olympics.

The History

²⁹ “1 Year after the Invasion Began, a Timeline of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” (PBS NewsHour, February 19, 2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/1-year-after-the-invasion-began-a-timeline-of-russias-war-in-ukraine>.

³⁰ “1 Year after the Invasion Began, a Timeline of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” (PBS NewsHour).

³¹ “How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts,”(Council on Foreign Relations), Accessed November 24, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts>.

³² “Belarus’ Top Diplomat Says He Can’t Imagine His Country Entering the War in Ukraine alongside Russia,” (PBS NewsHour, September 26, 2023). <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/belarus-top-diplomat-says-he-cant-imagine-his-country-entering-the-war-in-ukraine-alongside-russia>.

The first evidence of the sword dates 3,000 years ago to ancient Egypt, where hieroglyphs depict two men fighting with what resembles today's sabers.³³ Be that as it may, the official history of the sword begins in ancient Greece, with the creation of schools designed to teach the art of the sword in warfare.³⁴ Throughout ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, there was always a spectacle associated with the sword. For example, gladiatorial fights were used to quell the masses during the Roman Empire. However, the association of fencing and swords with the elites of society did not come about until after the Roman Empire fell. In fact, during the Empire, participating in a duel (i.e. a gladiatorial fight) for spectacle was seen as reprehensible.³⁵

After the fall of the Empire and the establishment of various monarchies, the elites used the sword as a symbol of power and mystique that would underscore a man's virtue (this was stressed by having royal figures always posed with a sword on their hips).³⁶ With the creation of the printing press came the movement of codification of fencing styles and techniques. Italy created the most complicated treatise of fencing, written by Don Jeronimo de Carranza, with the goal of applying all parts of a gentleman's education (math, science, art, philosophy, and religion) to the art of fencing - this was called *la destreza* (the high art).³⁷

It seems that the values of personal honor associated with fencing arose in the mid-16th century Europe, as dueling was becoming a deadly commonplace. A flood of treatises codified a specific type of honor that deemphasized the use of "disreputable tricks and abuses" in dueling, by request of the Constable of Nables under patronage of Saint George - so in this case, these

³³ Chris Jones, "The History of Fencing," (Fencing Academy of Philadelphia, December 20, 2021), <https://fencefap.com/the-history-of-fencing/>.

³⁴ Chris Jones.

³⁵ Richard Cohen, *By the Sword: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions*, (New York: Modern Library, 2008).

³⁶ Richard Cohen, 11.

³⁷ Richard Cohen, 29.

values are written to solve a public safety problem.³⁸ By the 16th century, “Europe aspired to be French,” they began using French terms for all aspects of fencing, inspired by ballet.³⁹ Lunges use the same muscles as ballet jumps and the *en garde* position is very similar to the second position in ballet.

Fencing continued to be refined, as various styles and fencing masters emerged all over Europe. The greatest masters of the 17th-19th centuries were from Italy. In 1823, the British government attempted to outlaw dueling entirely. The leading members of the House of Parliament and senior officials organized this movement, but they soon came to realize that it would be impossible to get rid of duels altogether because of how ingrained in society it had become. Joseph Hamilton, an Irishman who was a part of this committee, decided that if dueling could not be outlawed it should instead be regulated, thus a the formalizing of dueling etiquette continued in ‘Article II of the new code [which] called for the duelist “to abstain from nicknames, mimicry, offensive jokes, and what is usually termed horseplay.”’⁴⁰ This action helped orient duels as “affairs of honor [and] an ethical passage of arms...”⁴¹ In fact, the creation of the right of way rule was instituted as a safeguard against the dangers of having two fencers running full force at one another.

Fencing as a Political Tool

The association of fencing with honor and strength of mind and body brought about political incentives to use fencing competition as prowess as a soft power resource. While many fascist and autocratic dictatorships of the 20th century used fencing as a tool for their own

³⁸ Richard Cohen, 49.

³⁹ Richard Cohen, 72.

⁴⁰ Richard Cohen, 171.

⁴¹ Richard Cohen, 172.

political advancement, it also created a space for revolutionaries who wanted to counter these same regimes.

One striking example of a fascist regime seeking to harness fencing as a power tool relates to Nazi Germany. Historically, Germany created fraternities (where young men drank and dueled one another to demonstrate their masculinity) to counter Napoleon's invasion in 1806. Later these fraternities were seen as a threat to the Nazi regime, yet the Nazis took many of the fraternities' values into the training of their own officers, such as making fencing a requirement.⁴² Be that as it may, many fencing club alumni used their networks to enlist support for the resistance, exchange anti-regime information, and hold meetings.⁴³

Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) - the internal security section of the SS - was an avid sabre fencer. He pursued the personal goal of taking control of the FIE, which at the time was headed by the Belgian fencer, Paul Anspach. Heydrich sent a dispatch to Brussels (at the time it was the location of the FIE headquarters) to bring all FIE files to the Nazi headquarters in Berlin.⁴⁴ He desired to create a new European Alliance between Germany, Italy, and Hungary to replace the FIE in the conduct of fencing. Heydrich was killed just a few days after taking control and thus ended his fencing campaign! After World War Two, all Germans were banned from fencing internationally (until 1949) because of its strong association with Nazism.⁴⁵ After the war, a "commission for purging," was set up by the FIE. By 1947, member federations of the FIE expelled eighteen fencers for "acts against the FIE," including: three

⁴² Richard Cohen, 315.

⁴³ Richard Cohen, 316.

⁴⁴ Richard Cohen, 337.

⁴⁵ Richard Cohen, 461.

Czechs, four Austrians, five Norwegians, a Pole, two Dutchmen, and three Belgians. Not one German faced expulsion.⁴⁶

Fencing is a historically political sport. Because of its association with honor, strength, and intelligence, fencing is a tool for political elites to demonstrate these values. By being a powerful fencer, one becomes associated with prowess that increases their positionality within a social hierarchy. Why is it that many great political figures fenced in their youth? The controversy surrounding the war in Ukraine and international fencing illuminates the idea that the sport has a powerful influence on the international political stage.

Rules of the Bout

The rules in fencing can seem confusing, especially with the speeds that athletes are going – sometimes the spectator cannot see where the tip even hits! However, a brief overview of general norms and tournament etiquette is critical to understanding the sport and its political impact. The most important markers on a fencing piste are the *en garde* lines (where the fencers stand behind at the beginning of each encounter) and the warning zones (if a fencer steps behind this area, they give up a point to their opponent). When a fencer steps up to fence, they must have all their gear ready and will plug themselves in to the machine that registers points. After plugging in, a fencer must walk to the *en garde* line (for epee and foil they will have to do a weapon check with the referee). Before the bout can begin, both fencers are required to salute each other and the referee as a sign of respect. At the end of a bout, both fencers must shake hands or click blades (newly accepted since the COVID-19 pandemic) and salute the referee once again to reacknowledge the respect.

⁴⁶ Richard Cohen, 338.

The FIE has numerous rules that are established and upheld to maintain the peaceful integrity of turning a weapon encounter into a sport. Without a level of decorum, the encounter ceases to be a sport and turns into a duel. Under FIE rules, failure to salute or shake hands/click blades with an opponent is punishable by a black card, which results in an automatic elimination from the tournament. The values of chivalry and honor are manifested in the etiquette expected of fencers, referees, coaches, and spectators. Everyone participating in the tournament (including spectators) must demonstrate respect for all. Failure to do so can result in a spectator, coach, etc. Being ejected from the tournament venue.

How to get into the Olympics

Like all Olympic sports, athletes must qualify to compete, and teams must follow the regulations of the IOC. For the 2024 Olympics, there will be a total of 212 fencers – 102 men, 102 women, and six host country quotas.⁴⁷ Placement of athletes into quotas is determined by the FIE Official senior Team Ranking list of April 1, 2024. This list is established according to the number of points accumulated from April 3, 2023 to April 1, 2024 in the following events: Senior Team World Cup Competitions, Senior Team World Championships, and the Senior Team Continental Championships.

Qualification for team events goes as follows: Team ranking is determined by the points accumulated. Some 144 athletes will qualify for the individual competition (three athletes per National Olympic Team - NOC). The four highest-ranked NOCs in each weapon and per gender will qualify for the Games, regardless of their zone of origin.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Gisella Fava Martín, EJ Monica Kim and Marta, “How to Qualify for Fencing at Paris 2024. The Olympics Qualification System Explained,” (Olympics.Com. August 27, 2022).

<https://olympics.com/en/news/how-to-qualify-for-fencing-paris-2024-olympics-qualification-system-explained>.

⁴⁸ Gisella Fava Martín, EJ Monica Kim and Marta.

Individual event qualification goes as follows: The FIE Individual Senior Adjusted Official Ranking (AOR) is listed by zone of April 1, 2024, which is based on points accumulated in the following events: Individual Grand Prix competitions, Individual Senior World Cup Competitions, Satellite competitions, Individual Senior World Championships, and Individual Senior Continental Championships. Individuals who have already qualified through the Team competition are removed from the list, which will then be adjusted. Based on the AOR, the six best athletes (one per NOC and weapon) will qualify in the following amount: two for Europe, two for Asia-Oceania, one for Africa, and One for America.⁴⁹

The framework of individual bouts and wider competitions make fencing an interesting case for the study of NSSAs and their legitimacy in the international political system. Because fencing is a weapon sport, respect between all participants in a bout is paramount to maintain the activity's essence of sport and play.

The honor that is associated with fencers is a result of its historical roots in European high society, and their desire to espouse honorable character. Athletes in modern-day fencing agree and choose to not engage in the deadly capabilities of their weapon as an act of honor and peace. An honorable fencer is one who says, "I have the ability to turn this bout into a real fight, but I am choosing not to because of the mutual respect that we two parties have agreed upon." This framing rings similarly to the norms in the international system, where states choose not to engage in deadly conflict and instead to use diplomacy to solve conflict. The IOC and FIE are the two most important organizations in the conduct of international fencing, including upholding its ability to be exercised within the Olympic ideal of peace through sport. Russia has

⁴⁹ Gisella Fava Martín, EJ Monica Kim and Marta.

historically used the Olympic Games as a political tool, especially in the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. Today's controversy in international fencing relating to the war in Ukraine represents breaches to the norm of respect and peace that Olympianism hopes to promote. The prominent position of politics within fencing in its history and today makes it a strong case for the examination of sport and diplomacy.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review and Methodology

LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-State Actors in Diplomacy

Before discussing sport diplomacy in the context of NSSAs, it is important to first examine current literature on the role of organizations and individuals as non-state actors in diplomacy. Beginning from the Treaty of Westphalia, which established the modern ideals of diplomacy of today (specifically the image of diplomats being reliable and trustworthy persons), scholarship illustrates how globalization, media, and changing geopolitical interests have evolved into a modern diplomacy that emphasizes the importance of unofficial institutions in its conduct, specifically focused on sports and its subsequent participants.⁵⁰ An important part of the idea of non-state actors having influence is Polyilateralism, which highlights a third dimension of diplomacy that argues non-state actors develop “normal” diplomatic relations through mediums such as communication, media, and negotiation despite not possessing the state right to sovereignty.⁵¹ A non-state actor can be either an individual or an organization.

⁵⁰ Stuart Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2018), 29.

⁵¹ Michał Marcin Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy: Sports in the Diplomatic Activities of States and Non-State Actors*, (Lanham, UNITED STATES: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020, 23).

The most prominent non-state actor in the international sporting system is the IOC, created by Geoffrey Wiseman as “...an actor of transitional civil society that works for nonprofit and supports legitimate sociopolitical causes across international borders and engaged in diplomatic interactions.”⁵² Because of the increasing interdependencies created by globalization, organizations such as the IOC and other non-state actors are more attractive - meaning, low risk and yet well-versed throughout the world - diplomatic forces compared to traditional diplomatic structures. The broader question of whether the increasing connectedness of the modern world warrants using unconventional diplomatic strategies – in this case, the strategy is utilizing sport as a mode of soft power. Is there something about technology and globalization that forces new actors into the diplomatic system?

Sport Diplomacy

This section identifies the origins and current discourse surrounding sport diplomacy. The Cold War sparked interest regarding sport as a tool for influence in the international political system. In his book, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, Stuart Murray, a leader in sport diplomacy research and theory, seeks to clarify the definition and use of the term, ‘sport diplomacy,’ saying it includes “...the use of sport to realise goals, minimise friction and – generally – bring strangers closer together.”⁵³ Murray’s book examines the presence of two subcategories in sport diplomacy - Traditional, and Non-Traditional. Early academia structures the study of sport diplomacy as a tool for states’ geopolitical agendas involving government actors.⁵⁴

⁵² Michał Marcin Kobierecki, 23.

⁵³ Stuart Murray, 3.

⁵⁴ Verity Postlethwaite, Claire Jenkin, and Emma Sherry. “Sport Diplomacy: An Integrative Review.” (*Sport Management Review* 26, no. 3, June 1, 2023): 361–82. 3.

Traditional Sport diplomacy involves *state actors* using sport to push their agendas. Extensive research on the incentives for hosting events such as the Olympic Games have been done in the context of traditional sport diplomacy - for example, there are numerous articles on the importance of the 1938 Berlin Olympic Games as a tool for Nazi propaganda⁵⁵ or the use of “cricket diplomacy” to ease tensions between India and Pakistan by prompting peace talks between the two states.⁵⁶

Recent research highlights the parallel functions and institutions between international sport organizations as NSSAs and state-actors. International sport organizations not only regulate their sport, but they also must uphold positive reputations in the international system to maintain “...perceived legitimacy, which in turn has a major impact on their effectiveness in negotiating to achieve their objective.”⁵⁷ To many, these functions are synonymous with goals of state governments. The similar goals and conduct between states and international sport organizations makes the examination of the International Fencing Federation as a non-state diplomatic institution easier to compare to the traditional form of diplomacy discussed by Murray.

Literature on sport diplomacy initiatives includes evidence for the power of sporting individuals in diplomacy; they become interesting cases for analysis of the “unofficial diplomat.”⁵⁸ The distinction that individual athletes maintain makes them interesting cases to analyze as diplomats in the international sport arena.

The United States identified the power of athletes in projecting a positive image of the country, and established the Sports Diplomacy Division, which “...focuses on people-to-people

⁵⁵ Stuart Murray, 66.

⁵⁶ Moolakkattu, Mathew John. “Cricket Diplomacy and The India-Pakistan Peace Process.” (Peace Review 32, no. 4 October 1, 2020): 426–33. 428.

⁵⁷ Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman. “Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy,” Accessed September 24, 2023. 1111.

⁵⁸ Stuart Murray, Geoffrey Allen Pigman. 1112.

engagements...within the context of sport exchanges, sports envoys and sports mentoring.”⁵⁹ The theoretical potency of personal connections between athletes and other participants in sport regardless of state association points to the separation that athletes have from state. This idea is often harnessed by governments to improve international relations. Many states began to reform their strategies for international discourse by transforming the roles of diplomats from “‘gatekeepers’ to ‘boundary spanners,’” thereby inviting more people to join the unofficial diplomatic force.⁶⁰ This highlights the idea of NSSAs being both international sporting institutions *and* individual athletes being diplomatic actors in Kobierecki’s ‘modern’ diplomacy. Sport diplomacy is a form of modern diplomacy because of its increasing presence as a result of globalization and the growing interconnectedness of states and individuals around the world.

Sports and Soft Power

Given the ambiguous approach one can take with sport, it is important to make plain the definitions of the terms “sport” and “soft power.” While historically academia has found “sport” as undefinable, today’s scholars acknowledge the all-encompassing nature of the subject, stating that, “Sports are institutionalized, rule-governed, structurally game and play-like...encounters in various tests and contests of human physical skills.”⁶¹ The elements of institutions and rules illustrate the similarities between sport conduct and the conduct of governments and point to why it is a preferred method for garnering state soft power – sport functions in a similar style to the state.

⁵⁹ Richard Parish. “EU Sport Diplomacy: An Idea Whose Time Has Nearly Come.” (JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 60, no. 5, September 2022): 1511–28. 1516.

⁶⁰ Stuart Murray. 91.

⁶¹ Lukáš Mareš, and Daniel D. Novotný, “What Is Sport? A Response to Jim Parry,” (Sport, Ethics and Philosophy 17, no. 1 January 2, 2023): 34–48. 43.

The foundational idea for the topic of sports diplomacy is “soft power,” a term popularized by Joseph Nye. Nye defines soft power as “...the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”⁶² Soft power is a staple of modern diplomacy, because it is associated with less risk by acting as an attractive power (as opposed to coercive).⁶³ Soft power is often manifested in a state’s ability to express itself as an attractive culture. Sport is a type of soft power that states seek to exploit in their international political endeavors, as it has proved to be one of those ‘universal languages’ of humanity.

Governments’ interests in sport as a tool for diplomacy make the relationship inherently political, as their interactions are dependent upon the political system in place.⁶⁴ Sport is increasingly becoming the preferred form to practice soft power because it requires the involvement of a multitude of people (coaches, athletes, officials, etc.) who have the ability to build positive relationships between states “...by building mutual sympathy, combating stereotypes, and showcasing the virtues of the country.”⁶⁵ One of the great strengths of sport diplomacy is that the international sport community is a network built on personal friendships, whose common ideals can prevail over political or economic considerations.⁶⁶

Academic focus on sport diplomacy began with examining how the United States, Soviet Union, and China utilized the Olympic Movement as a proxy ground for the East-West struggle during the Cold War.⁶⁷ Hockey is a famous case-study for this conflict. While the two countries

⁶² Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” (The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 616, no. 1, March 1, 2008): 94–109. 94.

⁶³ Stuart Murray. 96

⁶⁴ François Carrard, “Sports and Politics on the International Scene,” (Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali 78, no. 1, 309, 2011): 25–32. 25.

⁶⁵ Michał Marcin Kobierecki and Piotr Strożek, “Sports Mega-Events and Shaping the International Image of States: How Hosting the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups Affects Interest in Host Nations | SpringerLink,” Accessed September 24, 2023. 52.

⁶⁶ François Carrard, 27-9.

⁶⁷ Toby C. Rider, “A Campaign of Truth: The State Department, Propaganda, and the Olympic Games, 1950–1952.” (Journal of Cold War Studies 18, no. 2, 2016): 4–27, 26.

found each other at odds in the context of various competitions (famously, the 1957 Ice Hockey World Championships held in Moscow), the individual athletes from the U.S. and USSR built friendships that lasted decades.⁶⁸ Events like this signal the power of using athletes as diplomatic tools because of their politically non-threatening reputation.⁶⁹

Another case is the famous “Ping-Pong diplomacy” in 1971 that began the easing of tensions between the U.S. and China, where table tennis players Zhuang Zedong of China and Glen Cowan of Team USA spoke to one another with candor and warmth, resulting in an invitation from the Chinese government to have the American athletes engage in a series of matches with China.⁷⁰ This is an example of non-state and state actors working together for diplomacy, known as networked sports diplomacy.⁷¹ According to experts, we are now in the era of sport for peace and development, following the establishment of the 1992 ‘Olympic Truce’ and increase in partnerships between sporting organizations, athletes, and charities.⁷²

Fencing and Society

Academic literature on the relationship between fencing and sport diplomacy is very limited. Most academic literature on fencing sport is related to biomechanics of the body or the health benefits of the sport. Strict norms of respect, dignity, and honor expected of fencers are useful tools for the analysis of sport and its relationship to international politics. Fencing separates itself from other sports by first, being one of the few sports to have an event at all Olympic Games since 1896 (it has historical influence and significance) and second by

⁶⁸ John Soares, “Cold War, Hot Ice: International Ice Hockey, 1947-1980,” (Journal of Sport History 34, no. 2 2007): 207–30, 212.

⁶⁹ Simon Darnell, *Sport for Development and Peace: A Critical Sociology*, (1st ed. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 21.

⁷⁰ Michal Marcin Kobierecki, “Ping-Pong Diplomacy and Its Legacy in the American Foreign Policy,” (Polish Political Science Yearbook 45, 2016): 309.

⁷¹ Stuart Murray, 131.

⁷² Richard Giulianotti, “Sport, Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution: A Contextual Analysis and Modelling of the Sport, Development and Peace Sector,” (Ethnic and Racial Studies 34, no. 2, February 1, 2011): 207–28, 210.

underscoring the importance of honor and decorum in its conduct as a sport.⁷³ During the 16th century, fencing and its association with the nobility of the courts (during King Henry VIII) began to stress the value of cunningness - a fencer and nobleman who was not intellectually engaged, both in life and sport, was a disgrace to his household.⁷⁴ This relationship between the courts and fencing has directed attention to analysis of how fencing fits into the formal structures of society.

One analysis on the relationship between dueling values of masculinity and honor in relation to the modern Italian state illustrates how changes in the Italian political landscape were often followed by a “dueling epidemic.”⁷⁵ Steven Hughes gives an interesting snapshot of how fencing and its historical association with elitism played a significant role in Mussolini’s desire to rid the common people of individualistic ideologies, stating that Mussolini’s regime maintained a contradictory attitude towards fencing’s values of honor and chivalry, finding them to be individualistic and demonstrating disdain for the government’s authority. To create nationalistic honor, “Rhetoric [shifted] from honor defined as a personal sensibility to honor as a personal duty to the regime.”⁷⁶ Hughes' analysis of dueling values and trends in relation to regime shifts in Italy highlight the strong historical correlation between the values of fencing sport and political institutions.

An analysis of a 15th century German fencing rulebook finds similarities between the conduct of politics and the decorum required of all participants in fencing duels. In this case, norms dictated that spectators demonstrate respect for both fencing parties, if they decided to

⁷³ “FENCING: History of Fencing at the Olympic Games,” (The Olympic Studies Centre, October 19, 2017), 2.

⁷⁴ Egerton Castle, “Schools and Masters of Fencing: From the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century,” (Courier Corporation, 2003), 24.

⁷⁵ Egerton Castle, 24.

⁷⁶ Steven C. Hughes, 268.

shout, spit, or throw something, the fine was 30 shillings (which is equivalent to dozens of salary weeks on average).⁷⁷ Rules such as these, which are still present in today's fencing conduct, mimic those seen in the courts - this idea of respect for all parties when at odds with one another. Similarly, another analysis of a 19th century Swiss fencing rulebook revealed the institutionalized, strict sporting nature of fencing, even though it was organized and taught by the Swiss military and therefore the state.⁷⁸ Fencing academia mainly focuses on history from the 20th century and before. There appears to be a gap in the literature on contemporary fencing norms, techniques, or wider relations. This thesis fills the gap in the literature by examining a current conflict in the fencing community.

The sport has made international strides, such as the addition of women's sabre events to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.⁷⁹ One study on the relationship between Title IX and fencing revealed how the specific athleticism required of fencing and its decorum proved to be fruitful grounds for women's empowerment. For example, the ability to successfully stop an opponent's attack requires a fencer who is confident in their footwork, point-control, and both offensive and defensive strategies.⁸⁰ Winning a single bout requires a level of grit and self-assuredness that not only gives the fencer an opportunity to claim victory, but also translates into the fencer's person off the strip.⁸¹ Once a fencer gets to the direct elimination rounds, they must outlast and outwit their opponents for at least 15 points (95% of the time fencing extends to more than 15 points

⁷⁷ Olivier Dupuis, "A Fifteenth-Century Fencing Tournament in Strasburg," (*Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 2015, no. 2, October 1, 2015): 67-79, 72.

⁷⁸ Mathijs Roelofsen, "'En Garde – Un, Deux!': Military Sabre Fencing in Nineteenth-Century Switzerland," (*Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 9, no. 1, June 3, 2021), 11.

⁷⁹ "FENCING: History of Fencing at the Olympic Games," 2.

⁸⁰ Grace Chenxin Liu, "Breaking the Barriers in Women's Fencing: Historical Roots, Title IX and Empowerment of Women," 1-24, (2022), 9.

⁸¹ Grace Chenxin Liu, 9.

total). If one fencer decides that they can no longer endure the bout, they will lose, even if their skill is objectively better than their opponent.

One intention of this thesis is to analyze how individual fencers have political sway because of the historical norms required to categorize an otherwise violent activity as sport. Study of fencing's rules, values, and physicality reveal historical ties to state political institutions, specifically fencing's ability to affect levels of soft power as described in the background section. Fencing as a useful sport for a case study in assessing the larger question on the role of NSSAs in diplomacy because of the similarities of norms between the sport itself and the international system, its historical political significance, and the sport's growing presence with the rise of technology and social media.

The breach of the Olympic Peace and norms of international fencing by the events of the war in Ukraine is a compelling case of how institutional and individual NSSAs insert themselves into the international political system. There is a gap in the literature on fencing and its role in the 21st century, especially on the global stage and Olympic Games. Today's international fencing makes a good case for continuing analysis of modern diplomacy because it involves non-state actors in the conflict of two states (Ukraine and Russia) and the use of media as a mechanism to take political stances and actions. This thesis' analysis of fencing in today's international political climate sheds light on the influence and similarities between NSSAs and governments, as well as individual athletes and diplomats, and their positions within this new modern diplomacy. This thesis expands upon existing literature by highlighting fencing as an important facet of sport diplomacy because of its history, and the people and states it involves. This analysis focuses on the intersection of NSSAs and sport diplomacy and whether sport is a powerful tool in the international political realm to garner relations between states and people.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis utilizes a mix of qualitative and quantitative data and analysis. Chapters three and four focus on analysis of the IOC and FIE respectively. Much of the data in these two chapters came from mission statements and articles posted by the organizations themselves, news articles about the controversy of both organizations' involvement in the war in Ukraine, and social media posts by individual athletes criticizing or involving the organizations. A critical piece of data came from the International Athletes Forum that occurred in October 2023, which focused on the war in Ukraine and the IOC's guidelines for Russian and Belarussians to compete as Individual Neutral Athletes (AIN). This forum was posted on the IOC's YouTube channel. It included a question-and-answer session where athletes from around the world could freely voice their opinions on the subject. This section of the video provided powerful anecdotes by athletes on the IOC and its decision-making process as being influenced by state agendas (specifically pacifying Russia and Belarus) as opposed to taking a stand against aggression.

Each organization's goals highlighted the place in the international system that they saw themselves filling. Media reports indicate that the FIE has strong ties to the Russo-Ukrainian War in their reporting on the former-FIE President, Alisher Usmanov, stepping down from the position after being sanctioned by the European Union as a Russian oligarch. The data illuminated a disparity between the IOC and FIE's statements about maintaining the non-political integrity of sport and their action to allow Russian and Belarussian athletes, which make the upcoming Paris games political in nature. These chapters also utilized social media and interviews with individual members of the international fencing community and examined their criticisms regarding the FIE and IOC. This was done to inform the relationship between

international sport organizations and their individual participants, which was then analyzed in the context of the organizations' influence and responses to state versus individual criticism.

Chapter five inspects the role of individual members of the international fencing community as 'unofficial' diplomats in the international political system. Data from this chapter came in the form of two interviews with members of the international fencing community. These interviews gathered the participants' perspectives on the issue of fencing in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian War, the influence of individuals within the political sphere of sport, and whether fencing has a special place in international politics. Each participant was contacted via email with a list of questions that they will be asked as well as forms of consent. Interviews were conducted on the virtual meeting platform Zoom and lasted for around one hour each. As the interview progressed, participants' responses were transcribed onto a document securely stored on the CU OneDrive.

After data collection, analysis of the transcripts from both participants were compared for similarities and differences in their responses to the three questions. Similarities highlighted a facet of fencing that is more likely to be fact because it is attested for by multiple people. Differences represent the various perspectives that members of the international fencing community have regarding politics, which can be informed from the participant's background. Questions were worded with the assumption that participants would discuss the following topics: the historical presence of fencing in politics, the presence of the Russian government in both the IOC and FIE, and the controversy of the power of the individual athlete in sport as a whole. These questions read as follows:

- I. What makes international fencing special in terms of the Olympics, its place in the international community, and its role and impact in politics/conflict?
- II. Considering the war in Ukraine, do you think that Russian athletes should be allowed to compete in the France 2024 Summer Olympic Games? Why or why not?
- III. Is there a larger relationship between individual athletes and world events?

Both participants surprisingly highlighted the doping scandal of the Russian Olympic Team as an important factor that sheds light on the influence that Russia has in the Olympic scene. Another unanticipated theme was how the relationship between sports within their state's government structure influences the ability for NSSAs to act as players in the international political system. A major limitation of the interview data includes survey bias. This thesis engages with a small sample size for its basis of analysis, meaning that the interview responses are skewed towards specific sects of the international fencing community.

CHAPTER THREE: The IOC as an NSSA

This thesis explores NSSAs and their roles in the international political system as a case study. This chapter focuses on the relationship of the IOC with the international political system and its place within the controversy surrounding fencing and the war in Ukraine. The IOC is the top governing body of competitive international and Olympic fencing sport and is an important actor in the political controversy within the international fencing community sparked by the war in Ukraine. This examination of the IOC orients around the organization's perceived positionality within the international and sporting hierarchy (derived from their official websites and charters),

response to the war in Ukraine and its effect on international fencing sport and the upcoming Paris 2024 Olympic Games (specifically stated on the organization's websites, media reports, and social media posts involving each organization), and their responses to criticisms from athletes over their response to the war.

This chapter argues that the IOC is fearful to deviate from the international state status quo. Analysis of the data collected relating to the IOC and the war in Ukraine highlights a tendency for the IOC to align Olympic policies and norms with state political agendas. In this case, the IOC (whose leadership desires to maintain the participation of the Russian and Belarussian Olympic Committees) is afraid to 'rock the boat' of international politics. The IOC feels that banning Russian and Belarussian athletes would anger the countries' Olympic Committees and discredit the merit of the IOC. The IOC's reluctance to deviate from state political agendas demonstrates that the IOC is an NSSA who follows political trends set by state actors in international politics.

Positionality

The IOC's highest office is its Executive Board including the IOC President (Thomas Bach), four Vice Presidents, and members who are elected to serve four-year terms. Part of the Executive Board's job is to manage all International Federations (IFs), meaning that the Board has the final say in all matters relating to all Olympic sports' ruling body and conduct.⁸² This hierarchical structure is important because the FIE originally took a stance on Russian and Belarussian athletes and was modified to follow a set of IOC guidelines for Neutral Athletes. The actions of the FIE and IOC are in conversation with one another. Examination of how this

⁸² "IOC Executive Board," Accessed January 3, 2024, <https://olympics.com/ioc/executive-board>.

hierarchy affects each organization's influence and actions in the international political system reveals that the influence and importance of these organizations is derived from the desire for states to use sport as a tool in exercising soft power.

The IOC's Perception of the Athlete

This case study on the war in Ukraine and its controversy in international fencing requires exploring the IOC's perception on the role of athletes in sport, as the situation involves individual athletes taking a stance on whether Russians and Belarussians should be allowed to compete. Because fencing is an individual sport, the perception of the athlete *as an individual* is important in the IOC's decision-making process and response to athlete criticisms, circumstances, and perceptions on the war. According to the IOC, athletes are at the center of the Olympic Movement; the IOC underscores the importance of protecting athletes' human rights in all international sport competitions. The IOC claims to invest in combating "...match-fixing manipulation, logistics or staffing..." and highlights the importance of athletes as role models for future generations by stating they "...inspire millions of children around the world to participate in sport and reflect the Olympic ideals."⁸³ A large part of the protection of athletes' human rights is the protection of individual dignity. Dignity is at the foundation of the Olympic Charter, which states, "The Goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity."⁸⁴ Thus, the IOC asserts that maintaining athletes' dignity in sport is at the heart of the Olympic Movement, which involves the protection of their human rights.

⁸³ "Athletes - The Heart of the Olympic Movement," (IOC), Accessed January 3, 2024, <https://olympics.com/ioc/athletes>.

⁸⁴ "Olympic Charter," Accessed December 18, 2023, <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-charter>, 3.

Given these statements, it is understandable for the IOC to support the participation of all athletes regardless of their government's action to breach the Olympic Truce. On the other hand, the IOC would understand the anger and fear felt by Ukrainian athletes because of the war. Placing the athlete at the center of the Olympic Movement posits individuals as more important than state actors in the Olympic Games. For the IOC to continue its commitment to the Olympic Movement, individual athletes must be allowed to participate in the Games. Part of this individual participation involves the protection of their human rights while engaging in sport – for example, being able to compete without political scrutiny. However, this does not appear to be the case for the IOC, who makes decisions and recommendations that function within the Russian state political agenda.

The IOC released a document outlining its goals for human rights protection within sport for 2024. These objectives highlight the IOC's promise to protect all athletes regardless of political affiliation, nationality, gender, etc. In the case of the war in Ukraine, it means protecting athletes on both sides of the spectrum. However, many see the protection of Russian and Belarussian athletes who are known supporters of the Kremlin as a breach of Ukrainian athletic sovereignty. Objectives ten and eleven deal with representation and meaningful consultation and read as follows:

10: "Continue strengthening the IOC's model of athlete representation and continue to require Olympic Movement stakeholders to meaningfully engage with athletes and include their views into their decision-making process."

11: “Consult with athletes from specific vulnerable groups and other relevant stakeholders on decisions that may impact those athletes.”⁸⁵

These objectives appear to contrast statements made by individual fencers in an open letter to the IOC. The open letter by the fencing community (more on this document in the section on the FIE and in Chapter Four) explicitly states that the FIE and IOC’s surveys and decision regarding Russian and Belarussian athletes being able to fence at the upcoming Paris Games is not reflective of the opinions of international fencers. The IOC’s recommendations to reintroduce Russian and Belarussian athletes into the upcoming Paris 2024 Games demonstrates the organization’s desire to maintain a positive reputation with all states – regardless of their actions and involvement in political conflict that affects athletes – rather than following their own guidelines.

Russia, a state with a very large presence in the international fencing community (both today and historically), desires to continue to strengthen its presence and prowess in the sport of fencing. To do so it must be allowed to have athletes compete. The IOC created guidelines that enable Russia to do this, even if the athletes are not directly representing their country. While the IOC’s action to support Russian and Belarussian athletes as individuals falls in line with their reasoning of non-discrimination based on nationality, it also invalidates the IOC’s commitment to the Olympic Truce to maintain and promote peace through sport. Russia and Belarus breached this truce, so their participation in the upcoming Games sets a precedent that non-peaceful states are allowed to engage in international sport peace while also simultaneously waging war elsewhere.

⁸⁵ “Olympic Charter,” 14.

The IOC's large international presence is not derived from the organization itself, but from the desire to use athletes as political and propaganda figures by states. If governments believe that engagement in international sport is a valuable resource, the demand, and therefore importance, of the IOC and the Olympic Games increases. Russia, like many other states, historically used international fencing as an avenue to project power and prowess on the international stage. This being the case, the logical conclusion is that the IOC's influence derives not from its own merit but is instead a result of its importance as a soft political power vessel.

Response to the War in Ukraine

The majority of data in this section is derived from the eleventh International Athletes Forum (IAF) held on October 9, 2023, where athlete representatives met in Lausanne, Switzerland to voice their opinions on IOC actions and the upcoming 2024 Paris Olympic Games. This IAF focused on the war in Ukraine and the IOC's guidelines surrounding the participation of Russian and Belarussian athletes in international competition as Authorized Neutral Athletes (AIN).

The forum opened with the Chair to the IOC Athletes' Commission (AC) expressing the IOC's solidarity with the Ukrainian Olympic Community and reiterating the guiding mission of the Olympic movement as "...contributing to peace through the unifying mission of sport and guaranteeing full access to competitions wherever these are in the world."⁸⁶ On March 28, 2023, the IOC released a set of recommendations for AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes, which read as follows:

⁸⁶ *International Athletes' Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>.

- I. Athletes with a Russian or Belarussian passport must compete only as Individual Neutral Athletes
- II. Teams of athletes with a Russian or Belarussian passport cannot be considered
- III. Athletes who actively support the war cannot compete. Support personnel who actively support the war cannot be entered.
- IV. Athletes who are contracted with the Russian or Belarussian military or national security agencies cannot compete. Support personnel who are contracted with the Russian or Belarussian military or national security agencies cannot be entered.
- V. Any such Individual Neutral Athlete, like all the other participating athletes, must meet all anti-doping requirements applicable to them and particularly those set out in the anti-doping rules of the IFs.
- VI. The sanctions against those responsible for the war, the Russian and Belarussian states and governments, must remain in place.⁸⁷

At the beginning of the war, the IOC and all subsequent IFs decided to ban all Russian and Belarussian athletes from participating in all international sport competition. However, on March 28, 2023, the IOC convened to revisit the complete ban on these athletes and to formulate a set of recommendations for IFs to follow should they choose to allow individual athletes from Russia and Belarus to compete. It is important to note that at this time, support for sending aid to Ukraine was decreasing in the United States who was spearheading the financial support for Ukraine.⁸⁸ The Ukrainian military also blocked the Russian advance of troops in the East where

⁸⁷ *International Athletes' Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>.

⁸⁸ Andy Cerda, "About Half of Republicans Now Say the U.S. Is Providing Too Much Aid to Ukraine," (*Pew Research Center*, blog), Accessed January 26, 2024 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/12/08/about-half-of-republicans-now-say-the-us-is-providing-too-much-aid-to-ukraine/>.

fighting is the heaviest (Luhansk and Bakhmut).⁸⁹ These two factors put together could signal that the issue of the war in Ukraine fell to a lower level on state agendas. The IOC looked at the war not as high a priority on state agendas given the continuing longevity of the conflict.

The IOC states that all its recommendations are based on when Russia first invaded Ukraine, but not all variables of the war state at the time of the recommendations can be fully ignored. The international political climate at the time of the creation of the recommendations swayed the IOC to believe that the calming of Ukrainian support opened the door for a more permissive stance towards Russia and Ukraine. The IOC decided to remove the complete ban of Russian and Belarussian athletes thinking that it would not spark enough outrage in the West to derail the upcoming Games. Ultimately, the IOC understands that states want to compete in the Games and are willing to do so even if they disagree with its AIN policy.

On March 28, 2023, the IOC met to discuss the issue of Russian and Belarussian athletes in the upcoming Paris (2024) and Milan (2026) Olympic Games. The IOC acknowledged that Russia broke the Olympic Truce when it invaded Ukraine, leading to a set of sanctions against Russia as punishment.⁹⁰ These sanctions included:

- I. No international sports events organized or supported by an IF or NOC in Russia or Belarus.
- II. No flag, anthem, colors or any other national identifications whatsoever of these countries displayed at any sports event or meeting, including the entire venue.

⁸⁹ N. P. R. Staff, "Russia-Ukraine War: What Happened Today (March 28)," (NPR, March 28, 2022). <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089140474/russia-ukraine-war-what-happened-today-march-28>.

⁹⁰ *International Athletes' Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>. 3:43:06.

III. No Russian or Belarussian government or state official can be invited or accredited for any international sports event or meeting.

The sanctions attempted to curb any plans by Russia or Belarus to use its athletes and their hopeful successes in the upcoming Games as soft power war propaganda tools. While many athletes around the world (especially those from Western countries) expressed great disdain for the IOC's recommendations and called for the continuation of a complete ban on Russian and Belarussian athletes, the IOC followed the recommendations made by the UN Human Rights Commission, who reported concern for banning athletes based on nationality.

The IOC structured these sanctions, along with their decision to allow AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes to compete in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, to appease both sides to the conflict. They counterbalanced disdain states may have towards allowing AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes back into the Games. The sanctions spoke to a level of disappointment by the Olympic community for Russia's invasion. However, allowing Russian and Belarussians to compete as AIN decreases the likelihood of their respective states retaliating against the IOC. Here the IOC is following the wishes of all states historically involved in the Games.

At the IAF, Martin Fourcade (member IOC AC; Chair, Paris 2024 AC; Olympic Champion, Biathlon France) spoke about the implementation of the IOC's recommendations. He states that for the most part, the implementation of the guidelines has been successful except for one event: the disqualification of Ukrainian saberist Olga Kharlan in Milan on July 27, 2023. In this competition Kharlan (one of the top saberists in the world) fenced against Anna Smirnova, an AIN athlete from Russia. Kharlan defeated Smirnova 15-7. At the conclusion of the bout, Kharlan went to click blades with Smirnova, who held out her hand for a handshake. Prior to the

COVID-19 pandemic, fencers were required to shake hands with their opponents to demonstrate respect and a return to the 'normal' setting without weapons. To prevent transmission of COVID-19, clicking blades with an opponent became an acceptable form of respect. Kharlan refused to shake hands with Smirnova, who sat on the piste for 50 minutes in protest against Kharlan. This action resulted in the FIE disqualifying Kharlan from any future competition (more on the FIE's involvement in Chapter Four).

The Ukrainian government, who contacted the IOC and FIE and asked them to reverse Kharlan's disqualification from international competition, met this decision by the FIE with outrage. The Fencing Federation of Ukraine also released a statement calling for the removal of Anna Smirnova from international fencing competition (including the Paris Games), citing that her brother's involvement in the military and her demonstrated support for him is a breach of the recommendations set by the IOC:

"The Fencing Federation of Ukraine has appealed to the International Fencing Federation (FIE) with a demand to remove Russian sabre Anna Smirnova from the list of neutral athletes due to her non-compliance with this status and to immediately remove her from participation in competitions under the auspices of the FIE. Anna Smirnova's activity on Instagram, where she openly demonstrates verbal and non-verbal support for the Russian army, which is the symbol and implementer of aggression against Ukraine, shows that she is by no means a neutral athlete and has never been one."⁹¹

The IOC and FIE did not take any action against Smirnova and instead focused on Kharlan. The IOC reassured Kharlan by promising her a spot in the 2024 Paris Olympic games

⁹¹ "Ukraine Demands Russian Competitor Be Stripped of Her Neutral Status after Fencing Scandal," (Ukrainska Pravda), Accessed December 31, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/07/30/7413427/>.

should she fail to qualify again – the winning bout in Milan would be her qualifying victory for the Games. The IOC also “[asked] the international federation (the FIE) to deal with the situation in a sensible way. The IOC [stood] firmly on the side of the athletes, and support[ed] athletes whenever needed.”⁹² The Ukrainian government and sport federation initially rejected the possibility of Ukrainian athletes competing against a Russian or Belarussian. They later modified this statement, saying that they are willing to compete against an AIN, thus allowing Team Ukraine to qualify for both the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. This change in policy highlighted the importance of sport competition not only for the athletes, but also for Ukraine’s state presence on the international sporting stage. Athletes and states are willing to compete internationally despite criticisms it may have about the FIE or IOC, because there is more incentive to garner soft power through victory in the international sport stage.

This is interesting because if the Ukrainian team continued to boycott international competition on the basis that they cannot compete against Russian and Belarussian athletes, they would be limiting their own athletes – who are representatives of their country and their cause – which could be seen as a victory in the sporting arena for Russia. Participation in international sport on the largest stage at the Olympics can serve as not only a demonstration of a state’s prowess but could increase national and international support for a state cause. Both Ukraine and Russia see the Games as a proxy for garnering soft power for the war effort despite the IOC’s proposed ‘neutral’ recommendations. The Olympics, being a competition between states and individuals with varied political positions, makes the international competition itself political, and is therefore an asset for state agendas. Both Ukraine and Russia demonstrate this view by having their governments engage directly with the IOC over the qualification of their athletes. It

⁹² *International Athletes’ Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>. 3:39:48.

is the states' desire to use the Olympic Games as a soft power tool that gives the IOC a level of influence and importance in the international system. The IOC's merit is derived from its value to push state political agendas.

As seen with Kharlan and Smirnova, athletes bring their own ideals and perspectives into sport. Fencing is an interesting case for analysis of individual perspectives having an influence on sport competition because it is an individual sport where athletes are facing one another with a weapon. While historically sport fencing has acted as an alternative to warfare and therefore a tool for peace, the tenuous political climate between Ukrainian and Russian and Belarussian athletes can turn today's fencing into a proxy for the war itself.

Athlete Relationship – Actions and Criticisms

At the end of the IAF, the floor opened to athletes to speak their minds on the issue of AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes. A representative from the African Commission spoke in support of the IOC's recommendations. She expressed that the African continent, a place wrought with political warfare and conflict, would not be able to compete should the IOC set a precedent of only allowing athletes from states in 'good' international standing to compete – meaning that they are not actively engaged in warfare. This statement shows the self-interested slant that commissions worldwide must take to give athletes the ability to compete and represent their respective states in sport. Not holding athletes responsible for government actions allows them to compete even if their state is breaching international social norms.

On the other hand, a representative, Anna, from Ukraine spoke against the IOC's recommendations and lack of sympathy for Ukrainian athletes. She expressed how Ukrainian athletes and citizens are trapped because of nightly Russian attacks:

“You all need to understand that there are children who cannot do sport now, because it’s too dangerous. A lot of infrastructures are destroyed, and it also influence for athletes. Athletes on the other side are involved. They're involved in propaganda. We saw a lot of cases that they attend the meetings and support their governments, and we have no cases that they talk something against their government...Ukraine has no moral rights to compete with them...All athletes are involved in war because they stay silent. They are models.”⁹³

According to Anna, Russian and Belarussian athletes are propaganda tools in sport regardless of whether they are allowed to present their flags and national anthems on the Olympic stage. Anna also highlights that Russian and Belarussian athletes who disagree with the war have other avenues to continue their pursuit of participation in the Olympics, such as joining the Olympic Refugee Team.⁹⁴ A representative from Germany, Lisa (a saberist), called for a ban on Russian and Belarussian athletes and continued sanctioning of the countries from the Olympic Games as punishment for mixing sport and politics.⁹⁵ These two individuals present the opinion of those who believe that Russian and Belarussian athletes should be banned from the Games because there are other options for them to continue competing on the Olympic stage without indirectly representing a breach of the Olympic Truce on said stage.

While this question-and-answer session was enlightening to various perspectives on the issue of Russian and Belarussian athletes, no changes were made by the IOC because of the feedback. The IOC President, Thomas Bach, has repeatedly expressed the importance of

⁹³ *International Athletes’ Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>. 3:56:33 – 3:59:17.

⁹⁴ *International Athletes’ Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>. 3:56:33 – 3:59:17.

⁹⁵ *International Athletes’ Forum 2023 - Day 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rjUGYDJgXA>. 4:16:19.

maintaining the non-political integrity of the Olympic Games, stating that while participants of the Olympics must be politically neutral, the IOC cannot make the mistake of being referees in political disputes "...because we will be crushed by these political powers."⁹⁶ Bach understands that the IOC's power and influence is derived from the states who continuously choose to participate and spend energy on the Olympic Games. If the IOC were to take a controversial stance on an issue like the war in Ukraine, it would deter many of its donors and constituents that act as the foundation for its power. The IOC's reluctance to get involved in politics is derived from the ideal of sport being a separate, pure entity from the messiness of reality. This idea is also self-serving for the IOC, which understands that in order to maintain its funding and high participation of states in the Olympic Games, it must remain a "neutral" entity. This idealistic view does not exist, as we see politics and sport strongly intertwined with one another throughout history.

Conclusion

The IOC posits itself as the leader of the Olympic Movement, calling for peace through sport and camaraderie in the Olympic Games. It views athletes as the heart of this movement and calls for the protection of every athlete's individual human right to compete without discrimination. However, this position is influenced by the politics of the international political community on the war in Ukraine. The IOC, wanting to appear as a neutral party to all states (both Russia and Ukraine for example), released a set of recommendations to allow Russian and Belarussian athletes to compete as AIN. This response was met with great criticism from western athletes around the world. At the same time, athletes from war-torn countries (such as those in

⁹⁶ "Treatment of Ukraine Fencing Athletes in China Sparks Backlash," (Newsweek, March 27, 2023), <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-fencing-athletes-china-russia-anti-war-banner-1790419>.

the African continent) supporting the ideal of sport being politically neutral exemplifies the self-interested agendas that states and individuals have regarding participation in the Olympic Games. An individual who represents Ukraine may not want to compete against a Russian or Belarussian AIN athlete, but also wants to compete in the Games. To have both wishes met, the Russian and Belarussian AIN athletes must be banned. Alternatively, such a ruling would set a precedent that would inhibit other athletes representing war-torn states from competing.

The IOC's repeated position as a non-political entity and decision to allow Russian and Belarussian representation as AIN in the upcoming 2024 Paris Olympic Games indicates that the IOC demonstrates a tendency to model their own policies to function within state political agendas. Therefore, the IOC is an NSSA who does not influence the international political system but is instead *influenced* by states who control the system. A political standoff between Ukrainian saberist Olga Kharlan and Russian saberist Anna Smirnova (competing as AIN) has gained international attention as a failure of the IOC and FIE to maintain neutrality in sport.

CHAPTER FOUR: The FIE as an NSSA

This chapter focuses on the International Fencing Federation (FIE) as an NSSA in the international political system. The FIE, founded on November 29, 1913, is an IF that dictates the rules of international fencing, plans and manages all international fencing competitions, promotes fencing internationally, protects and monitors the development of the sport as well as its athletes, and guarantees the respect for rules and fair play in all sport aspects.⁹⁷ In the

⁹⁷ INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - FIE 100, "INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - FIE 100," Accessed January 5, 2024, <http://fie.org/fie/history/fie100>.

hierarchy of international sport, the IOC monitors and recognizes the FIE as a federation.⁹⁸ This chapter analyzes the FIE and its relationship to the international political system and the war in Ukraine. Data in this section came from the FIE's official website, media reports on the FIE and its involvement in the controversy surrounding the war in Ukraine, and social media posts and statements made by athletes regarding the FIE and its actions.

I argue that, because of the FIE's historical ties to the Russian world of fencing and its decision to follow the IOC's example and approach towards Russian and Belarussian athletes, the FIE is an NSSA with a disposition to create and follow policies that allow international fencing to function within state political agendas. While the FIE is an autonomous organization with its own political ties (for example, its former president is a Russian Oligarch), it generally acts within the IOC's parameters and rule-sets. This effectively limits the FIE from taking any action too far outside the bounds of the IOC's Olympic Charter. If the FIE does take action that the IOC disagrees with, the IOC has the authority to realign the IF's policies with their own.

Positionality

The organizational hierarchy of the IOC and subsequent IFs is important because it is the IOC's job to monitor the FIE's compliance with IOC standards of Olympism and protection of all athletes, two subjects that the organizations appear to have differing approaches to in the realm of politics surrounding the war in Ukraine.

The FIE's website lists the organization's mission and aims as the overseer of international fencing competition. The FIE sees itself as an organization which "...establishes the rules to which international competitions must be organized and oversees their

⁹⁸ "International Sports Federations," Accessed January 5, 2024, <https://olympics.com/ioc/international-federations>.

implementation.”⁹⁹ This statement parallels the IOC’s perception of how IFs function within the Olympic hierarchy. The FIE’s goals offer a different perspective on the limits of their jurisdiction of international sport from the IOC. Most notable is the FIE’s own understanding of its place within international politics. Goals III, V, VII, and X are goals that relate to the FIE’s involvement in the international conduct of fencing. They are stated below:

III. to establish Rules according to which international competitions must be organized;

Goal III is a promise by the FIE to adhere to the IOC’s norms of the international competitive sporting community regarding the conduct of competition. Many of these norms are strongly tied to the historical values associated with fencing, such as honor, dignity, grace, and respect. In this sense, the FIE is making a commitment to carrying out and planning international fencing competitions where all participants are respected and have the dignity they deserve through sportsmanship. As discussed in the background section of this thesis, respect and dignity are two elements of today’s fencing that allow it to be a sport as opposed to an all-out duel.

V. to ensure that in international competitions the bans, suspensions, expulsions, disqualifications and all other penalties issued by one of the member federations are respected;

Goal V states that the FIE will adhere to all member federations actions within the fencing arena. The European Fencing Federation suspended the Russian Fencing Federation and Belarussian Fencing Federation’s memberships in 2023. This means that the federations’ officials, athletes, and coaches will no longer be able to participate in any events hosted by the

⁹⁹ INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - The International Fencing Federation. “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - The International Fencing Federation Official Website.” Accessed December 17, 2023. <http://fie.org/fie/structure>.

European Fencing Federation (however, AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes are an exception per FIE and IOC guidelines).¹⁰⁰ The Ukrainian Fencing Federation initially refused to have its athletes fence Russian and Belarussian athletes. It later modified this position, which could be seen as conforming to the FIE's rulings (as opposed to the FIE adhering to the Ukrainian Fencing Federation's wishes). However, if the FIE chose to side with the Ukrainian Fencing Federation's request to remove Russian and Belarussian athletes, then they would be acting against the wishes of the Russian and Belarussian Federations and the IOC.

Because the European Fencing Federation expelled both Russian and Belarussian membership, the FIE could be seen as acting against a member federation. Goal V puts the FIE in an uncertain position, where they must walk a line between their commitment to member federations and the IOC's guidelines. In the end, the FIE chose to follow the IOC's example.

VII. to study and legislate on all matters pertaining to fencing in international relations;

Strikingly, Goal VII posits the FIE as an actor within international relations. It states, "to study and legislate on all matters pertaining to fencing in international relations." This goal sits precariously between the IOC's commitment to keep sport within the non-political sphere while also engaging with the international political community. The intent behind this statement could be to promise to protect the integrity of fencing within the international system, or it could involve the FIE positioning itself as a non-state sporting political actor who has the right to be a player in the international political system. This could be the reason why the FIE was the first federation to allow Russian and Belarussian athletes back into international competition following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁰⁰ dpa, "Top European Fencing Body Suspends Russia And Belarus," (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 25, 2023), <https://www.rferl.org/a/europe-fencing-body-suspends-russia-belarus/32474849.html>.

In this goal, the FIE is claiming to be an *active* player in the international political system. This does not reflect the IOC's attempts to remain non-political. By saying they want to study international relations in relation to fencing, the FIE is first acknowledging that fencing has a strong relationship with politics that make it a worthwhile pursuit for the organization, and second, the FIE is claiming that it has the jurisdiction to make an opinion on international relations, which entails engaging in international political matters.

X. to apply appropriate measures to contribute to the respect of the environment.¹⁰¹

In goal X, the FIE makes the assurance that all elements of identity (political affiliation, race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) are respected by all parties involved in international fencing competition. This statement will come into play later in the chapter in the discussion of the FIE's response to the war in Ukraine and how it may not completely be adhering to all these mission statements, such as protecting all parties in international fencing – especially regarding Kharlan's disqualification because of her political views and action. The FIE also states that it is the protector of the core values of fencing as a sport that combines elements of mental toughness, physicality, respect, dignity, and discipline that is often associated with norms of the international political system.

The FIE's Perception of the Athlete

The FIE does not address athletes and their roles within international fencing. It does, however, declare extensive commitments to the protection of human rights and dignity for each athlete and participant in international fencing. This section relating to human rights is written under the "VISION" heading on the FIE's website. The FIE's first human rights objective is "to

¹⁰¹ "INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - The International Fencing Federation Official Website." <http://fie.org/fie/structure>.

place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity. The practice of sport is a human right*.”¹⁰² The FIE claims that it is a human right for everyone to participate in sport, which is a position that supports allowing Russian and Belarussians to compete in the upcoming Olympics. This begs the question: what happens when their participation hinders another’s? This question relates heavily to the controversy surrounding Olga Kharlan and Ana Smirnova referenced in Chapter Three. Why did the FIE side with her AIN opponent to remove her from the games? It was not until the Ukrainian government stepped in that the ruling was changed.

The FIE changed its initial position on Kharlan’s actions only after a state intervened and strongly voiced its position on the issue. In this case, Ukraine understands that it needs Kharlan to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games because she can act as a powerful representation of Ukraine and its war effort by performing well in the Games. The FIE is an NSSA in the state-controlled game of international politics, so it does not influence change in international politics but is controlled by state political agendas. The FIE is concerned, like the IOC, with maintaining its neutrality because it is vital to its value to state actors as a soft power organization.

Response to the War in Ukraine

In March 2023, the FIE convened its yearly congress and voted to overturn the complete ban on Russian and Belarussian athletes, allowing them a pathway into qualifying for the Paris 2024 Olympics as AIN athletes. This ruling fell in line with the recommendations made by the

¹⁰²“INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - The International Fencing Federation Official Website,” <http://fie.org/fie/structure>.

IOC for the reintroduction of Russian and Belarussian athletes.¹⁰³ The FIE is one of the first sports to open the door for Russian and Belarussian athletes since the war in Ukraine began. According to their goals, the FIE aims to model itself around the rules, regulations, guidelines, and expectations set by the IOC. Officially, the FIE's decision to allow Russian and Belarussian AIN athletes was in response to the adherence of the IOC's guidelines. However, it is notable that the FIE was the first organization to do so. The FIE's leadership before the start of the war sheds light on the reasoning behind fencing acting as the pioneer for the reintroduction of Russian and Belarussian athletes into the Olympic sphere.

From 2008 to 2022 the FIE was led by Russian billionaire, former saber fencer, and oligarch Alisher Usmanov. Usmanov graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in International Law and received his degree in banking from the Financial Academy under the Government of the Russian Federation. He is also close friends with IOC President (a fellow fencer) Thomas Bach, who congratulated him on his re-election in 2021.¹⁰⁴ On March 1, 2022, Usmanov released a statement detailing why he stepped down from the position of FIE President in protest to sanctions from the European Union. The statement reads as follows:

“On 28 February 2022 I became the target of restrictive measures imposed by the European Union. I believe that such decision is unfair, and the reasons employed to justify the sanctions are a set of false and defamatory allegations damaging my honor, dignity, and business reputation. I will use all legal means to protect my honor and

¹⁰³ Jonathan Crane, “Fencing to Allow Russians and Belarusians Back in.” (Deutsche Welle, March 12, 2023). Accessed January 6, 2024.

<https://www.dw.com/en/fencing-to-allow-russians-and-belarusians-back-into-competition/a-64960783>.

¹⁰⁴ “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - Alisher Usmanov Re-Elected by Acclamation as FIE President at 2021 Elective Congress in Lausanne.” (International Fencing Federation). Accessed January 6, 2024. <http://fie.org/articles/1139>.

reputation. I hereby suspend the exercise of my duties as the President of the International Fencing Federation effectively immediately until justice is restored.”¹⁰⁵

Usmanov’s use of diction such as “justice,” “honor,” and “defamatory” demonstrate his anger for essentially being ousted from international fencing because of sanctions levied against him by the European Union (EU). Usmanov has very strong ties to both the IOC and Russian government. For example, in 2020, Usmanov donated an \$8 million original manuscript written by Pierre de Coubertin (the original founder of the modern Olympic Games) that detailed the original philosophy and values of the Olympic Movement to the IOC.¹⁰⁶ Many saw his generous donation of de Coubertin's manuscript as a move intended to garner more respect towards Russia as a major competitor in the Olympic Games and to relieve the bans on Russian and Belarussian Olympic Federations from the Olympic Games. According to the Official Journal of the European Union, Usmanov is a pro-Kremlin oligarch whose actions have aided in the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine:

“Alisher Usmanov is pro-Kremlin oligarch with particularly close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. He has been referred to as one of Vladimir Putin’s favorite oligarchs. He is considered to be one of Russia’s businessmen-officials, who were entrusted with servicing financial flows, but their positions depend on the will of the President. Mr Usmanov has reportedly fronted for President Putin and solved his business problems. According to FinCEN files he paid \$6 million to Vladimir Putin’s influential adviser Valentin Yumashev. Dmitry Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of the Security

¹⁰⁵ “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - Statement by Alisher Usmanov,” (*International Fencing Federation*), Accessed December 27, 2023, <http://fie.org/articles/1157>.

¹⁰⁶ George Ramsay, “Russian Oligarch Alisher Usmanov Donates \$8.8 Million Olympic Manifesto to Museum,” (CNN, February 10, 2020). <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/10/sport/olympics-manifesto-alisher-usmanov-spt-intl/index.html>.

Council of Russia and former President and Prime Minister of Russia, benefited from the personal use of luxurious residences controlled by Mr Usmanov.”¹⁰⁷

These findings from the EU highlighted a correlation between Usmanov and his decisions involving the IOC and FIE. The sanctions against Usmanov resulted in his decision to step down in protest to what he described as ‘injustice.’ Given the circumstances of Usmanov’s strong ties to the Kremlin and a history of fighting for softer anti-doping measures on Russian athletes, the FIE’s decision to allow Russian and Belarussian athletes back into international competition, despite large disdain from individual athletes and federations in the international fencing community, was a result of bias towards the Russian Olympic Committee and desire to follow the IOC’s model (who is swayed by the Russian state political agenda).¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the FIE is influenced by international politics because its legitimacy is derived from the level of importance that state-actors put on the organization.

Athlete Relationship – Actions and Criticisms

As discussed in the IAF video, a special case involving the execution of IOC recommendations surrounding AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes took place in 2023 at the World Fencing Championships in Milan. Olga Kharlan, a four-time Olympian (winning gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and two bronze medals from the 2012 London Olympic Games and 2016 Rio Games respectively) and leader of Ukraine’s national fencing team, was disqualified by the FIE on July 27, 2023, for not shaking hands with her AIN Russian opponent, Anna Smirnova, at the end of the bout. The bout ended with Kharlan winning 15-7.

¹⁰⁷ “Official Journal L 58/2022,” (Official Journal of the European Union, February 28, 2022), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A058%3AFULL>.

¹⁰⁸ AP, “Usmanov Urges IOC to Let Russia Flag Fly at 2018 Olympics,” (*USA Today*, December 8, 2017), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2017/12/08/usmanov-urges-ioc-to-let-russia-flag-fly-at-2018-olympics/108423828/>.

Kharlan stated that the disqualification would have made it very difficult for her to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. This led to the intervention by the Ukrainian government, who asked the IOC to remove the black card call on Kharlan.¹⁰⁹ This is important because Kharlan is not only the number one women's saberist in the world, but she is one of the best athletes for the Ukrainian Olympic Team. Without her Ukraine's chances for winning a medal would diminish greatly. For the Ukrainian government, Kharlan's participation and possible success in the 2024 Paris Games could serve as a morale booster for the Ukrainian war effort and symbol of Ukrainian prowess on the international stage. Kharlan is very vocal and active in demonstrating her support for Ukrainian soldiers, especially on social media. She auctioned off a Barbie doll modeled after herself (wearing fencing gear) for £8,400, which she donated to the war effort.³⁰

According to news sources, Kharlan spoke to the referee before the start of the match and explained that she would only tap blades with her Russian opponent (this is an acceptable form of respect since the COVID-19 pandemic). The referee agreed.¹¹⁰ However, when Kharlan went to tap her opponent's blade, Smirnova expected Kharlan to shake hands. When Kharlan refused to do so, a stalemate ensued. An official from the FIE walked up to Smirnova and tried to speak to her about the situation, but the bout committee instead resolved to give Kharlan a black card, therefore disqualifying her from further competition and the upcoming Olympics. This official who spoke to Smirnova during her protest was removed by the FIE after this event.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Svitlana Vlasova, Tim Lister, and CNN. "Ukraine's Top Fencer Disqualified from World Championship after Refused Handshake with Russian," (CNN, July 27, 2023).
<https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/27/sport/ukraine-fencer-disqualified-refused-handshake-russian-intl-spt/index.html>.

¹¹⁰ Nick Ames.

¹¹¹ Vlasova, Svitlana, Tim Lister, and CNN.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, three Russian fencers have fled Russia to the United States to fence as neutral athletes. This event was such an embarrassment to the Russian Fencing Federation that the Russian epee coach was fired.¹¹² At the same fencing competition in Milan, Ukrainian fencer Igor Reizlin withdrew from the competition because he did not want to fence his assigned Russian opponent.¹¹³ Konstantin Lokhanov, formerly a Russian Olympic fencer in the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games, now lives in San Diego and is attempting to represent the United States in the upcoming Paris Games. He believes that Kharlan's disqualification could have been a trap set by her Russian opponent to remove her from Olympic competition.¹¹⁴ Lokhanov does not understand why Smirnova had to create a drama about the end of the bout. He said that the tapping of blades is a completely acceptable form of respect in fencing.

Phil Andrews, the CEO of USA Fencing, made a statement about the three former-Russian athletes, Konstantin Lokhanov, Sergey Bida and Violetta Bida, who now live in the United States. Andrews says, "All [three] of these individuals have made sacrifices at great personal cost...and put their lives at risk to be able to represent our nation and we ask you to make every effort to support them in [this] extraordinary circumstance."¹¹⁵ The move by these athletes to the United States is an act of protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Team USA's fencing coach, Greg Massialas, took a similar position to Lokhanov. Massialas believed that Russia had the intention of removing possible barriers to medals in the

¹¹² Gabriela Sá Pessoa, and Jeré Longman, "A Ukrainian Fencer Is Disqualified after Refusing to Shake Hands with a Russian Opponent," (The New York Times, July 27, 2023, sec. World).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/world/europe/ukraine-fencer-olga-kharlan-russia.html>.

¹¹³ Gabriela Sá Pessoa, and Jeré Longman.

¹¹⁴ Gabriela Sá Pessoa, and Jeré Longman.

¹¹⁵ "Olympic Fencers Who Fled Russia after Invasion of Ukraine Win Support for U.S. Citizenship," (USA Today), Accessed January 23, 2024.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2024/01/10/russian-fencers-gain-support-represent-america-paris-olympics/72165780007/>.

upcoming Olympic Games. He said, “The Russian Federation had the option to send or not send any of these people...And it happened to be the people they sent were in specific weapons, which are events that Ukrainians had a good possibility to qualify for the Olympic Games.”¹¹⁶ These accusations position Anna Smirnova as not a truly neutral athlete. Following this event, the Ukrainian team called for the removal of Anna Smirnova as an AIN athlete. Part of their reasoning for why Smirnova does not qualify as an AIN is because she demonstrated support for her brother, who is in the Russian military, on social media.¹¹⁷ The Ukrainian team believes that the FIE as turning a blind eye to Smirnova’s affiliation with the Russian military, for which they sees as strong evidence for her removal from future international competition.

Eventually the IOC and FIE accepted Ukraine’s call to revoke Kharlan’s black card and IOC President Thomas Bach promised Kharlan a spot on Ukraine’s Olympic Team.¹¹⁸ In an article published by the FIE, the organization states that it “...stands fully behind the penalty, which, after thorough review, is in complete accordance and compliance with its official rules and associated penalties.”¹¹⁹ This statement is somewhat contradictory to the decision to allow Kharlan back into international competition. The FIE believes that Kharlan’s actions were black-card worthy (FIE rules state that both fencers must shake hands to acknowledge the end of a bout and return to ‘normal’ life), but because the IOC sided with Kharlan and Ukraine, the FIE

¹¹⁶ “Ukrainian-Russian Fencing Drama Rekindles Question: Why Do Fencers Shake Hands?” (NPR), Accessed January 6, 2024.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/01/1190975853/ukraine-russia-fencing-olympics-handshake-history-explained>.

¹¹⁷ Olena Pavlova, “Russian Fencer Smirnova’s Brother Serves in the Russian Army, Which the International Federation Has Turned a Blind Eye To,” (Oboz, July 27, 2023).

<https://eng.obozrevatel.com/section-sport/news-russian-fencer-smirnovas-brother-serves-in-the-russian-army-which-the-international-federation-has-turned-a-blind-eye-to-27-07-2023.html>.

¹¹⁸ “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - FIE Suspends Penalty for Women’s Sabre Fencer from Ukraine.” (International Fencing Federation). Accessed December 27, 2023. <http://fie.org/articles/1316>.

¹¹⁹ “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - FIE Suspends Penalty for Women’s Sabre Fencer from Ukraine.”

also believed that her place in the upcoming Games retained the Olympic Spirit.¹²⁰ Again, the FIE follows the IOC's lead regarding the war in Ukraine and fencing, which is why they are content with Kharlan's Olympic spot.

The situation with Kharlan and Smirnova and the IOC's decision to allow Kharlan to compete in the Paris 2024 Games demonstrates the sway that the international system has over both the IOC and FIE. It is not until a state actor, in this case the Ukrainian government, steps in and expresses disdain for the IOC and FIE as organizations that action is taken. In that sense, the FIE is influenced by state politics. In order to maintain its outreach and influence in the international system, it needed to placate any hostile attitudes of its member IFs, which are located within the state-actor framework – meaning that the national teams around the world are important pieces for governments to garner soft power and push their agendas.

Another situation involving Ukrainian fencers highlights the FIE's aversion to upsetting state actors. Ukrainian epeeist Blada Kharkova fenced in a championship in Nanjing, China. She wanted to take a picture with an anti-war banner called, "Angels of Sport," that showed all the Ukrainian athletes killed in the war. When she attempted to take this photo, FIE officials tried to take the banner away. In the same competition, team Ukraine gave out stickers to other fencers who wanted to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine – these stickers were taken away by the same FIE officials. Kharkova posted a video on social media that showed FIE officials taking her banner away. In her caption she states:

“Today at [the] World Cup in China we wanted to take a picture with a banner where we showed how many athletes were killed by Russia. As a result organizations and

¹²⁰ “INTERNATIONAL FENCING FEDERATION - FIE Suspends Penalty for Women's Sabre Fencer from Ukraine.”

@fencing_fie didn't allow us to do it. @fencing_fie you mentioned that politics had no place in sport. Now, let me ask you this: how can sport not be involved when about 343 sport facilities [are] being destroyed and more than 250 athletes will never compete again?

Ru[ss]ia[...]violated all values of Olympism. Fie is trying to hide [the] truth through threats, restrictions and keeping us mute, but how is this different from Russian political strategy?"¹²¹

Kharkova called out the FIE directly by tagging them in her caption. Like many other Ukrainian fencers, she saw her political views and struggles being tamped down by the FIE. On the one hand, the FIE and IOC could be trying to create an environment void of all political statements and actions to create a place where AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes can feel respected. However, the silencing of the Ukrainian position on the war creates a hostile environment for Ukrainian athletes. IOC President Thomas Bach addressed this issue saying that the IOC cannot be a referee of political disputes and should not allow for total isolation of any people based upon nationality.

On March 27, 2023, an open letter sponsored, supported, and shared by Global Athlete and Athleten Deutschland, called for the IOC and FIE to suspend the Russian and Belarussian Fencing Federations and ban on all Russian and Belarussian athletes (which would also involve rejecting the notion of a neutral athlete) from participating and hosting international competition until Russia withdraws from Ukrainian territory. The letter claimed that Russian interests outweigh the voice and rights of individual athletes, in which the majority are calling for a ban on Russian and Belarussian athletes. It also lists the numerical damage that the war has had on

¹²¹ "Treatment of Ukraine Fencing Athletes in China Sparks Backlash," (Newsweek, March 27, 2023).

Ukrainian sport and points to the funding that Russian and Belarussian athletes receive from their respective governments saying the war:

"...has resulted in 232 athletes being killed, 343 sport facilities being destroyed, 40,000 athletes forced abroad, and 140,000 young athletes left without sport facilities. The international community is acutely aware that for Russian and Belarussian athletes, there is no distinction between the athlete and the state. Not only have these athletes been encouraged to fight in the war by the Russian Olympic Committee, with a large majority of them holding military and law enforcement positions, but they are also beneficiaries of state funding – drawing their pay from Putin’s war chest and thus making any separation between the state and the athlete implausible. Athletes were and will be instrumentalized for Putin's propaganda. Competing under a neutral flag has not proven to be a suitable sanctioning instrument in the past and is not suitable now.”¹²²

Over 300 former and current elite fencers around the world felt that the IOC disregarded its commitment to upholding the Olympic Peace by allowing those who breach the Truce to continue representing their country, whether it be with or without national flags and anthems. The impact of this letter will be examined in the next chapter, where participants in the interview phase of the study elaborate on whether the letter resulted in any changes by the FIE or IOC.

Conclusion

The way that the FIE positions itself within the IOC and international system as needing to not only act within the IOC’s parameters of IFs increasing outreach and facilitating the

¹²² “Open Letter from 300+ International Fencers,” (Global Athlete, March 27, 2023), Accessed December 27, 2023. <https://www.globalathlete.org/our-word/over-300-call-ioc-and-fie-to-uphold-ban-russia-belarus>.

planning of international competition in their sport, but also as an actor involved in international relations demonstrates the FIE's perception that it should be an important actor within international politics. The organization's former President, Alisher Usmanov, is a Russian Oligarch, supporter of the Kremlin, and close friend of both Thomas Bach and Vladimir Putin. His relationship to the Kremlin and historical support for the Russian Olympic Committee points to the sway that state interests have in the international fencing community.

Russian interests manifested themselves in the FIE's decisions to disqualify Ukraine's top fencer, Olga Kharlan and the attempts to cover up support for the Ukrainian war effort at the fencing competition in China. However, the FIE and IOC supported Ukraine's state interests when the Ukrainian government challenged Kharlan's black card. This criticism was met with support by the IOC and FIE. The FIE's decision to allow Russian and Belarussian athletes to compete as AIN is not a reflection of fencers' opinions around the world, as over 300 fencers released an open letter to the IOC and FIE calling for the removal of all Russian and Belarussian athletes from any upcoming international competition until Russia leave Ukrainian soil. Given these reactions to two states' agendas in international sport, the FIE is an NSSA influenced by state agendas. This is a result of the organization's leadership involvement in state politics, but also the fact that the FIE's ability to function as an organization is derived from the IOC, leading to the FIE's inclination to follow the IOC's example.

CHAPTER FIVE: Individuals as NSSAs

This chapter focuses on the role of individual participants of the international fencing community in the international political system, specifically participants' criticisms of the IOC

and FIE's respective responses to the war in Ukraine and its presence in international fencing competition. Based on analysis of the responses to questions in the study, I conclude that the ability for individuals to act as influential NSSAs and diplomats of sport is highly dependent on the hierarchy and relationship between sport organizations and their respective governments. If the government is strongly involved in sport conduct, it is more difficult for individuals to sincerely voice their perspectives on issues of international politics. If a government is only loosely involved in sport conduct, it is easier for individuals to sincerely voice their perspectives on issues of international politics.

The perceived positions of the IOC and FIE's involvement in upholding the Olympic Movement and participation in international relations involves individuals in the international fencing community. This chapter examines the roles of individuals as NSSAs by examining their perspectives on the FIE and IOC's responses to the war in Ukraine, their own involvement in the international community, and personal experience with politics and sport. All the data in this chapter is taken from interviews with two individual members of the international fencing community. Both participants are involved and prominent members of the international fencing community at the Olympic level. These individuals were asked three questions:

- I. What makes international fencing special in terms of the Olympics, its place in the international community, and its role and impact in politics/conflict?
- II. Considering the war in Ukraine, do you think that Russian athletes should be allowed to compete in the France 2024 Summer Olympic Games? Why or why not?
- III. Is there a larger relationship between individual athletes and world events?

These interviews took place as virtual meetings (Microsoft Teams and Zoom) and to allow for recording for later analysis. These individuals will be called Participant A and Participant B. All participants are active members of the international fencing community and have had extensive experience with politics and fencing before and during the controversy surrounding the war in Ukraine.

Question I: What makes international fencing special in terms of the Olympics, its place in the international community, and its role and impact in politics/conflict?

Participants highlighted the historical significance of fencing in politics, namely the origins of its use in warfare and the special quality of being one of the original sporting events in the modern Olympic Games. Participants A and B both acknowledged that although fencing is not one of the world's most popular sports, many of its participants have positions in powerful places not only in the Olympic world, but also in society. For example, Participant B underscored the fact that fencing attracts a certain type of personality; that is, because fencing sport itself is essentially trying to solve the problem of "how do I hit my opponent so that I get a point," it attracts people who can think critically about problems that they may see in the world. They spotlighted Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook and Meta – arguably some of the most influential types of media – as a fencer. The reason why top universities in the United States (Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, etc.) value fencing as an extra-curricular activity for prospective students is because the sport requires that its top athletes think quickly, analyze a situation, and find a solution to win the match.

These statements highlight that the skills required of fencing push its athletes and community members to engage with the wider world in such a way that warrants political

involvement. Both Participants A and B listed top positions within the Olympic world occupied by fencers: IOC President, Thomas Bach, fenced for Germany; the Minister of Sport in Russia is a fencer; the Minister of Sport in Ukraine is a fencer; the President of the Russian Olympic Committee is a fencer; and the President for the Ukrainian Olympic Committee is a fencer. Not only does this pattern demonstrate that elites who have the means to reach the pinnacle of fencing are destined to become the sport's leaders, but it also highlights the potency of fencing in all international sports. Because top officials of international sport are involved in the fencing community, anything that occurs – political or otherwise – within that community affects every other sport and their respective participants internationally. Fencing is at the root of international sport and the Olympic Games.

Participant A stated, "... fencing and the political movement that happens in fencing really does have an impact on the world stage. I think that's exemplified by the fact that our ex-president was a Russian oligarch...Putin was focusing on fencing because we do wield that political power." The influence bestowed onto fencing sport because of the strength of its historical engagement with politics and conflict makes the sport a viable investment for governments who want to increase their soft power abilities. Participant A highlighted that the international fencing community understands that a lot of money exchange is going on within the FIE for Russia to buy votes in the federation, saying, 'The Russian strategy [is to] pick up a bunch of fencing countries that largely have no fencers...but the Russians come in and say "we're going to give you \$100,000..." in exchange for votes supporting Russia in the FIE.' This is just another example of not only how state and sport relations make sport political, but also how this politicization manifests itself in the government using their own national federations to make political moves in the international arena through sport.

The United States is an exception in some ways, as it is one of the few countries whose sport is *not* tied to the government and is therefore a separate entity (this does not mean that Team USA is not political, but only that its politics are made separate from the central government). Participant B explained that sport outside the United States operates as pseudo-governmental entities. They said:

“The majority of sport around the world is actually run either by governments or government-represented organizations, in otherwise ministers of sport, ministers of sport and culture, ministers of youth and sport...Sometimes it’s funded by the government, sometimes it’s funded by other entities which are government related, very few have the U.S. system, where it’s not government funded. So, intrinsically when the government funds something, it’s political.”

On the one hand, sport is highly intertwined with politics because of the relationship that many sporting organizations have with their governments and countries that their athletes represent. Very few other sports can match the presence that fencing has in the political echelon of a lot of countries, especially Russia and Ukraine, which not only are major actors in the international political arena, but also produce some of the world’s top fencers. The fact that both countries’ fencing teams are strongly tied to their governments makes the sport political in nature; the athletes represent their governments’ agendas and act as a proxy for their conflict whether they like it or not.

One example made by Participant B related to the role of the Italian government in hosting a fencing world cup. In the Italian Championships, where Olga Kharlan and Anna Smirnova had their exchange, the highest levels of the Italian government are involved in getting Russian athletes into the country to be able to fence. The government also funds the event. While

the Italian government is engaging in fencing sport differently in this example than Ukraine or Russia (Italy is running a fencing competition while Russia and Ukraine are participants in Italy's event), this example highlights that all countries use sport differently, but all use it politically.

On the other hand, sport can also act as a unifying entity. Participant B also gave an account of when they saw a member of the North Korean Sport Ministry and a representative of the South Korean Olympic Committee sitting at the same table at a sporting event. They said, "...[sport] is the only time when warring countries come together...that doesn't really happen in fencing, and it's not fencing related, but it does give a clear illustration of why sport is a little different." Sport can transcend politics, as seen in this example, and in that way can act as a unifying entity internationally. This is because the Olympic Charter calls for sport to be above politics. This does not occur all the time, but it does highlight how sport can transcend the world's current affairs at a certain level.

Clearly, fencing is a special case in the international sporting arena because of its historical ties to warfare, politics, and longevity in the Olympic Games. The nature of fencing being a sport involving high level problem-solving tends to produce individuals who are politically inclined and involves politically high-profile countries who see sport as an asset for soft power being presented on the international sporting stage.

Question II: Considering the war in Ukraine, do you think that Russian athletes should be allowed to compete in the France 2024 Summer Olympic Games? Why or why not?

Both participants answered this question similarly, saying that there are a lot of nuances to their answers and that the situation is very complicated. Participant A pointed to the fact that a

Russian Oligarch put into power by Putin used to run the FIE. After he temporarily stepped down, the FIE decided to model its attitude regarding Russian fencers off the IOC's actions, which ultimately resulted in the AIN athlete guidelines made and accepted by the IOC and therefore the FIE (highlighted in Chapter Four). Participant A, however, mentioned that the guidelines block the participation of any athletes with ties to the Russian military, stating that this parameter effectively removes all of Russia's top fencers because they all train in clubs that are funded by the Russian military. This stratification of Russian sport makes all sport engagement politically charged, given the fact that sport is funded by the same money that is funding the military – which is a political entity because of its relationship to the state.

Participant B spoke extensively on the issue between Kharlan and Smirnova. According to Participant B, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy originally took the position that no Ukrainian athlete will compete against a Russian athlete, because it would legitimize Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kharlan believed that if she did not fence Russian athletes, then she would not have the chance to qualify for the upcoming Paris 2024 Olympic Games. The IOC and Zelenskyy eventually engaged in a series of negotiations prompted by Kharlan, resulting in the agreement that she could fence Russian AIN athletes and did not have to shake their hands. Smirnova's actions at the end of the bout resulted because officials made the deal behind closed doors.

The sequence of events regarding Kharlan somewhat pleased Participant B because it a) "...shed light on some of the issues political involvement causes..." and b) '...it guaranteed at least one Ukrainian in the Olympic Games, and to that point, there was a possibility that Ukraine could've boycotted the Games, and there was a strong possibility of that...and that is why it was very smart for Bach, because he almost went "Hey Zelenskyy, I understand that you're going to

boycott because of Russian involvement, but now I've given your number one fencer and one of your athletes in the country a pass [into the Olympics]. You have to go tell her no.'"

Bach used the privilege of being in the Olympic Games as leverage over the Ukrainian government (specifically President Zelenskyy) to participate in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Bach used his power as the IOC president to give Kharlan a spot, and effectively put Zelenskyy in a dilemma: he could either continue the mandate that Ukrainian athletes refuse to compete against Russian athletes, which results in Ukraine's inability to compete in the upcoming games (Fencers, for example, have to receive a certain amount of international points earned through competition in order to qualify for the Games), or he could allow Ukrainian athletes to continue their pursuit of the Games, possibly resulting in the use of sport as a proxy for conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Bach's decision to give Kharlan a guaranteed spot in the games increased the salience of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games as a politically charged sporting event because Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government became more actively involved in the conduct of their own athletes.

Ultimately, Participant B believes that it is challenging to suggest that Russia and Belarus should be completely banned from the Games solely based on the invasion of Ukraine, and that it should be because of their manipulation of the sport doping system. Participant A also brought up the Russian doping issue from the past five years. Both Participants believed that while they definitely should be punished because of their breach of the Olympic Truce during the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games, the IOC should also punish Russia for cheating sport by doping, and that such a punishment should be a ban from the 2024 and 2026 Games. Both participants reason that they do not blame fencers who have not shown support for the Kremlin or Putin, and do not have material gains from the administration for the government's actions.

Participant B made an interesting point, saying that there needs to be ways through which Russian athletes who openly turned their back on the Russian government to compete. As stated in Chapter three, one suggestion from a Ukrainian athlete was that these former-Russian athletes should compete through the Refugee Team. The problem with this is that, as highlighted by Participant B, Russian athletes who criticize the government do not qualify for the refugee team, even though they are country-less. One example brought up was the three former-Russian fencers who are currently looking for citizenship in the United States. They do not qualify for the Refugee Team, so the only way they can fence in the 2024 Paris Games is if they fence for Russia – which is not a possibility because they have openly turned their back on the country. Going back would put their lives on the line. Because of the limited resources and avenues for competition for these athletes, they will not be able to compete in the upcoming Games. This limitation to competition as a stateless Russian athlete alludes to the fact that, again, sports is political because athletes need to have a political entity (a government) to represent in the Games.

Participant A spoke about doping in the third question. For the sake of relevance and organization their perspective on the doping issue will be placed here. Participant A spoke about how the doping scandal of the past three Olympic Games has been a constant question in the international competitive sports world. This allegation of doping comes from hard evidence, and yet the IOC has “...kind of copped out...” as far as banning the Russian Olympic Committee for doping. This demonstrates that there is a strong precedent for *not* banning athletes, even when hard and fast evidence is given in the case of doping. This could signal why the IOC decided to take an avenue where AIN Russian athletes could continue their pursuit of the Games, given that

in the past the decision to ban Russia on the grounds of doping has not found any footing in the IOC.

Question III: Is there a larger relationship between individual athletes and world events?

Both believe that while they both think it is important for athletes to be able to safely and reasonably express their views, it is hard for them to do so in many countries because of how closely tied sport is to the governments they represent. Participant B spoke about how in today's United States sport culture it is much easier for individual athletes to speak their minds about any issue without repercussions because of the separation of the state from the U.S. Olympic Committee and subsequent sport federations. USA Fencing took a more supportive stance for athletes' preferences on whether they decide to fence a Russian athlete, saying the organization will not punish any athletes who choose to opt out of fencing a Russian opponent. No athletes refused to fence because of the implications it would have on their qualification points for the upcoming Olympic Games, but they had the option to do so without repercussions from their federation.

It is more difficult to be open as a federation to individual perspectives on politically charged issues when the government funds the federation. The federation adheres to the government's position on the issue because of the funding and support that they give. Ultimately it all boils down to the fact that individuals want to compete, and they can only do so with the support of their federation, which receives government support. Even in the United States, where the fencing world is not tied to the government, fencers' goal is to fence at the Olympic Games which requires that they compete internationally against Russian and Belarussian athletes to receive points. Participant A expressed this realistic sentiment in their interview, saying that,

although athletes may not agree with the IOC or FIE for allowing Russian athletes, all athletes are trying to make an Olympic Team.

As stated in the previous chapter, individuals are more inclined by the prestige of competing at the Olympic Games than to boycott in political protest, as exemplified by Participant A's description and Olga Kharlan spearheading negotiations between the IOC and President Zelenskyy to come to an agreement that would allow her and her fellow Ukrainian teammates to compete.

Participant A discussed the open letter written by the international fencing community to the IOC and FIE. As a reminder, this letter called for the IOC and FIE to reintroduce the ban on Russian and Belarussian fencers because of the war's direct attack on the fencing community, such as bombing sport facilities, and displacing and killing thousands of athletes. According to Participant A, nothing came of the letter, which points to the question: What power do athletes really have? They said that they believe athletes have a lot of power and say in the U.S. given the separation of state from the sporting organizations themselves. Fencers in USA Fencing have the ability to take part in the governing of both USA Fencing, and the U.S. Olympic Committee, and therefore have a platform to voice their honest opinions on issues. However, states around the world all understand that their athletes just want to go to the Olympics and this knowledge gives the state power to dictate or even ignore athlete criticisms on an issue because the state is powerfully tied to sport.

Participant A said that:

‘...the response oftentimes received to the athletes is “well, okay, you’re asking for the Russian and Belarussian athletes to be banned on X, Y, Z, but are we really going to

delve in and ban athletes because of human rights abuses? In that case, what about other countries?...at what point do you penalize athletes for the acts of the country?”

When speaking about the war in Ukraine, Participant A highlighted the complications that come with the situation. Because Russian and Belarussian athletes are funded by the military it is difficult to parse the two entities. What this means is that when the FIE or IOC are looking at the situation, they could be thinking that banning athletes for the actions of the Russian or Belarussian government would be unfair for the individual because of how connected the state and sport funding is. However, Participant A then pointed out that the doping scandal is a much more convincing argument to ban the Russians because it involves the sport organization at large – as opposed to being tied to state military funding.

Participant B brought up an interesting comparison between Olympic sports and tennis, and how tennis' separation from the Olympics allows its participants to more freely express themselves. There are many ethnically Russian and Belarussian tennis players that are large on the international competitive scene, however, because the pinnacle of international competition for tennis is not the Olympic Games and because individual athletes in tennis are self-funded, there is more leeway with expression. In that sense, tennis athletes from Russia are not representing Russia, but are representing themselves. Many of them do not train in Russia and are not endorsed *or* funded by the government (maybe because of its detachment from the Olympic Stage) , which gives them more freedom to speak personally.

This example illustrates again the idea that because most countries use state funding for their national fencing federations, the athletes are constrained by their state's agendas in what they can express politically through fencing thus tampering the power of their voices. In essence, both participants said they believe athletes should be able to voice their opinions on issues, but

this phenomenon does not occur because of the strong relationship between sport and state internationally.

Although sport can prove to be a dividing force in the war in Ukraine because of its relationship to states, athletes generally band together in the spirit of sport – for example, both Participants spoke about how North Korean and South Korean delegates and athletes have come together in a sporting context that would otherwise be impossible in another setting. Ukrainian sabreist Olga Kharlan is an outlier in this analysis. Kharlan is an individual whose sport institution is strongly tied with the government. Despite this limitation, she organized and pushed for President Zelenskyy to renegotiate a deal with the IOC in order to allow her and her fellow athletes to compete at the upcoming Paris Olympic Games. While her case demonstrates a powerful example of individuals using their platform to actively participate in the international political system through sport, even in a system where the state has a lot of sway over sport.

Kharlan is a double-faceted individual because she is an exceptional athlete with a guaranteed position on Ukraine's Olympic Team by the IOC President. This makes her an outlier because it is her world-renowned fencing skill that gave her the power she needed to be an important player in the war in Ukraine. Her teammates do not have her sporting prowess and therefore do not possess that same kind of power, meaning that they are limited by the state. Kharlan is a rare, super-achieving exception in this case, but it does highlight how being an exceptional athlete does give one easier access to participation in the international political system.

Interview data highlighted the complexity of the war in Ukraine and its influence in fencing, a sport with which both Russia and Ukraine have strong historical ties and powerful influence. Participants believe that fencing's influence is omnipresent in the international sport

community, the IOC, and in politics because it is historically rooted in the politics of European states (for example, magistrates used fencing as a means to demonstrate their political intelligence and honor), it involves powerful states and actors, and it attracts a personality drawn towards problem-solving, which often entails participation in politics. While both participants believe that Russian and Belarusian fencers and their respective Olympic Committees and fencing teams should be punished because their governments breached the Olympic Peace, the Russian Olympic Committee should definitely be banned on the basis of cheating. While the finding is unanticipated, it highlights a deepening distaste for the Russian Olympic Team's history of doping in the past few Olympic Games. Athletes feel that Russia compromises the integrity of sport through both cheating and breaches of the Olympic Peace. The interviews reveal that, while athletes believe individuals within the sport community should have the ability to speak their political opinions freely, this is dependent on the hierarchical relationship between sport and state. If states have authority over their sporting institutions, it is very difficult for athletes to voice their opinions because of fears of state punishment. If states have little to no authority over their sporting institutions, athletes can freely voice their opinions on politics.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

Fencing is a special sport in the international community because of its historical roots in the political echelons of society given its prominence among major players in the international political system, the countries that it involves, and the problem-solving oriented personalities that it attracts. The complexity of whether Russian and Belarussian fencers should be permitted to compete in the next Olympic Games highlights the unwillingness of the IOC to ban athletes, even with hard evidence, and the strong ties that states have with their sporting federations. This

deep bond between state and sport can prove limiting in an individual athlete's ability to engage with the international political system. Because sport federations are tied to state funding, all its participants must adhere to the state's position on any political issue – as exemplified by Ukraine's initial refusal to compete against Russian athletes because of a state mandate. However, individuals can try to engage in politics if there is a system that allows for it. Athletes in the U.S. are encouraged to use their voices because of a separation of state and sport. Olga Kharlan used her position as a high profile Ukrainian athlete to incentivize her country's leader to change his position on a political issue.

The controversy in today's international fencing community surrounding the war in Ukraine is a result of the sport's historical roots in international politics and as a tool for soft power. The IOC and FIE are NSSAs who demonstrate a tendency to follow major players in the international political system – specifically, they orient their policies that work within the political agendas of powerful state actors. This is evidenced by the IOC and FIE's response to the war in Ukraine by creating a set of guidelines that allow for AIN Russian and Belarussian athletes to compete in the upcoming Paris 2024 Olympic Games, knowing that their participation in sport is vital to the power of the IOC and FIE. Because Russia is a prominent state in the world of fencing, it has placed a high value on the FIE and IOC as tools for state power garnered through sport.

Individual participants in the international fencing community believe that fencing is a special sport within the international political context because of its historical roots in conflict, the nature of fencing sport involves extensive problem-solving - which tends to attract a personality that gets involved in politics, and fencing's value in high profile state actors in international politics. While the study's participants felt that all athletes should be able to express

their political opinions, doing so is difficult in most states because sport and state are so intertwined, which leads to states having a strong level of control over the messages that individual athletes' may try to convey. Athletes want to compete, even at the expense of limiting their own voices to maintain the patronage of the state they are representing.

Sport is a double-edged sword: it can be both a unifying and divisive mechanism in world politics. This thesis utilized data taken from news outlets, social media, both the IOC and FIE's websites, and interviews with members of the international fencing community about their perspectives and experiences with the politics of fencing both before and during the war in Ukraine to explore the question of the role of both individuals and non-state organizations in international politics and whether they have sway over state agendas. This thesis concludes that it appears that both the IOC and FIE follow state agendas because much of their influence is derived from soft power potential that states see in sport. Individuals can have political sway if they are detached from the state, thereby giving them the space and freedom to speak; However, if sport is tied to the state, then its participants are limited by the state agenda.

By using fencing as the focus for an analysis of the sport diplomacy influences of NSSAs, this thesis demonstrates the importance of political historical significance when engaging with the politics of sport. Fencing's legacy in both warfare and as a tool for armistice makes it a relevant player in today's conflict between Russia and Ukraine, both of which have historical and current high-profile involvement in the sport. This thesis also introduced another avenue for political analysis that is strongly related to using fencing as an academic focal point for political research, as opposed to keeping research related to the sport limited to medical and historical research. This research adds to the theoretical framework of sport diplomacy and offers

a deeper dive into the role of organizations versus individuals as NSSAs by studying the relationship between sport and the international political system in the context of fencing because of its politically charged history and norms of respect by way of armistice.

In the future, research could expand upon this study by gathering a larger sample of participants to interview. While the two involved in this study were very informative for exploring the question of whether fencing has influence in the international political system, the small sample size of this specific study means that there are strong biases in the findings, as they are informed by a limited number of perspectives. A future study could also engage more with the Olympic Charter and add another analysis on the diction used in framing the goals of the Olympic Movement and attempts by the IOC to limit political statements in the Games, to maintain the sanctity of sport.

Sport is a major element in international politics. Fencing makes a strong sport for study because of its historical connection to the international political system, the parallels between fencing sport values (such as respect and dignity) and the norms of the international diplomatic arena, and its involvement in high-profile state actors. However, the study also reveals wider questions about sport and politics. Fencing creates an armistice by having two athletes engage in an agreed conflict with weapons. In essence, fencing uses tools of warfare to curb warfare. However, can fencing remain apolitical because of its roots in politics and conflict? This is a question that can be further explored to delve deeper into the question of how individuals can or cannot function as diplomats in the international political system.

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