Nadia Comăneci and the Secret Police: A Cold War Escape, by Stejărel Olaru. Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth, Bloomsbury, London, 2023, 312 pp.

Book Review

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This engaging book begins with an account of Nadia Comăneci's dramatic defection from Romania in 1989. The gymnast, then aged 27, found life unbearable in Ceaușescu's police state, and took the courageous decision to leave. Such an escape – with few exceptions, Romanians were forbidden to travel abroad – was risky and dangerous.

The cover of the book is already telling. It is a close-up of the gymnast's face, with the chains of five Olympic medals around her neck. The chains are one symbolic takeaway. The other is the mirthless look in her eyes. She was only 14 years old, but there is little that is youthful in her demeanor. Rather, a resigned melancholy. Those chains were weighing rather heavily upon their holder. *Holder* rather than *owner*, because the child athlete had to share her unprecedented achievements with the oppressive regime that that would publicly showcase her and privately suffocate her.

Her achievements were indeed unprecedented. She scored the first even perfect 10 in Olympic history, at the Montreal Olympics of 1976. She left that tournament with five Olympic medals, three of them gold, and had become one of the most famous, and beloved, sporting icons of her century. She would go on to win two more golds at the 1980 Moscow Olympics, two World Cup golds, two World Championship golds, as well as many other medals, both individual and part of the national team. Trained from the age of seven, she participated in her first international competition in 1971, aged 10. In only a few years, she would for gymnastics what Muhamad Ali would do for boxing, or Jonah Lomu would do for rugby, she would become the face of her athletic discipline, even to people with no interest in sport.

Much attention in Olaru's book is given to the complex relationship between Comăneci and her Svengali-like coach Béla Károlyi (1942 – 2024) and to his wife Márta (born 1942). The husband-and-wife team were extraordinarily successful in coaching female gymnasts – they would defect in 1981 and train many successful American gymnasts such as Olympic gold medalist Mary Lou Retton. (The Károlyis' American reputation had been retrospectively damaged by association with the disgraced sexual predator Larry Nasser, whom they employed as a medic). Béla Károlyi was not even a gymnast, his sport was handball, but he evolved into a coach of undoubted success. But at what cost? Many of his charges spoke of mental and physical violence, and the book carries many examples. Obsessed with the girls gaining weight, he put them on the strictest diets, even denying them water for long periods. Olaru even

suggests that Nadia may have suffered a form of Stockholm Syndrome, regarding Károlyi.

He plainly saw himself as the reason for Nadia's success and he clashed with anyone who came close to the prodigy, including Nadia's mother, Ștefania, who did not agree with his assessment. For her, it was 'thanks to her talent Nadia has made Károlyi the world's most famous gymnastics coach, while Károlyi claimed that it was the opposite, that thanks to his talent Nadia had become the world's top sportsperson' (p. 109).

The Károlyis established in the town of Onești a school of gymnastics that became much admired, especially after Comăneci's triumph at the 1976 Olympics. Prior to that, Nadia's hometown was some sort of experiment in statist planning, and became a place of socialist pilgrimage. Visitors would include Walter Ulbricht, Tito, even Khrushchev.

That the Károlyis were ethnically Hungarian did present some challenges. In Ceaușescu's state, overt nationalism was more on display than in the other People's Republics, and the country's ethnic minorities, Roma, Germans, and especially Hungarians were often treated with suspicion. Or better to say with heightened suspicion, because the state, with its huge security apparatus and network of informers, was suspicion itself. And a peculiar paranoia that haunted the USSR and People's Republics was the fear of their prominent personalities defecting to the West.

To offer one example, describing the entourage of the Romanian gymnastics team that went to Moscow in 1980, Olaru states that there was only one formal Securitate officer; 'However, he was backed by fifty-four informers, sportspeople, journalists and officials within the four-hundred strong Romanian delegation' (p. 189).

The sources of the book include Comăneci's own memoirs, which seem conciliatory in tone, and Károlyi's more self-serving autobiography, multiple interviews, and several archives, domestic and foreign. The single biggest source, appropriate to the title of the book, is the archive of the Securitate. This seemingly vast store of documents continues to be gift to historians of Communist Romania, and to related disciplines. A most distinguished scholar of the country – Katherine Verdery – has written superbly on the 'anthropology of secrecy' drawing on the 3,000 pages of documentation dedicated to her 'case' (Verdery, 2014).

Olaru has been able to draw on numerous reports and transcripts of telephone calls, as the phones of anyone connected with Comăneci were listened to by the Securitate. Furthermore, official minutes of meetings throw more light on the personal interest that Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena took in the young gymnast. The prominent role of Elena Ceaușescu is attested by some transcripts here, and she has rightly been subject of a serious biography (Popa, 2021), taking her out of the zone of gossip and ridicule to where she was relegated by the popular imagination (albeit with a little help from herself). It was her personal directive that Nadia was expected to win three gold medals at the 1980 Moscow Olympics (in fact, she managed to win 'only' two golds).

One strength of the book is an insight to the horse-trading that went on among judges from the communist 'bloc' in order to secure as many medals as possible. The Romanians, and Nadia herself, felt they were treated dishonestly by the Soviets in 1980. Yet Olaru notes a long-standing tendency to complain of unfair scoring, going back to the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, and from there to Melbourne in '56, and so on.

As this is a specific study and not a biography, Comăneci's private life is left tactfully unexplored. This is justifiable, given that the topic is the years of spying and intrusion the young athlete suffered at the hands of the state. He does, however, make one exception. That was, Nadia's friendship with Nicu Ceaușescu, noting that, 'at

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the time people regarded him as his father's successor' (p. 208).

> In the archives there is no information about the relationship between Nadia Comăneci and Nicu Ceaușescu for the simple reason that the Securitate was not allowed to gather information about the members of the family that ruled Romania. For Nadia's part, when asked to comment on the subject; she has refused to admit that she had any personal relationship with the youngest son of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu. She has confirmed that she met him and knew him […] but their relationship was strictly professional. But there are a number of accounts of a personal friendship between them that have become public. These accounts were given by people who were close to Nadia at the time, including members of her family, and we do not doubt their veracity, even if she herself has denied them and regards them as 'clumsy tales' (p. 219).

This friendship, such as it might have been, dates to the late 1980s, when Nadia had retired from gymnastics. Yet the state still surveyed her, often justifying their actions in protective terms. From her rapid ascent to world fame in the mid-1970s, Comăneci has been seen as vulnerable to kidnapping – there was one very amateurish plan hatched – and, more vaguely, to the attentions of sinister foreign agents. This was the domestic paranoid corollary to the fear of cross border defection. Her last trip to the West was in 1985, although she was allowed to visit other countries in the Eastern Bloc on occasion. She was invited to numerous events in Western countries but was denied the right to travel. As Olaru puts it, she who 'had travelled all over the world since the age of ten was a prisoner in her own country' (p. 220). In 1989 alone, she had to decline twelve invitations to travel.

Her courageous decision to take matters into her own hands, which necessarily entailed taking the risk of trusting people to help her, took place in late November of that year. She crossed the border into Hungary, a country that was cautiously reforming under Kádár, but which might still have repatriated her. Luckily it did not. She went on to Austria and then the USA and Canada. That the regime she fled collapsed only weeks after her defection, does not make her courage any less admirable. As she put it herself, she chose freedom.

News of her defection – of which she had not even informed her own mother – infuriated the ruling elite. It also cast suspicion on everyone that knew Nadia. Police interrogations followed and might have led to sanctions or trials if the regime itself was not about to collapse suddenly. The revolution, as it became, began in unlikely circumstances, in the Banat. Fighting broke out in Timișoara in mid-December, but local security forces were unable to contain it. Returning from Iran, where a decade earlier another autocrat failed to read his own people, Ceaușescu famously lost control of a huge crowd that had gathered in the capital Bucharest on December 21. Fleeing the following day, he and Elena were arrested, put on dubious trial, and unceremoniously executed. It was Christmas Day. The chaos did not end immediately; in fact, more lives were lost after the Ceaușescus' execution than before. Because of the way that sport was organized by the state, many people in uniform who were involved in the fighting were athletes, and several prominent sportspeople paid with their lives. Like Nadia, they too chose freedom.

It is a fitting tribute to the gymnast that her homeland has decreed 2026 as 'the Year of Nadia Comăneci'.

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