MAKING THE COUNTRY COME TRUE

Roy MacSkimming's *Cold War: The Amazing Canada-Soviet Hockey Series of 1972* has been re-released as an ebook by Greystone Books, along with his unauthorized biography of Gordie Howe, *Gordie: A Hockey Legend*. MacSkimming is also the author of the prime ministerial novels *Macdonald* and *Laurier in Love* (Thomas Allen).

The iconic image is what we love to remember: arms upraised, face radiant with joy, Paul Henderson leaps into teammate Yvan Cournoyer's arms after scoring "the goal of the century."

Forty years on, we still revel in our last-minute triumph over the Soviet Union in 1972. But we acknowledge more gracefully our razor-thin margin of victory. We also appreciate how brilliantly the Soviets played, how profoundly the series changed the sport, and – inevitably, given hockey's importance to Canadians – how it changed the country.

Cournoyer himself coined a memorable phrase evoking the series' meaning for Canadians. When I interviewed the star Montreal Canadiens right-winger for my book *Cold War: The Amazing Canada-Soviet Hockey Series of 1972*, he described the series as even greater in significance than the holy grail of hockey, the Stanley Cup: "The Stanley Cup is something you've dreamt about all your life, and when you win it for the first time, it's like a dream come true. But in '72, it was like the country come true."

Nothing could better express the series' impact. It was our long-awaited opportunity to prove a faith central to our national identity: that whatever else we may be, we're the world's best at playing the sport we invented.

The reality, as it turned out, was far more challenging and complex and far-reaching. As the drama mounted to an almost unbearable pitch throughout September 1972, it wasn't only our players who were tested: our sense of ourselves as Canadians was on the line, and we had to confront our own vanities and vulnerabilities. What we learned helped us grow.

Before '72, it had galled us that Canada couldn't send its best to the Olympics or world championships. The International Ice Hockey Federation's dubious definition of amateurism barred National Hockey League players from competing internationally, yet allowed Soviets playing fulltime for the state to be perennial champions of the world. Canadians were sick of the hypocrisy. A national poll taken by the newspaper supplement *Weekend Magazine* in 1969 showed 99% of respondents wanted a showdown between the Soviets and the NHL.

The federal government encouraged the idea. The Department of External Affairs pursued "hockey diplomacy" as part of Prime Minister Trudeau's policy of better relations with the USSR. In an exchange of visits with Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin in 1971, Trudeau raised the issue of hockey competition between the two countries. Soon afterwards, second secretary Gary Smith at the Canadian embassy in Moscow, then in the early stages of a distinguished diplomatic career, picked up signals in the state newspaper *Izvestia* that the Russians were finally ready to test themselves against the NHL. Official talks ensued, resulting in agreement to hold a "best vs. best" series of "friendly matches," four in either country. No cup was at stake: just the symbol of global hockey supremacy.

As if these stakes weren't high enough, Canadians insisted on loading a whole other layer of meaning onto the series. Amid the frenzy of speculation leading up to the opening game, the teams came to symbolize their respective societies' conflicting political systems. Our guys were rugged, free-wheeling, free-enterprising individualists. Their guys were programmed robots, cogs in the hockey version of the Communist machine. At some primal, unreasoning level, we believed a Canadian victory would prove the superiority not only of our game but our way of life.

We allowed ourselves a few anxieties. Because the NHL season hadn't begun yet, Team Canada would have to play themselves into shape, whereas the Soviets trained all year round. And Bobby Orr and Bobby Hull, considered Canada's best players by everyone including the architect of the Soviet team, Anatoly Tarasov, were sidelined – Orr because of injury, Hull because the NHL vetoed his participation after he defected to the rival World Hockey Association. All the same, the vast majority of "experts" picked Canada to win in a walk. Many predicted an eight-game sweep: an expectation that left no room for error or surprise.

We *had* to win. What alternative was there?

As the Soviets stepped onto the ice in the Montreal Forum wearing their red cosmonaut helmets, faces expressionless, names unpronounceable, they seemed robots indeed. It was a heady moment: the world's two hockey superpowers facing off for the first time. The

bareheaded Canadians, long hair flying, scored two quick goals, and the expected outcome seemed assured. Moments later we discovered how swiftly the Soviets could strike. Far from being regimented and predictable, their style was fast, furious and creative, a match for the Montreal Canadians' "firewagon hockey" at its best. We quickly learned to pronounce Valery Kharlamov, Alexander Yakushev, Vladislav Tretiak.

When game one mercifully ended, heavy mist rising off the ice from the ashes of NHL invincibility, it was Soviet Union (7) and Team Canada (3). Broadcaster Foster Hewitt kept repeating the score for the huge television audience, as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd just reported, play by incredible play.

Collapsed in front of their TV sets, Canadians experienced collective trauma. The dawning awareness that we could lose raised unthinkable possibilities. A national myth would perish. The Communist system, however symbolically, would triumph. Suddenly a series of "friendly matches" prefigured the long-dreaded climax of the Cold War. A Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile had exploded in the heart of Montreal.

Canadians didn't respond to the defeat in the polite, moderate spirit consistent with the national stereotype. We agonized. We despaired. We raged. Team Canada coach Harry Sinden said it best: "A little piece of all of us died today."

The mourning process began with disbelief but quickly turned to shame and anger. The same media that had predicted easy victory reflected the black public mood. The *Montreal Gazette* wrote of Team Canada's "arrogance" and "humiliation." The headline in *Dimanche-Matin* read "Le Canada humilié 7-3." The *Globe & Mail* called it "a shocking, incredible result," and *Globe* sports columnist Dick Beddoes asked, "Has the National Hockey League been perpetrating a fraud all these years?"

At least Beddoes had the honesty to eat his own words. Having vowed that if the Soviets won a single game, he'd "eat this column at high noon in a bowl of borscht," he did just that on the steps of the Soviet consulate in Toronto.

Despite a Canadian victory in game two at Maple Leaf Gardens – perhaps the most important game psychologically, because it proved early on that Team Canada could beat the Soviets – and a tie in game three in Winnipeg, public disillusionment reached its peak with game four: a humbling 5-3 loss in Vancouver. Boos rained down on the Canadian players' heads, inspiring captain Phil Esposito's passionate, sweat-drenched defense of his team's effort on national television – one of the great pieces of spontaneous rhetoric in Canadian history.

When Team Canada left home to prepare for the second half of the series in the USSR, hardly anyone came to the airport to see them off. The players felt the country had abandoned them. The booing had been bad enough – backup goaltender Eddie Johnston compared it to booing your army in wartime. But the players were baffled and hurt by the ongoing contempt for them expressed in the media. They'd taken on the public's expectations as representatives of their nation, its hockey tradition, its political ideology: Esposito said afterwards he'd "have killed to win." And now they knew better than anybody how exceptional the Russians were, and what a hard road lay ahead. Yet many Canadians could only blame Team Canada for the loss of their illusions: an emotional block that reflected badly on the country's maturity.

During the mid-series pause, the players had to rebuild their faith in themselves. Playing two exhibition games in Stockholm against the Swedish national team, gaining a win and a tie, gave them a taste of the larger international ice surface and the hostile officiating they'd face in Moscow. Away from the glare of the Canadian media, the players faced their existential situation, bonding into a unit. Ask any Team Canada member, and he'll identify this as the moment when a collection of disparate individuals from different teams transcended their NHL rivalries to forge a shared conviction: they had nobody to rely on but each other. As the Toronto Maple Leafs' Ron Ellis put it, referring to the Team Canada entourage, it was "fifty against the world."

At home, many Canadians had difficulty keeping the faith. It was hard to believe that a team with only one victory at home could win three out of four on enemy ice: the challenge that now faced Team Canada. Yet to ask Cournoyer, Esposito, Henderson, Serge Savard or any other team member is to learn they believed nonetheless they could take it all. They *still* believed, even after losing the first game in Moscow 5-4 – a heartbreaking defeat after Canada had enjoyed a 4-1 lead.

Now in the unenviable position of needing to win every one of the remaining games, Team Canada needed all that faith: the faith of a Henderson, who said, "You tell yourself, '*We're not gonna lose*'"; or a Cournoyer, who believed it was the stark fear of losing, of going home to face the wrath of their countrymen, that helped Team Canada achieve its miracle. The whole team shared in that miracle, and the ineffable Henderson delivered it by scoring the winning goal in each of games six, seven and eight.

The Russian half of the series had its comic-opera touches. Team Canada was obsessed with the idea that the KGB had bugged their hotel rooms, stolen their supplies of Canadian steaks and beer, and was responsible for mysterious phone calls to the rooms in the middle of the night. It had its sad moments too: Bobby Clarke, who played so strongly on a line with Henderson and Ellis, deliberately fracturing Kharlamov's ankle; Jean-Paul Parisé threatening an official with his stick; Alan Eagleson, who

had helped rally the players' self-confidence in his role as team manager, scrimmaging with Soviet soldiers at rink side and giving the finger to the crowd.

In the end, these things were all but forgotten in the epiphany of Henderson's goal with 34 seconds remaining in the series. From the Canadian point of view, disaster had been averted, justice served. We were believers again. Earlier doubts notwithstanding, the entire nation had downed tools to watch the final game and now went joyfully mad. Meanwhile, something else had happened.

Many millions of Russians and North Americans had watched the eight games on television, allowing them rare glimpses into each other's society. Both peoples shared the experience of beholding the enemy face to face, and what they saw weren't nuclear missiles but other human beings devoted, like themselves, to hockey. Détente took many forms: the '72 series was one of them.

The crowds too had become an integral part of the drama. In Canada fans booed their displeasure, whereas in Moscow they observed the stoical decorum decreed by their rulers. But Russians were also astonished to witness the raucous contingent of 3,000 Canadian visitors in the Luzhniki Arena blowing trumpets, waving their country's flag, shouting their opinions out loud.

Afterwards the sport itself changed radically, especially in Canada. Shaken but deeply impressed by the Soviets' excellence, we revolutionized our game. Clearly our reliance on grinding physical play and sheer heart was no longer enough. We put new emphasis on skating, passing and teamwork, moving to the faster, more skilled, more sophisticated style now played everywhere.

The cross-fertilization process advanced further with the opening up of the NHL to Europeans: Swedes, Finns and Czechs at first, eventually Russians and others. International competition involving NHL players became the norm. The Canada Cup series pitted professionals of several nations against each other: Canada won often but not always. Finally, in 1998, NHL players were allowed to play for their country in the Olympics. The Canadian pros' Olympic debut in Nagano was a disaster: they finished fourth. But somehow we survived it, accepting the fact that Russia wasn't the only hockey power to have caught up with us.

Now we've learned to share our game with the world. We watch international competition with both patriotism and pleasure, whether among professionals or juniors, men or women, knowing it offers some of the best hockey of the year. This sharing of our national sport mirrors the sharing of our country with Canadians from many cultures. The globalization of hockey has become part of our multiculturalism.

That's the real legacy of 1972. At first a proxy for war, the Summit Series evolved into a paradigm of coexistence. Today the great goaltender Tretiak calls Canada "my second home." The surviving Russian and Canadian warriors get together for reunions and ask after each other's wives and grandchildren. There was even media talk, later discounted, that Vladimir Putin and Stephen Harper would face off as part of the series' fortieth anniversary celebrations.

Neither side truly lost the series. The Cold War lost.