

THE (UNOFFICIAL) HISTORY OF CROQUET: PART 4 CROQUET AND COMMUNISM

In pre-communist Romanov Russia, only the Tsar, nobles and the professional classes played croquet, which collectively amounted to only 2% of society. The remaining population was dominated by the peasant class and so croquet was considered bourgeois by the incoming Bolsheviks.

It is therefore surprising that croquet was a favourite pastime of post-revolutionary communist leaders. Lenin is known to have been an excellent croquet player, as was Stalin, who actively promoted the sport. However, croquet was established as a proletariat pastime as early as 1917, when the Communist Croquet Club of the People (СССР) was established, featuring as its symbol the mallet, hoop and ball motif that appeared on propaganda posters such as the one shown, with the caption Croquet For All. The motif appears to have been the inspiration for the iconic hammer and sickle symbol that became widely copied by communist regimes following its adoption in Russia, but the role of croquet in establishing the most recognisable symbol of communism is not widely appreciated.

A notable feature of how croquet was played in communist Russia was the absence of handicapping, as everyone was considered to be equal under communist doctrine. This obviously benefitted the better players and score cards kept in the Kremlin official archive reveal that Stalin always won his games, although it is not known whether this was due to his opponents' abilities, or a desire to avoid a prolonged period in one of the Gulag camps where croquet was not on the curriculum.

It is therefore not so surprising that croquet was also a favourite pastime of Chairman Mao, who similarly promoted the game, as can be seen from the 1967 poster shown, which features the mallet, hoop and ball symbol adopted by the organisation of Communist Peoples Croquet (CPC) and the caption Croquet For All. However, communist China did not suffer from the same contradiction whereby croquet could be seen as an elitist sport, as there is no record of it having been played by the emperors. The terms used were similar to their Western equivalent, except that during the four years of The Great Leap Forward, jump shots were renamed leap shots.

In fact, playing croquet quickly became an important aspect of diplomacy in China, whereby matches were played at the conclusion of conferences attended by foreign dignitaries, the most famous being the games played between Chairman Mao and Ho Chi Min in 1955 (pictured) and Richard Nixon in 1972. The Nixon game was not widely reported in the Western press, as he lost 26-0.

However, one of the lesser known venues for croquet played by a communist leader is Ealing Croquet Club, when in 1961 Fidel Castro and Che Guevara attended an International Communist Party conference held at Ealing Town Hall. The only surviving record of the match is a postcard (pictured), recently discovered by the club in the local Ealing Historical Society archive.

The irony is that in England playing croquet is associated with vicarage lawns and Oxbridge quadrangles; whereas in reality it has a much more proletarian heritage, whereby Croquet For All may be a more appropriate slogan for modern-day clubs.

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