

*Three Seconds:*

# A Hard-won Victory and A Revelation of 1970s' Soviet Society

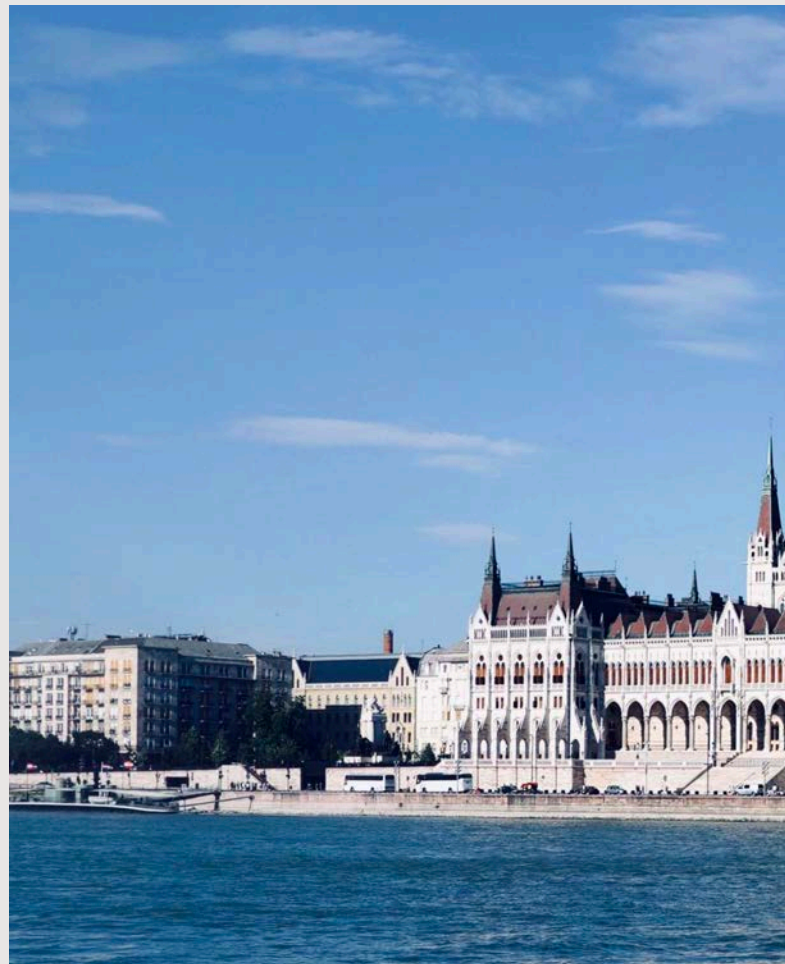
**Bosco YE**

I believe many people are familiar with the Nation Basketball Association in America. As the top domestic basketball tournament in the United States, NBA has a very high reputation all over the world. In recent years, the Olympic men's basketball games have all been won by Americans. However, in 1972, the invincible Americans suffered three seconds of darkness and was defeated by the Soviet Union basketball team. *Three Seconds*, a basketball movie directed by a Russian director Anton Evgenievich Megerdichev, tells the story of this unexpected victory of Soviet basketball players, while revealing the dark side of Soviet society.

The Soviet Union in the 1970s was a place with extreme political complexity. Political factors permeated Soviet Union's activities in almost every aspect. Before the 1972 Olympics, the former head coach of the Soviet Union basketball team was forced to leave the team for political reasons and was replaced by a tactically advanced and more dedicated head coach, Garland. As soon as he took office, he regrouped the men's basketball roster. At the same time, he also told the Soviet Sports Bureau that the team should seek for some more

advanced trainings abroad.

Garland's biggest challenge was to unite the entire Soviet team. As we all know, the Soviet Union was a "superpower" composed of

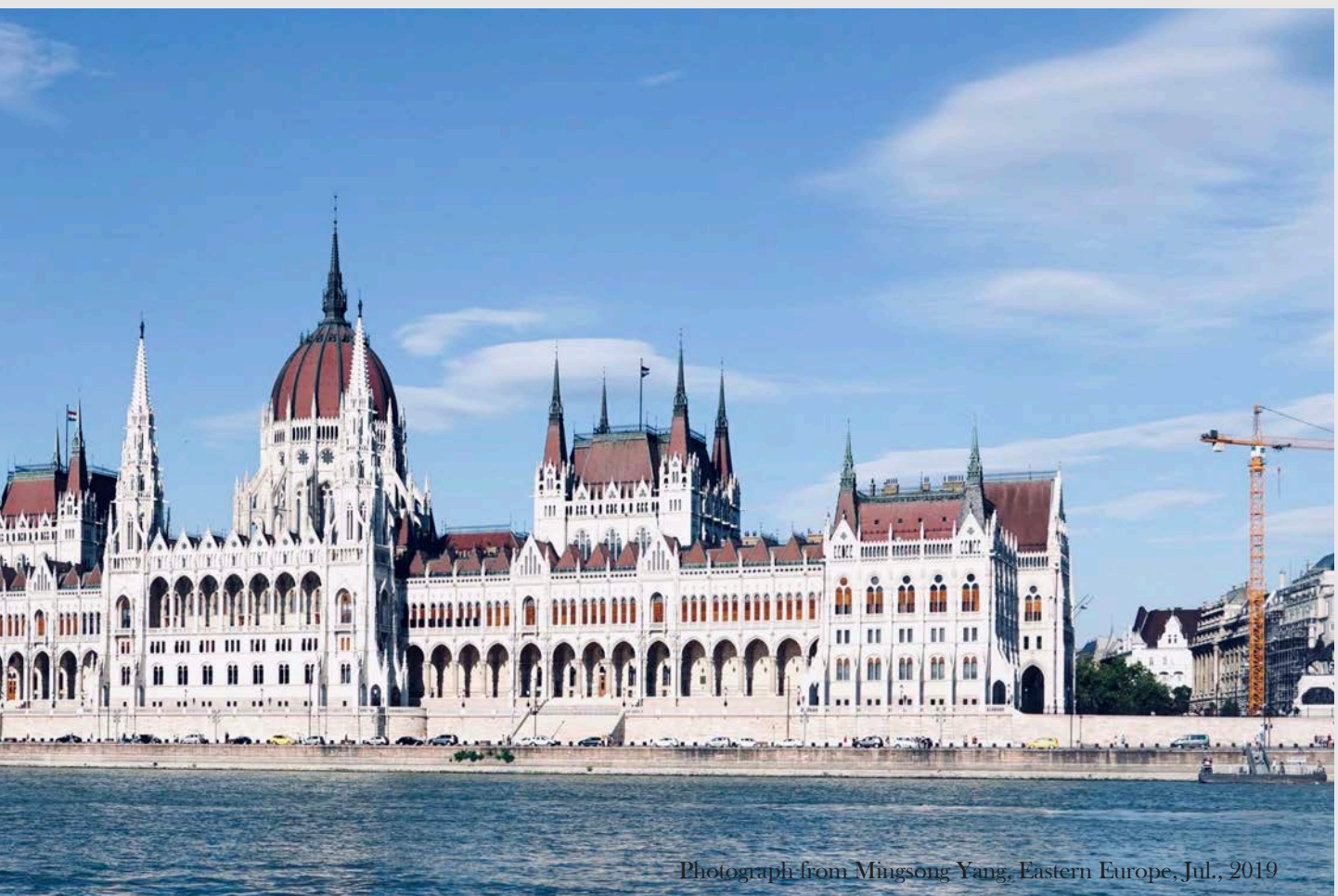


many different countries. Cultural differences could easily divide the team into different small groups, which might hinder their teamwork during a match. However, Garland managed to unite and improve the team with his high emotional quotient and excellent coaching skills. When a player on his team was injured, he covered the player's medical treatment fee with his own salary, even if his own son was waiting for an operation and needed a huge amount of money. When the sister of a Georgian player hosted a wedding, he took the entire team to celebrate, which was quite rare in the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The climax of the movie is the final hit from the Soviet basketball team. However, shooting the scene of "final hit" requires superb shooting skills to appeal to the audience's emotions. For example, the director used

close-up shots many times, shooting muscle collisions, murderous eyes and dripping sweat. In order to present the last 3 seconds of the final match, the director used slow motion to deliberately lengthen the time, creating both "eternal" and "instant" confrontation and forming tension. Moreover, the director used "silence" to trigger "emotional imitation", a psychological mechanism, which makes the audiences hold their breath until the basketball enters the hoop. Finally, sound resumes and the audiences' emotions are released.

If you take a closer look at Three seconds, you will find that it hacks deeply into the political system of the former Soviet Union and reveals the dark side of Soviet society. During the 1960s and 1970s, the confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States became increasingly fierce. In the early 1970s,



Photograph from Mingsong Yang, Eastern Europe, Jul., 2019

a large number of Soviet celebrities fled. Gomelski, the then assistant coach of the Soviet basketball team, became the focus of skepticism. Since the national team would inevitably play abroad, it was easy to escape. To prevent Gomelski from escaping, the Soviet Union simply removed him from the team. Although the Soviet Union during the Cold War was very powerful in some fields (such as aerospace), it was actually quite backward in many other fields. Many domestic materials were scarce and expensive because the government did not carry out foreign trade. In the movie, the Soviet basketball players who rarely went abroad carried many common items, such as wool, radio and belt, when they returned the Soviet Union and passed the customs. The dignified national players were like smugglers. Even when the star player Sergei Belov was suffering from a knee injury, he had to borrow painkillers from the United States basketball team because painkillers were not common in the Soviet Union. It was not easy for players to overcome injuries, and they also faced

the reward and punishment mechanism—"winning, low bonus; losing, black room". Outside of the competition, everyone had their own troubles, such as livelihood, family and love. Through these historical backgrounds, we can better understand the hardships of Garland, as well as the theme that this movie wants to express.

Although the success of *Three Seconds* relies on the indispensable failure of the American basketball team, it cannot be classified as a traditional inspirational film. The movie praises an attitude, that is, coaches and athletes of the Soviet Union, when facing the influence of political and institutional factors, still truly loved their collective, loved the sport of basketball, and were willing to give up everything to win the match that represented national honor.







Photograph from Sam Song,  
Tibet, Jul., 2019