

Kicking the mathematical ball around: IMO as an East-West play area during the Cold War

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The International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO), was initially dominated by Eastern Bloc countries, reflecting the political landscape of the Cold War. However, the 9th IMO, held in Yugoslavia in 1967, marked a turning point, symbolizing a bridge between East and West. As a politically non-aligned country, Yugoslavia played a unique role in fostering cooperation between rival blocs, and in this case, using the IMO as a platform for intellectual exchange. This event was the first to welcome a delegation from the United Kingdom, signifying the gradual inclusion of Western countries and setting a precedent for increased international participation.

The 1967 IMO not only enabled mathematical collaboration among students but also served as a conduit for dialogue among educators, mathematicians, and officials from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The competition from this point on became more than just an intellectual contest; it was a rare space where scientific cooperation subtly challenged political divisions.

Through problem-solving and mathematical creativity, participants and organizers alike forged connections that transcended geopolitical barriers. This paper will explore how the Yugoslav IMO of 1967 served as a symbolic and practical bridge of cooperation, fostering communication and understanding at a time when such exchanges were otherwise fraught with tension and suspicion.