

Sport and Traditionspflege in the German Democratic Republic

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This study analyses the development of East German sport and sports history, and explores in detail the relationship between sport and the state with respect to national political and ideological goals, rather than the international ambitions traditionally associated with sport in the former German Democratic Republic. Specifically, it examines the role of Traditionspflege, a complex concept that includes the selection, maintenance and promotion of historical traditions. This process supported the legitimacy and stability of the nation.

Images of successful times were essential to German Post-war revitalisation. Whereas history often creates artificial and nostalgic links to the “good old days,” it can also educate people in a particular political behaviour. The reconstruction of history

East Germany, however, was denied a nostalgic underpinning. Knowledge of the past should not make people “yearn for yesterday,” but should provide clues and reasons for the necessary existence of East Germany, in short, an historical justification. Moreover, the past should offer answers for the present and, more importantly, directions for the future. Included in the search for past legitimation was the promotion of past German heroes who embodied socialist ideals. Among these were sporting figures.

Sport and sports history thus played a primary role in cultivating a specific East German national identity and, therefore, had a direct political purpose. Although nostalgic images of past sporting glories reinforce particular cultural identities, the sporting history of East Germany was regarded more specifically as a means of instilling an East German awareness or identity in their citizens. The production of historical traditions was an integral step in establishing an East German national identity. The Traditionspflege process was, in part, responsible for selecting and constructing role models from former worker athletes and communist or socialist leaders who would then be used in the political education of the youth. Past events and heroes, thus, became historical object lessons for the young and encouraged specific socialist behaviour.

This paper explores links between Traditionspflege and sport. It argues that some of the ways Traditionspflege was linked to sport include the proliferation of memorial races and tournaments, the naming of stadia and sports festivals and the encouragement of research into local and regional sports history. Many local ‘traditions’ were later expanded and presented as national traditions which further contributed to the development of East German national identity.

This research has broader implications for the analysis of German-German relations following reunification since it discounts the popular assumption that sport was a political tool employed to enhance purely the international prestige of East Germany and it demonstrates the national goals of sport and sports history.