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The Social Construction of Sporting Traditions in the GDR

The development of historical consciousness was the main prerequisite for the formation of a national identity in the GDR. In order to inculcate a desired identity within the people, the state had to embark upon a process of selecting and constructing a suitable national past. This process, however, was only one small part of overall attempts to reorganise identity in the GDR. Most important was a successful conveyance of the selected history to a broad population that had a potentially conflicting version of the national past. This ideal socialist history was presented to the public by means of an elaborate series of traditions and commemorations.

The East German state institutionalised the process of reconstructing the past through *Traditionspflege*. *Traditionspflege* was a complex process that encompassed the selection or production, maintenance and promotion of historical 'traditions.' Traditions were socially and politically constructed entities which *Traditions* created and refined through a selective reinterpretation of history. Through *Traditionspflege*, the GDR tried to carefully manage the development of identity by making an official national history accessible to its citizens and traditions provided a direct link to East German rather than German history. *Traditionspflege* operated successfully on several different levels which made it crucial to the development of identities across collective, local and regional levels. The workplace, schools, social and sporting clubs were incorporated into the movement and each of these sites became responsible for disseminating historical knowledge and encouraging an understanding of the GDR's historical development.

Sports and physical education classes, as well as extracurricular sport, were part of the political-ideological education of East German citizens, and *Traditionspflege* within the sports movement provided a method to achieve these goals. Sporting traditions were constructed in an attempt to focus young athletes and participants on the national and regional past of their sports and on political revolutionaries involved in sport. As such, the preservation of sporting traditions from German sports history assisted political-ideological education. More specifically, sports *Traditionspflege* also contributed to the development of socialist patriotism and proletarian internationalism within the sporting context. In addition, *Traditionspflege* within sports organisations aimed to familiarise students with the progressive events and personalities from the history of physical culture: in other words, to confront them with historical role models which acted as guides to ideal socialist behaviour. As a result, ideological education, in the form of historical propaganda, and *Traditionspflege* within sport were critical factors in the construction of national identity.

This paper refutes the notion that international sport was the main avenue by which national identity could be constructed in the GDR and instead seeks to understand the role that *Traditionspflege* within sport played in the construction and maintenance of an East German specific identity.



“How do you spell that, a-u-d . . .?”