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Political Football: Spartak, The Party and the Moscow Working Class 1910-1942

This paper attempts to study fan support for Soviet soccer teams as a way of investigating working-class political sympathies and communities in Stalin's Russia. It examines the emergence of Spartak Moscow in the pre-Revolutionary Presnia district of proletarian Moscow and its ascendancy to the position of the USSR's most popular club. Working-class identities were closely tied to the choice of team, and those identities were closely tied to the attitudes of the capital's male industrial laborers toward the state, toward each other, toward their families and toward their communities. In other words, such choices were political although this was a politics of a fairly deinstitutionalized sort. This study uses recently opened archives, the press, memoirs and interviews with contemporary observers to examine the relationship between big-time spectator sport and Soviet domestic politics at the height of Stalin's purges.

In 1935, a Moscow soccer team sponsored by the Dukat tobacco company came under the wing of the recently founded Spartak sport society. This new multi-sport club, with branches in the USSR's major cities, was founded by the Party's youth wing (Komsomol) and funded by the retail trades trust (Promkooperatsiia). The team that became Spartak was originally established in 1922 by the four Starostin brothers (Nikolai, Andre, Alexander and Peter) who drew their players and fans from their native Presnia district. The eldest of the Starostins, Nikolai, would continue to lead the team until his death in 1996 at the age of 94.

Early in 1936, the haphazard structure of Soviet soccer was replaced by a professional league, patterned after models that had emerged in capitalist countries. Millions soon flocked to stadiums, and immediately Spartak came to rival what had been the most powerful Soviet side, Dynamo Moscow. Founded in 1923 by the secret police, the teams of the Dynamo sport society were run by the leaders of the NKVD, most infamously after 1936, the soccer-mad Lavrenti Beria. Very quickly, Spartak became the favorite of Moscow's overwhelmingly working class male fans - a fact widely noted in the press and demonstrated by the team's league-leading attendance. Less discussed was why the Starostin's team was so popular. Spartak was beloved because it was the strongest civilian team in Soviet sport. It turned out that few citizens wanted to support the state's organs of repression, nor did they show much love for the club of the Red Army, founded in 1928. Rooting for Spartak became a safe form of resistance to the authorities.

Beria's reaction to the fact that Spartak had come to dominate the new league involved the use of a tactic which can best be described as, "if you can't beat 'em, bust 'em". In 1939, he attempted to have the Starostins arrested on charges of operating a bourgeois sport enterprise. There was some substance to the accusations as Spartak did pay its athletes more generously than did the other clubs. Prime Minister Molotov was not persuaded by Beria's arguments in 1939 and refused to sign the arrest order, but in 1942 Politburo member, Georgi Malenkov did. The brothers were taken to the Lubyanka (secret police headquarters), where they spent two years before being sent off to their various Siberian destinations. There they were met by the local commandants who were so thrilled to have sports celebrities in their camps that they asked the Starostins to coach the local Dynamo teams in the outer reaches of the Soviet minor leagues. They were spared hard labor and allowed to live in their teams' locker rooms rather than the brutal barracks - privileges that surely saved their lives. They remained in camps until 1948 and in exile until 1955 when they returned to Moscow and resumed their careers, leading Spartak to new heights.

I try, in this paper, to set the story of Spartak in the larger context of the history of Soviet popular culture. Through the methods of what has come to be called cultural studies, I evaluate the role of sport in the success or failure of the regime, particularly as Spartak's popularity can tell us much about the workers who were supposed to be the social base of the Bolsheviks before World War II. In particular, I examine the ways Spartak was opposed to Dynamo and practiced a body culture that fostered spontaneity and pleasure as opposed to Dynamo's highly conscious didacticism.