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The Soviet Alternative to Olympism: The Red Sport International, 1921-1937

Using new archival materials, the paper analyzes the failed Soviet attempt to construct a communist alternative to the Olympic movement through the Red Sport International (or Sportintern), the sport arm of the Comintern. Formed in 1921, the Sportintern organized international competitions that were intended to strengthen ties with workers in foreign countries, to influence foreign opinion in favor of the Soviet Union, and to promote “proletarian class war”. The Sportintern also organized festivals and demonstrations in member countries, like the annual International Day of Worker’s Sports. Through the Sportintern, the Soviet Union aimed to create and disseminate a universalist model of “proletarian” physical culture in opposition to the “bourgeois” model that was represented most prominently by Olympism. In trying to define a universal vision of workers’ sport, the Sportintern also came into conflict with the social-democratic sport organization, the Lucerne-based Socialist Workers’ Sport International. The Sportintern suffered from serious organizational problems and was hampered by bureaucratic rivalries with other Soviet organs, but it was nonetheless moderately successful in the 1920s establishing member sections in Europe, the United States, and Latin America with membership in the tens of thousands. By 1937, however, when the Sportintern was secretly dissolved, it had only one active section outside the Soviet Union (in Czechoslovakia). Its ignominious dissolution is surprising in light of the relatively successful Workers’ Olympiad in Antwerp in 1937 and the boycott of the “Hitler Olympics” in 1936, both sponsored jointly by the Sportintern and the Lucerne Sport International. In tracing the shifting patterns of Soviet sport diplomacy, the paper argues that the failure of the Sportintern ultimately resulted from the Soviet decision to abandon its attempts for formulate a genuine alternative to the capitalist or Olympic models of sport. The decision stemmed, in turn, from the militarization of sport that swept Europe and America in the 1930s and more generally from the seductive power of the globalizing culture of modern Western sport.