

# Petr Roubal

# Spartakiads



The Politics of Physical  
Culture in Communist  
Czechoslovakia

## **Spartakiads**

The Politics of Physical Culture in Communist Czechoslovakia

**Petr Roubal**

---

Published by Charles University, Karolinum Press and Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences

Translation by Dan Morgan

Cover and layout by /3. dílna/

Typeset by Karolinum Press, Czech Republic

First English edition

Originally published in Czech as *Československé spartakiády*, Prague: Academia, 2016  
Czech edition reviewed by Michal Kopeček (Institute of Contemporary History, Prague), Muriel Blaive (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague)

© Karolinum Press, 2019

© Institute of Contemporary History, 2019

© Petr Roubal, 2019

Translation © Dan Morgan, 2019

ISBN 978-80-246-3851-5 (Karolinum)

ISBN 978-80-7285-235-2 (Institute of Contemporary History)

ISBN 978-80-246-4366-3 (pdf)

ISBN 978-80-246-4368-7 (epub)

ISBN 978-80-246-4367-0 (mobi)



Charles University  
Karolinum Press 2019

[www.karolinum.cz](http://www.karolinum.cz)  
[ebooks@karolinum.cz](mailto:ebooks@karolinum.cz)



Institute of Contemporary History



# Petr Roubal

## Spartakiads



The Politics of Physical  
Culture in Communist  
Czechoslovakia

**KAROLINUM PRESS / INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY**



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 9

Preface 11

## **A GENEALOGY OF THE SPARTAKIADS 25**

Ideology of the Organicism and Beginnings

of the Mass Gymnastic Performances 30

A Physical *Sonderweg* and the Post-1848 Turner Movement 35

The Turners and the Third Reich 43

The Political Aesthetics of Tyrš's Project 49

Sokol Slets Prior to the First World War 62

Segregation as Emancipation 70

The Mystery of Democracy – Slets during the First Republic 75

Strahov Stadium 80

Transformations in Slet Symbolism 88

The Left and Mass Gymnastics 94

The Communist Party and Sokol after the Second World War:

the Search for a Common Denominator 102

The All-Sokol Slet of 1948 – “Can the People Betray?” 107

## **SYMBOLISM OF THE FIRST SPARTAKIAD IN 1955 127**

Stalinism without Stalin 129

“Socialism Is a Child.” School and Junior Days 135

A New Shift Begins 141

The Unbearable Heaviness of Folklore: Folk Dance

and Spartakiads 152

Sokol Members from the Factories and Offices 158

Performances of the Armed Forces 165

## **SPARTAKIAD SYMBOLISM DURING THE “NORMALIZATION” ERA 173**

Spartakiads with a Human Face 175

“Normalization” Spartakiads as an Image of Social Cohesion	186
Parents and Children Performing Exercises	197
An Amiable Background: Female Performances at Spartakiads during the “Normalization” Era	204
Junior Women and “Buds”	210
Soldiers and the Crisis of Masculinity	214
A Return to Sokol	221

## **THE ORGANIZATION OF SPARTAKIADS 231**

Professional Discourse	235
The “Call to Arms” for the 1st All-State Spartakiad in 1955	252
A Return to a Tried-and-True Practice	261
Spartakiad Five-Year Plans	269
Physical and Ideological Training for the Spartakiad	278
Spartakiad Participants in Prague: Transportation, Accommodation and Food	286
The Disciplinary Space of Strahov Stadium	294
The Budget of Spartakiads in the Moral Economy of State Socialism	309

## **SOCIETY AND SPARTAKIADS 319**

Open Resistance	324
Weapons of the Weak	329
Spartakiad Potlatch	337
An Enthusiastic Reception	348

Conclusion 364

## **APPENDIX 371**

Bibliography	387
List of Illustrations	417
Index	421

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of this book would not have been possible without the support of a number of institutions, colleagues and friends. First and foremost, I would like to thank the Central European University in Budapest for their support. Without the advice and help of my supervisor, István Rév, my research would have undoubtedly remained captive to a Manichean view of the communist past. I would also like to mention the help of others on the Central European University faculty, particularly that of Jiří Musil and Marsha Siefert who generously shared their experiences with me. From a cultural-anthropological perspective, I am most grateful to my mentors from the University of Cambridge, Paul Connerton and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov. No less important was the assistance of the late Henning Eichberg who helped me discover the cultural and political history of the collective movement. Hana Havelková and Libora Oates-Indruchová expanded my limited view of the subject's gender implications. Martin Franc led me to superb resources on everyday life and consumption during the Spartakiads. Also, significantly contributing to my work were the comments and suggestions made by Adéla Gjuričová, Michal Kopeček, Vítězslav Sommer and Tomáš Zahradníček, colleagues from the Institute of Contemporary History. Discussions with Horst Bredekamp, Muriel Blaive and Maja Brkljačić during the early phase of research were also enlightening. Blanka Chocholová and Marek Chochola, who willingly searched the family archive of Václav Chochola and provided his unique photographs, also deserve my gratitude.

Research for this book was supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (GPP410/11/P779), the translation by the Editorial Board of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. The English version of the book was for the most part edited during a research fellowship at Imre Kertesz Kolleg in Jena.



## PREFACE

The concrete structure of the largest stadium in the world sits on a hill in Prague. Every five years from 1955 to 1985, two hundred thousand spectators, including prominent guests such as Tristan Tzara, Fernand Leger, Raul Castro, and Juan Antonio Samaranch, would watch from the stands an enormous mass spectacle unrivaled in magnitude the world over. The actors in this theater were gymnasts whose synchronized movements were meant to create the new language of a new society and provide an answer to the fundamental question of state socialism: What is a socialist people and what is their will?

All six of these spectacles known as “Spartakiads” took up only a few days over the course of the forty years of communist reign, yet we can hardly overstate their significance. Spartakiads were the most important communist ritual that best captured and literally embodied the new regime’s ambition to create a new person and new society – the objective here was nothing less than the embodiment of communism. In 1955, renowned Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval celebrated Spartakiads as a prefiguration of the future communist society: “If a thousand people can on a single command, / a thousand, upon a thousand people, who don’t know each other, / don’t know each others’ names, don’t know, didn’t know each other, / if they can on a single command create a garden patch, / there’s no reason, sister, there’s no reason, brother, / there’s no reason to despair, my friend, my comrade, / over that which gave us our most challenging tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup> The vast funding that the party and state administration was willing to spend on this venture (between a half billion and one billion Czechoslovak crowns of that period for a single Spartakiad) attests to the importance that they attributed to

1 Nezval, Vítězslav: “Sborový zpěv”. *Nový život*, 1955, vol. 7, n. 9, pp. 893–896.

it. Spartakiads were also ambitious art projects bringing together, in a real *Gesamtkunstwerk* spirit, a broad range of artistic spheres: from music and choreography, to film and architecture, to design and literature (along with the aforementioned poet Nezval, other renowned figures taking part in Spartakiad projects included painter and illustrator Karel Svoboda, architect Jiří Křehák, dancer Milča Mayerová, writers Ota Pavel and Arnošt Lustig, and cinematographer Jan Špála).

Spartakiads impacted society's everyday life in a way that no other political ritual, such as elections (voting dates were actually postponed due to Spartakiads) or May Day parades, could compare. Throughout the school year leading up to a Spartakiad performance, a million participants from the ages of twenty months to eighty years would train several times a week, and in Prague schools the school year would end early to accommodate Spartakiads. Scarce goods could be bought in Prague when Spartakiads were being held, though such goods would then understandably be even more difficult to find elsewhere and at other times. Spartakiads rhythmically arranged the lives of many Czechoslovaks, as attested to by the writer Ladislav Fuks who viewed Spartakiads as "milestones of sorts" people who "counted their own lives in terms of Spartakiad years, [...] wondering if they'd live to see the next Spartakiad or even the one after that."<sup>2</sup> People were humming Spartakiad musical hits such as *Poupata* (Buds) for years after the event had ended. They dreamed about Spartakiads, many friendships and romances began at Spartakiads, and even more than one life was conceived there (though not to the extent that the urban myth claimed) and, though rarely, people died there.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the aim of this study to cover all themes opened by the Spartakiads. Instead, four fundamental questions will be examined: Where did Spartakiads as a cultural and political phenomenon

2 Fuks, Ladislav: "O spartakiádě trochu jinak". *Rudé právo*, vol. 60, 2. 7. 1980, p. 5.

3 Dryje, František: "Sen o spartakiádě, 26. 8. 80". *Analogon*, 1996, vol. 8, n. 16, p. 44.

emerge from? What was their core message, or what was being said through Spartakiads? How were their logistics organized? How did the public react to the Spartakiads? The answers to these questions form the individual chapters of this book with the exception of the second question, whose response requires two separate chapters since Spartakiads symbolized one thing for people in the 1950s and something else for people after the Prague Spring of 1968.

The predecessors of Spartakiads, the German *Turnfests* followed by the Sokol *Slets* (in Czech a *sokol* is a falcon and a *slet* is a gathering of falcons), played a crucial role in depicting the imagined community of the German or Czech nation, understood as organic communities (*Volk*). The image of aligned rows of thousands of gymnasts, which we first encounter in German cities in the 1860s, was to compensate for the lack of uniform and deeply rooted national institutions. The further development of mass gymnastic performances, which soon became one of the primary means of political representation regardless of national or political borders, supports the notion that the human body is an ideological variable.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, who later became the first Czechoslovak president, scoffed at members of the Czech Sokol community for their flag-waving Slavism that he felt slavishly imitated the German Turners. That they did so under the leadership of “Sudeten” Germans Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner was yet another point of ridicule. Yet the imitation did not end there. In the hopes of forging “synchronized Slavism” the Czech Sokols spread Turner gymnastics to other Slavic countries. Towards the close of the 19th century, social democrats also seized upon synchronized exercises: instead of the collective body of the nation, its participants displayed class solidarity. Following split in the workers’ sports movement, communist participants also embodied the revolutionary aspirations of the proletariat at the first Spartakiad in 1921. The image of the synchronized movement

4 Hoberman, John M.: *Sport and Political Ideology*. University of Texas, Austin 1984, p. 53.

of male (and since the early 20th century also female) bodies evoked several fundamental political themes that were crucial for both nationalist and leftist movements: the subordination of individual will to collectivity, the aestheticizing of discipline (if it is beautiful, it must also be good), collective will, commitment to defense, faith in the rationalization of society and progress (for instance, the communists adopted Tyrš's motto: "Forward! Not one step back! (*Kupředu, zpátky ni krok!*)".)

The synchronized movements of the participants represented a visual political strategy by which a mass of human bodies creates the image of the nation's or people's single collective political body. The Turner and Sokol adherents certainly were not the first to make use of this impressive metaphor. The title page for Hobbes's *Leviathan* published in 1651 shows a crowned sovereign, whose body consists of a dense mass of individuals of both sexes, towering over the landscape. Having directly contributed to the creation of this image, Hobbes visualized here his social contract theory.<sup>5</sup> The individuals depicted are renouncing the right to live their solitary, miserable, nasty, cruel and short lives in an everyone-for-themselves war, and are forming a single collective political body of the state – a Leviathan. Since the mid-17th century when this political metaphor first appeared, the theme of the transformation of a mass of individuals into a single symbolic body has been incorporated into the repertoire of modern political regimes with a gradual shift in emphasis from the concept of the state to the concept of the nation and people. Spartakiad's representation of the communist proletariat was part of this tradition, but also significantly changed it. The communist "working people", that is to say, had the Janus face of an "obedient sovereign": The people were understandably the highest authority in a people's democracy ("all power belongs to the people"), but

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bredekamp, Horst: *Thomas Hobbes Der Leviathan. Das Urbild des modernen Staates und seine Gegenbilder. 1651–2001*. Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2003.

the decision of to whom, when and why was that of the communist party adhering to Marxist laws of historical development.<sup>6</sup> This theory held that the people themselves are not capable of thinking and acting; the people only know (as in the popular phrase “our people know well”) and they express what is on their mind through publicly articulated consent with the party’s policies. The image of a perfectly disciplined mass of Spartakiad participants, apparently not taking orders from anyone, managed to capture this antithetical nature of the communist people as an “obedient sovereign” much better than other political rituals. *Obrana lidu*, the daily of the Czechoslovak army, wrote that this was how Spartakiads were to demonstrate that the people of Czechoslovakia “stand unwaveringly behind the Communist Party, behind their National Front government, that they enjoy carrying out their bold and elaborate plans.”<sup>7</sup>

The means by which Spartakiads embodied the working people radically changed over the course of communist rule. The first Spartakiad in 1955 presented in its various mass gymnastic pieces the people as a perfect mechanism composed of distinct social and professional groups with a clearly defined task. Participants assumed the symbolic form of workers, farmers or proletarian intelligentsia and only together did they provide a complete testimony about the socialist people. All easily interchangeable symbolic elements formed distinctly defined components of the total mechanism “in our enormous socialist workshop.”<sup>8</sup> The symbolism of the mechanism was explicitly developed by the most successful performance of the first Spartakiad entitled *A New Shift Begins*, at the end of which the participants formed with their bodies the image of several huge turning cogwheels. In contrast to previous Sokol practices, the body and its movements were also subordinate to this mechanical logic.

6 Fielidius, Petr: *Řeč komunistické moci*. Triáda, Prague 1998. The people thus resemble the fish from Emir Kusturica’s film *Arizona Dream*. The people don’t think, the people know.

7 “Krása i zbraň”. *Obrana lidu*, vol. 14, 2. 7. 1955, p. 1.

8 “Květiny bílé po cestě...”. *Rudé právo*, vol. 35, 3. 7. 1955, p. 2.