Petr Roubal

Spartakiads

The Politics of Physical Culture in Communist Czechoslovakia

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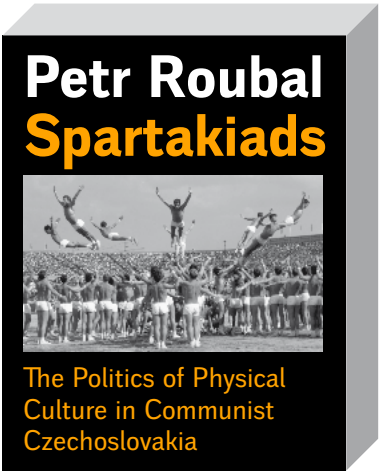

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PREFACE

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."[1] 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 Svolinský, architect Jiří Kroha, dancer Milča Mayerová, writers Ota Pavel and Arnošt Lustig, and cinematographer Jan Špáta).

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."[2] 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.[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] 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

5 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.[6] 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."[7]

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."[8] 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 Fidelius, 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.

The participants' bodies were materials for the creation of various words and symbols; their movement was then intended to depict a wide range of work activities.

In contrast to this, later Spartakiads, especially the three that fell within the "normalization" period, i.e. the consolidation period that followed the Soviet led intervention against the Prague Spring in 1968 and lasted till 1989, largely returned to the Sokol representation of the people as an organism.[9] The symbolic elements were no longer mechanically arranged one after another, but the symbolism of the individual compositions – a happy childhood, the beauty of a woman's body, male courage – together created a firm and self-enveloped "organic" whole. If the symbol of the first Spartakiad consisted of a gear made up of the participants' bodies, the Spartakiads during the normalization period were best encapsulated by parents (mothers) performing mass gymnastic routines with three- to six-year-old children that referred to the "unchanging" world of the nature and family. The mass choreography was also altered: instead of symbols and letters, the participants used their bodies to create simple abstract compositions of regular geometrical formations (one of the creators of the cancelled 1990 Spartakiad even suggested using Piet Mondrian's abstract paintings for the choreography).[10]

These changes did not merely lead to a simple return to the Sokol tradition; the creators and sponsors of normalization Spartakiads also attempted to find the lowest common denominator between the ruling power and the public at large and to eliminate all disruptive elements (e.g. the traditional Soviet flag disappeared from Spartakiads during normalization). It essentially consisted of a strange

9 For a general discussion of the term "normalization" in Eastern Europe see Fulbrook, Mary. "The Concept of "Normalisation" and the GDR in Comparative Perspective." In: Mary Fulbrook (ed.): *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–1979. The "Normalisation of Rule"?* Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford 2009.

10 Belšan, Pavel: "Choreografie a funkce náčiní, nářadí a režijních prostředků ve skladbách ČSS". In: *Sborník ze semináře FTVS UK Praha k problematice hromadných vystoupení Československé spartakiády.* Metasport, Ostrava 1986, p. 56.

type of dialogue in which the side holding all the power tried to find symbols and meanings acceptable for the ritual's consumers. The prevailing view among scholars is that the communist rituals gradually became stale and turned into tedious duty. As explored in the fourth chapter, the Spartakiads' development instead went in the opposite direction, becoming an effective and consensual ritual. Yet their success also raises the question of whether they could still be considered a *communist* ritual.

Considering the scale and complexity of the Spartakiads, another question that arises is how such a spectacle could have been organized by the notoriously inefficient communist bureaucracy. The explanation is not overly complex: despite the assurance of the journal *Literární noviny* that Spartakiads were "not merely an altered form of the Sokol Slets," they were in fact just that.[11] In terms of organization, the Slets and Spartakiads shared a continuity that might even be considered smooth. Spartakiads were held at the Sokol Slet stadium built in 1926 and which more or less remained unchanged from the time of the final Sokol Slet until the 1970s. They followed up on the Sokol routines of simple physical exercises and the organizational network of Sokol clubs. Most importantly much of their success is owed to the professional expertise of former Sokol officials and authors of the mass gymnastic routines for the Slets, whose agenda gradually took over the specialized discourse on mass gymnastics. These individuals saw in state socialism the chance to implement the old slogan "Every Czech a Sokol!" (*Co Čech, to sokol*) through funding and political support that the new regime provided, while another part of the same Sokol subculture was serving long prison terms or seeking a new identity abroad in exile. Though the Communist Party gained a political ritual that legitimized their totalitarian ambitions, it came at the price that it provided or directly created a considerable autonomous space for former Sokol members to decide not

11 Frýd, Norbert: "Jsme bohatší". *Literární noviny,* 1955, vol. 4, n. 28, p. 1.

only highly specialized matters, but also those of a conceptual nature. In addition to the involvement of former Sokol members, the almost absurd generosity of state institutions was responsible for the success of Spartakiads, which became part of the "moral economy" of state socialism, a kind of symbolic exchange of gifts between the Party and the people, whereby less lofty aspects such as financial calculations were disregarded. As the authors Ota Pavel and Arnošt Lustig wrote in 1965, the Spartakiad was "a gift to the republic to commemorate its twentieth anniversary and also a gift by the republic to all of its children."[12]

The general public's reaction to Spartakiads was characterized by a broad pallet of attitudes – from open resistance of those trying to prevent Spartakiads or ridiculing them (e.g., the famous animated filmmaker Jan Švankmajer combined Spartakiad photographs with illustrations from the books of the Marquis de Sade) to enthusiastic acceptance mainly by former Sokol members and their descendents. The most common reaction by far was the attempt to "use" Spartakiads to consume everything that the regime offered in its efforts to organize a successful ritual. Perhaps we could best describe this approach in employing the term *Eigensinn*, or obstinate willfulness, which describes a tactic of the oppressed. Such people tolerate the strategy of the ruling power to the extent that is necessary, but also pursue their own objectives as far as the ruling power allows.[13] Though the party was able, with the help of Sokol specialists, to

12 Lustig, Arnošt – Ota, Pavel: "Úvod, k němuž jsme nechtěli hledat název". In: Vladimír Dobrovodský (ed.): *III. celostátní spartakiáda 1965*. Sportovní a turistické nakladatelství, Prague 1966, unpagin.

13 Alf Lüdtke came up with this term and originally used it to describe the power relations in Prussia in the first half of the 19th century, though he also applied it in his later works to Nazism and communism.. See Lüdtke, Alf: "The Role of State Violence in the Period of Transition to Industrial Capitalism. The Example of Prussia from 1815 to 1848". *Social History*, 1979, vol. 4, n. 2, pp. 175–221; Lüdtke, Alf: *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*. Ergebnisse, Hamburg 1993; Lüdtke, Alf: "'… den Menschen vergessen'? – oder: Das Maß der Sicherheit. Arbeiterverhalten der 1950er Jahre im Blick von MfS, SED, FDGB und staatlichen Leitungen". In: Alf Lüdtke – Peter Becker (eds.): *Akten, Eingaben,*

create a picture of a perfectly "legible and obedient" mass on the field of Strahov Stadium, outside the stadium gates it could only helplessly watch as society appropriated Spartakiads and adapted them to its needs.

In this light, the Spartakiad example backs the theories of Malte Rolf, Karen Petrone and other scholars on Soviet rituals. In their view, Soviet rituals were usually not just boring ceremonies that viewers merely had to endure, but instead resembled folk celebrations or even, as Malte Rolf characterized them, *a rausch* or "a collective frenzy."[14] Soviet society integrated them into its everyday life; the rituals gave structure to the collective memory, experience and expectations along similar lines. There thus occurred a kind of self-sovietization, i.e. an adaptation to the new Soviet worldview with its specific perception of time and space. Society could understand the rituals as meaningful, could actively take part in them and remember and look forward to them, but this did not at all mean that it also assumed the official standards of behavior or the official discourse. Instead, these regime-organized rituals formed a frame that society filled with its own festivity, often based on traditional, religious models. Yet these various forms of adaptation, appropriation and hybridization of a socialistic ritual did not at all weaken, but strengthened them. Their adaptation to society's needs ensured that these official cultural practices penetrated the people's lives.[15]

Nevertheless, Spartakiads occupy a somewhat specific place in terms of society's involvement in socialist rituals. On the one hand it may seem that they created a very insignificant space for

Schaufenster – Die DDR und ihre Texte. Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag. Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1997, pp. 189–222.

14 Rolf, Malte: *Das sowjetische Massenfest*. Hamburger Edition, Hamburg 2006, p. 243; See also Klimó, Árpád – Rolf, Malte: "Rausch und Diktatur". *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 2003, vol. 51, n. 10, pp. 877–895.

15 Binns, Christopher A. P.: "The Changing Face of Power. Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System I., II.". *Man (New Series)*, 1979, vol. 14, n. 4, pp. 585–606; 1980, vol. 15, n. 1, pp. 170–187.

negotiations and non-conformist views. Each gymnast had his precisely defined space and predefined task; his movement could be analyzed and even retroactively corrected. It was a case of either performing the task or failing to: the participant either stood on his mark and performed correctly or he didn't. In fact, the opposite was true. Spartakiads required extensive preparations of relatively stable social groups with their own social dynamics, including rehearsals in Prague that would last several days. Unlike the May Day parades, there was much space outside the performance itself for autonomous forms of celebrations. It could even be said that, more than a hybridization of a ritual, what occurred was a carnival-like inversion of values, as Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin refers to it.[16] The conduct of participants before and after the actual performance could be described as anything but the picture-perfect discipline that the participants' bodies displayed during the mass gymnastic routines. In contrast to other socialist rituals, we also find a certain difference in terms of content. The symbolism of the Spartakiads focused much more than, say, the May Day parades on the human body with its semantic ambivalence and multivalence, which (along with the Sokol connotations) allowed the participants to interpret the ritual how they wished. Spartakiad symbolism enabled the involvement of many people who would have otherwise rejected the communist ritual. Yet this kind of inclusive ritual was the very objective of the political powers.

It should be pointed out here that this study is not a comparison of the Czechoslovak Spartakiad within the broader context of the ritual practices of Eastern Bloc countries. We would find throughout the Eastern Bloc a very similar picture of the synchronization of gymnasts and their use as a specific political medium. From a comparative perspective, perhaps the most interesting would be the Soviet, East German, and Yugoslavia mass-gymnastic performances

16 Bakhtin, Mikhail M.: *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana UP, Bloomington 1984.