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## ETHNIC MINORITIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOVIET SPORT

**Key words:** ethnicity, Soviet sport.

### ABSTRACT

Choosing physical culture and sport in the Soviet Union as a topic often means focusing on elite sport and Soviet participation within the international sport movement or the relationship to and influences on the other former socialist countries in Eastern Europe. Examination of Soviet sport – its system, implementation, role in politics and society and so on – are far from reaching a point which we could call “satisfactory”. Neither Russian nor foreign scholars are using the sources now available in the archives to a sufficient extent and they are also badly neglecting to take advantage of the vast number of contemporary witnesses such as athletes, coaches, judges or officials. In many former Soviet republics research is focusing on “national” – Estonian, Lithuanian, Uzbek, Belarusian, Kyrgyz or even Russian – sport history rather than looking at the subject from the Soviet, i.e. a multinational, point of view. And it is this approach that is chosen in this paper.

The title of this presentation focuses on the ‘big picture’: “Ethnic Minorities and National Identity in Soviet Sport”, although the author herself is aware of the fact that the topic “ethnic minorities in the USSR” itself would occupy considerable time and space. This paper is aimed at giving a general overview on the role of physical culture and sport within the creation and affirmation of the so-called “national identity” in the Soviet Union. The situation in this multinational state was found in contrast to many other examples, especially in present-day middle and Eastern Europe. In the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* the development of a “national” movement of physical culture and sport was not aimed at differentiation, limitation or conscious separation – but rather focused on integrating the many nationalities and ethnic minorities into a *single* Soviet society. Physical culture and sport proved themselves to be valuable means for creating a

multinational collective and developing a shared patriotic ideal.

Soviet patriotism was not included in the agenda of political and propaganda aims until the 1930s. Up to this point Lenin’s call for national self-determination had considered that the process of internationalism and the building of communism would automatically reduce nationalistic tendencies within each republic and nation of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> Even if official policy allowed for the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Alex Pravda, “The evolution of Soviet federalism“, in: Brown, Archie (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/London/New York 1982, p. 303; Erwin Oberländer, “Sowjet-patriotismus und russischer Nationalismus“, in: Kappeler, Andreas (ed.), *Die Russen. Ihr Nationalbewusstsein in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (= Nationalitäten- und Regionalprobleme in Osteuropa, vol. 5),

national groups, and a federal structure was created that provided a basis for their development, the centralistic political system kept a close eye on the Union Republics, and Soviet integration could often not be differentiated from Russification. Comprising more than 100 nationalities grouped in 16 Republics the USSR was the world's largest multinational state. The country itself officially claimed to be the first to have solved the problems of multinationalism.<sup>2</sup> Especially in the first decade of the Union the so-called "national in form, socialist in content" approach was attempted.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, was a completely theoretical claim and the question of nationalities remained one of the most serious problems of the Soviet Union throughout its existence. Until 1934 no nation building process had been implemented in the USSR, as one preferred to speak of 'international spirit' and 'revolutionary idealism' instead.

Stalin's social and economic "revolution" in the 1930s destroyed any attempts of developing national identities and cultures in the republics. After having introduced the concept of "Socialism in One Country" – from the mid-1920s – Stalin's drastic change in politics in 1934 and his 1936 constitution set off a development of Soviet patriotism which was clearly initiated from "above" as an educational concept, rather than a spontaneous emotional appearance.<sup>4</sup> Soviet patriotism could hardly be differentiated from Great Russian nationalism<sup>5</sup> and Stalin's Russification and assimilation hit ethnic minorities and nationalities severely as any kind of rejection – that is a critical or nationalistic comment – was pursued and punished within Stalin's reign of purge and terror. The

directed development of a trans-national Soviet identity and patriotism was of uttermost importance considering the increasing fascist threat and the need for strong spirits and moral during the years of the so-called "Great Patriotic War" – the Second World War. Russification was clearly supported by the decree of institutionalizing the Russian language in all Union Republics.<sup>6</sup> This close identification of Soviet with Russian was one of the constant problems in cultural integration and is still rejected today when, for example, the Russian language is not considered a welcome form of communication in the Baltic region.

Krushchev encouraged a more tolerant political climate, and supported a concept of Soviet patriotism that seemed to be more agreeable to all nationalities and less concentrated on Russian assimilation.<sup>7</sup> The main tenor was focused on the joint achievement of all Soviet people. A leading term of this time was the "Sovetskij narod" – the "Soviet people", which was later officially recognized in the Constitution of 1977.<sup>8</sup> Brezhnev then again affirmed a tight control over the Union Republics, scarcely allowing any signs of nationalist noncompliance. Nevertheless, the ambivalence of Soviet nationality policy at all times called for demands by, for example, the Balts, Georgians, Armenians and Ukrainians for greater economic and cultural autonomy and reduction of Russification.<sup>9</sup> All these tendencies lingered beneath the multinational state and broke loose when *perestroika* started reforming the Soviet Union.

This very brief overview on the development of a national identity and patriotism in the Soviet Union is necessary before taking a closer look at physical culture and sport within this process. Each nationality and especially the ethnic minorities brought some kind of specific physical culture and sport traditions into the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*. There are, for example, various forms of wrestling and boxing in the Ukraine and Caucasus, reindeer-racing among Yakuts or the Chukchi tradition of "tugumga" – wrestling in snow – or

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Markus Verlag, Cologne 1990, p. 83: "Bis 1934 waren alle offiziellen Verlautbarungen von einem durchaus internationalistischen Geist geprägt, die Appelle richteten sich an den revolutionären Idealismus und nicht an Heimatliebe und Patriotismus."

<sup>2</sup> Pravda, "The evolution of Soviet federalism", p. 303.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Pravda, "The evolution of Marxism-Leninism", in: Brown, Archie (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/London/New York 1982, p. 292; Oberländer, "Sowjetpatriotismus", p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> Paul A. Goble, "Sowjetstaat und russischer Nationalismus", in: Keppeler, Andreas (ed.), *Die Russen. Ihr Nationalbewusstsein in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (= Nationalitäten- und Regionalprobleme in Osteuropa, vol. 5), Markus Verlag, Cologne 1990, pp. 91-96; Oberländer, "Sowjetpatriotismus", pp. 83-90.

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<sup>6</sup> Erhard Stöltig, *Eine Weltmacht zerbricht. Nationalitäten und Religionen in der UdSSR*, Eichborn Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1990, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Pravda, "The evolution of Soviet federalism", p. 305.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 304.

Kyrgyz sports such as “Kuresh”, “Enish”, “Alaman-baiga” just to mention a few.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, just as the many nationalities in the Soviet Union varied in their respective cultures as expressed in language, educational system, housing and so on, there was also a large disparity in experience, tradition, goals and achievements in terms of physical culture and sport. Parallel to all other social areas the sport system was also subject to centralisation by the Kremlin power.<sup>11</sup> This meant that existing structures were dissolved and rebuilt, but in vast areas where physical culture and sport had not yet been institutionalised, this system had to be initiated and built up.

As James Riordan points out the early Soviet sport system followed three main goals: defence, health and integration.<sup>12</sup> After the October Revolution all existing clubs were dissolved and their equipment was confiscated by the *Vsevobutsh* – the *Central Board of Universal Military Training*. Physically healthy and strong young men were needed for the Red Army quickly and in vast numbers. Education in health, hygiene and nutrition was the second major goal of the newly found Soviet sport system. These campaigns were to support the “new Soviet” people in everyday questions and help battle drunkenness and uncivilised behaviour especially among rural citizens, and assist spreading more cultivated activities. The third function was integration – sports such as chess, volleyball, soccer, athletics

and many more were “cultivated” in all regions of the USSR and, for example, in 1920 the First Central-Asian Olympiad was organized, involving a large number of people and attempting to organize joint activities which would serve integration aspects.<sup>13</sup> A fourth important function of physical culture and sport developed in the mid/late 1940s was international success of Soviet athletes providing proof for the superiority of the socialist system.

The sport system reflected the ambivalent nationality policy of the Soviet Union quite clearly. On the one hand, people of various nationalities and ethnic minorities were not discouraged to carry out traditional games and competitions. Moreover, these strong traditions were efficiently used, for example, by supplying the Soviet team with talented wrestlers and weightlifters from regions where similar traditions were passed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, physical culture and sport were important means of creating Soviet identity and patriotism. At this point the paper will not focus on international success or achievements but rather on internal structures that clearly convey this tendency.

The first major “invention” was the so-called “GTO”. In 1931 – literally before Stalin started his project of a “Soviet identity” – the GTO national fitness programme, *Gotov k trudu i oborone* (Ready for Labour and Defence),<sup>14</sup> was installed to achieve greater participation in sports, make physical culture a normal feature of “the socialist way of life” and increase knowledge of hygiene, first-aid and health. But in addition, it was also a transnational movement, where the various republics did not compete against each other but rather found a joint activity with joint motifs and goals. And it was further a programme that supported the “Rodina”, the Motherland, the Soviet Union<sup>15</sup> and can therefore be seen as a first step

<sup>10</sup> For a selection of examples see: Muratchan Tanikeev, “Nekotorje Kirgizskie narodnje igrj i vidj sporta” (A few Kyrgyz national games and sports), in: *Teorija i Praktika Fizičeskoj Kul'turj* 16 (1953) 7, pp. 416-420; B. Tshesnokov, “Nazional'nje vidj bor'be” (National forms of fighting), in: *Fizičeskaja Kul'tura i Sport* (1953) 3, p. 32; [author unnamed], “Raszvet sovet-skich nazij” (Blossom of the Soviet Nations), in: *Fizičeskaja Kul'tura i Sport* (1969) 12, pp. 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> For relations between sport and politics in the USSR see: M. Prozumencikov, *Bol'shoj Sport i Bol'shaja Politika*, Moscow 2004.

<sup>12</sup> James Riordan, “The USSR”, in: Riordan, James (ed.), *Sport under Communism. The U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, The G.D.R., China, Cuba*, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, London 1978; further readings: Karl-Heinz Ruffmann, *Sport und Körperkultur in der Sowjetunion*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Nördlingen 1980; Henry W. Morton, *Medaillen nach Plan. Der Sowjetsport* (translated into German by Günter Schlange), Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, Cologne 1963.

<sup>13</sup> James Riordan, “Sport and Recreation”, in: Brown, Archie (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/London/New York 1982, p. 292.

<sup>14</sup> See B.R. Golzcapov, *Istorija fizičeskoj kul'turj n sporta* (History of physical culture and sport), 2nd ed., Akademia, Moscow 2004, pp. 162-166; Riordan, “The USSR”, pp. 25-27; Riordan, “Sport and Recreation”, p. 418.

<sup>15</sup> N.N. Romanov, “K novim uspecham pazvitija fizičeskoj kul'turj i sporta” (Towards new achievements in the development of physical culture and sport), in:

towards creating a Soviet identity. The “Hero of the Soviet Union” award was introduced by Stalin in 1934, which shows the chosen and directed path of Soviet patriotism and identification even more clearly.<sup>16</sup> This honorary title – one of the most prestigious in the USSR – was also awarded to a large number of world class athletes in later years acknowledging their achievements for their socialist home.

The GTO programme clearly fulfilled a highly educational function of propaganda and integration, and was often the subject of statistics declaring how many participants from which region had successfully achieved the GTO standards – a constantly (not surprisingly) increasing number. However, the programme did not leave space for competition, high standard results, performances or an impressive demonstration of friendship and mutual understanding among the many nations. To fulfill these expectations and propaganda goals All-Union Parades for Fizkul’turniki (athletes) were staged in Moscow – on the Red Square, and from 1946 onwards in the Dynamo Stadium.<sup>17</sup> Each Union Republic would carefully prepare for this major event and send a number of their best athletes to Moscow to represent the republic in the parade. In 1945 for example an All-Union Parade was staged on the Red Square to celebrate the victory over fascist Germany. Twenty-five thousand athletes participated in the event to picture the healthy, physical strong youth<sup>18</sup> of the *Union of*

*Soviet Socialist Republics*. Physical culture and sport were not only used to show physical superiority but also a united nation – the Soviet people.

The All-Union parades were the centerpiece of Soviet physical culture and sport up to 1954, when the last such parade was staged in Moscow’s Dynamo stadium. They were to be replaced by a new means of “transnational event”: the “Spartakiads of the Peoples of the USSR”.<sup>19</sup> The Spartakiads were organised at the town, region, district and Republic levels as qualifying contests in order to send the best athletes of each Republic to the finals in Moscow. The Spartakiads were held in the two years preceding the Olympic Games. Each contest within the Spartakiad-Series was a well-publicised event involving a great mass of athletes and *fizkul’turniki* not only in competitions but also in the extraordinary opening celebrations. The “Spartakiads of the Peoples of the USSR” brought the various nationalities and people together in a high standard competition that was to demonstrate not only the multi-national nature of the Soviet Union but also the beauty and high quality of their achievements – the excellence that could only be reached together.<sup>20</sup> Again the increasing numbers of participating athletes went to show the popularising effect it had on sport and physical culture in the USSR. The Spartakiads were clearly developed to demonstrate the multi-national aspect of Soviet society. The festivities surrounding the various levels of Spartakiad competitions were also used for demonstrations of traditional games or forms of physical culture in the different regions of the Soviet Union. The Spartakiads also served as a bridge between the *fizkul’turniki* in mass sports and elite athletes, conveying the feeling that top class athletes were part of the large majority, and that only the mass sport movement made these extraordinary sporting achievements possible.

The Spartakiads again reflected the ambivalent nationality policy: “national in form, socialist in content”. Physical culture and sport also served to transmit transnational codes such as the Soviet crest or the national anthem. In the late 1940s it was declared that all athletes competing in

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*Teorija i Praktika Fizičeskoj Kul’turj* 20 (1957) 11, p. 808.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalinde Sartorti, “Helden des Sozialismus in der Sowjetunion. Zur Einführung”, in: Satjukow, Silke/GRIES, Rainer (eds.), *Sozialistische Helden. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR*, Ch. Links Verlag, Berlin 2002, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. N.N. Romanov, *Trudnje dorogi k Olimpi* (Difficult paths to the Olympus), Fizičeskaja Kul’tura i Sport, Moscow 1987, pp. 35 ff.

<sup>18</sup> In a recent contribution to the journal *The Russian Review* Pat Simpson takes a closer look at the “suntanned, well-built, and trained“ *fizkul’turniki* participating in these parades and demonstrating the “[...] the New Soviet Person, which would combine the physical characteristics of health, strength, and beauty with the mental and moral powers to achieve the highest level of patriotism and *partiinost’* (party-mindedness).” Pat Simpson, “Parading Myths: Imaging the New Soviet Woman on *Fizkul’turik’s* Day, July 1944”, in: *The Russian Review* 63 (2004), p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Romanov, *Trudnje dorogi k Olimpi*, pp. 310 ff.; Romanov, “K novjm uspecham“, pp. 809-810.

<sup>20</sup> [author unnamed], “Zadači fizkul’turnich organizacij v 1956 g.” (The tasks of the physical culture organisations in 1956), in: *Teorija i Praktika Fizičeskoj Kul’turj* 19 (1956) 1, p. 8.

all-union or inter-national (within the USSR) competitions were to wear shirts that either had the name of the trade union or the Republic for which they were competing.<sup>21</sup> Further the opening and winners' ceremony were to have a festive character and the Soviet anthem was to be played regularly at these events.<sup>22</sup> This was implemented on the level of contests within the Soviet Union, for international competitions, athletes were to wear the letters "USSR" with the Soviet crest clearly visible on the front of their shirts – if possible on the left side with heart beating just beneath.<sup>23</sup> The daily newspaper "Sovetskij Sport" made an effort to print only pictures showing athletes in their official sports gear featuring the abbreviation of the Motherland and the crest, to explicitly show that these were genuine Soviet athletes.<sup>24</sup> All these measures were part of the great project of creation of a Soviet identity.<sup>25</sup>

In the many years to come the Soviet sport system would try and find a balance between national traditions and multi-national goals. For example, magazines such as "Fizkul'tura i Sport", "Sport in the USSR" or the sports newspaper would regularly present sporting traditions in Kazakhstan, relatively unknown regions of Siberia or the Baltic, and point out that these traditions had been suppressed in Tsarist Russia and were only to develop in the 'atmosphere of friendship and

mutual understanding so characteristic for the Soviet Union'.<sup>26</sup> The reports generally continued to emphasize that since the October Revolution sports such as chess, basketball, volleyball and so on had developed successfully, women's sports had increased as well as the number of recipients of the GTO badges and the participants at the local and regional Spartakiads. And in any kind of coverage about an athlete his or her place of origin would be always mentioned. The basic tenor here was again: "national in form, socialist in content".

The overview given so far focused on the structures implemented in physical culture and sport to create and strengthen Soviet identity. The practical side did not look quite as sparkling as statistics or the theory. Many republics had major problems in building up a working sport system due to lack of necessary materials. Documents from Russian archives<sup>27</sup> concerning the meetings of the Soviet sports committee often reveal great discrepancies between the set goals and the possibilities to achieve them, leaving the local sports committees complaining about insufficient help in matters of costs, nutrition, infrastructure and so on. Another major conflict occurred when athletes from the republics were "bought" or "drawn away" by Moscow or St. Petersburg clubs.

Two points remain that can only be mentioned very briefly: the first is competition between athletes from different republics, especially from ethnic minorities, to make up, for instance, the Soviet Olympic team. Here again there

<sup>21</sup> Romanov, *Trudnje dorogi k Olimpiu*, p. 300.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 301.

<sup>23</sup> Romanov concludes the discussion on whether to bear the letters 'USSR' on the front or the back of the sports gear as such: "[...] most are of the opinion that the state crest and letters 'USSR' can only be placed on the chest, near the heart, just like a military or labour order." Romanov, *Trudnje dorogi k Olimpiu*, p. 303. He later states: "The state crest and the letters 'USSR' are not only badges on the shirts or jackets as a kind of attribute. The awareness that you are presented with such a great honour must fill the athlete's heart and soul.", p. 303.

<sup>24</sup> "Newspapers – whatever their specialist theme – were explicitly positioned as propaganda sites which offered ideologically correct models to their mass readers through carefully contrived juxtapositions of texts and images. Newspaper photographs were vehicles of Socialist Realism as much as any poster, painting, or monumental sculpture, and unlike these media, photography offered an enhanced credibility to the accompanying texts, through the apparent, direct reference to lived actuality." Simpson, "Parading Myths", p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> As an example see the contribution by G.V. Sicharulidse, Chairman of the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport with the Council of Ministers of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in the journal *Teorija i Praktika Fizičeskoj Kul'turj*. After stating that before the October Revolution sport clubs had not been accessible for workers and only about 200 people were organised in sport clubs, he continues to point out the contemporary achievements: "In a historical short period of time [...] the Georgian people have taken a great step forward together with the other brother republics of the Soviet Union in their economic and cultural development. Great achievements were made by our physical culture organisations." G.V. Sicharulidse, "In the friendship of the family of peoples of the Soviet Union", in: *Teorija i Praktika Fizičeskoj Kul'turj* 35 (1972) 10, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> The GARF – State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow preserves the documents of the former *State Committee for Physical Education and Sport at the Council of Ministers of the USSR*.

are many stories referring to missing equal chances among the peoples of the USSR. For example, a Lithuanian swimmer had to be a lot better and faster than others, especially Russian athletes, to stand a chance of going to international competitions.<sup>28</sup>

The second brief point is that preparing this paper the works by Paul Yogi Mayer<sup>29</sup> and Uri Miller<sup>30</sup> on Jews in international sport were also consulted. Both list Soviet world class athletes of Jewish origin, and mention that it was a difficult task to verify Jewish athletes as many concealed their “nationality” – Jews being a recognized Soviet

nationality – in order to protect themselves from injustice that was and still is common against Jews in Russia. No reports or articles were found in the Soviet sport journals and papers explicitly introducing Jewish sport that would be comparable to other presentations on national traditions. And even if the athlete’s nationality or republic was mentioned, there was no information relating to athletes as “Evrei” (Jew) even though it was a recognized nationality. In this matter one can not speak of “national in form” but only “socialist in content”.

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<sup>28</sup> Information given to the author by a former Soviet athlete and participant of Olympic Games during a conversation at the 9th ISHPES Congress held in Cologne in September 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Yogi Mayer, *Jews and the Olympic Games. Sport: A Springboard for Minorities*, Vallentine Mitchell, London 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Uri Miller, *Sport v istorii Evreev i Evrei v istorii sporta* (Sport and the History of Jews and Jews in the History of Sport), Feniks, Rostov-on-Don 2000.