

# SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF PHYSICAL CULTURE IN THE SOVIET UNION IN THE YEARS 1917–1939

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**Abstract.** The article shows social and political aspects of implementing Soviet ideology-doctrine of physical culture after taking over the rule by communists in Russia and its evolution up to the year 1939. Physical culture, including sports was harnessed into the system of indoctrination of the population, preparation for military service and increased production effort. Sport, which was supposed to serve the working classes, became a tool of propaganda, confrontation with Western Countries and for leading politicians and trainers it became a conveyor belt of power ideology. Against the background of internal and external situation the system of so called socialistic physical culture social sport's phenomenon was shown, which, often against the policy of authorities, remained a way of life, entertainment, and spectacle gathering many fans.

**Key words:** Soviet Union, years 1917–1939, physical culture

## Introduction

It would seem that soviet sport was full and original product of Stalin's regime. And so it was, but only to some extent. Of course in the country where communists took over the rule, consistently, brutally but thoughtlessly material and spiritual traces of tsar's Russia were destroyed. Club sports (bourgeois), established on English patterns, scouting, and Sokol movement, not getting any deeper into details of all the various forms of activity of big city environments, were treated as relicts of the bourgeois past. However, despite the temporary difficulties associated with civil war, strengthening of authorities, with changes of communist policy towards the society and functioning of soviet economy, sport had had already grown such deep roots into the culture of Russian cities that it seemed impossible to eliminate it from life. Especially because the Party propagandists found there immeasurable and boundless exploration areas. There was also no way of resigning of the long years of sport's tradition and scientific achievements which met half way the vital interests of communist government. It might be worth mentioning here the work of Piotr Lesgraft (1837–1909) and Walenty W.W. Goryniewski (1857–1937) (Jakubowska 1959).

The beginning of development of modern sports and gymnastics organizations took place in tsar's Russia in the second half of 19th century. Actually, the process of adaptation of West European patterns took place along with the development of sports among the population of Polish towns. The first club was established in 1860 in Petersburg. It was St. Petersburg River Yacht Club, whose members came from bourgeois and gentry environment and which started organizing sailing and rowing races. In 1867 another River Yacht Club was established in Moscow. Soon rowing and sailing clubs were established in other Russian towns on the rivers Wolga, Dniepr, Black Sea and Baltic coasts. At the end of 19th century there were more than forty and in 1898 they formed Whole Russian Rowing and Sailing Association of Societies and Clubs (Samoukow 1964).

Since the beginning of the sixties of 19th century gymnastics enterprises have started to form and tennis has started to develop, and since the eighties of 19th century the Sokol movement, which gained pattern from the Friedrich Jahn system of gymnastics movement and Czech "Sokol", has gained its popularity. In 1860 in Petersburg Circle of Lawn – Tennis and Cricket "Neva" and in 1868 St. Petersburg Tennis and Cricket were organized. Soon, special interest groups and places to play tennis were established, among other places, in Moscow, Rostow on the Don, Kiev and Odessa. In 1864 in Petersburg the first Skating Club in Russia was organized, and in 1865 Circle of Followers of Skating, based on the Yacht Club, emerged and was later changed into association. Its member Aleksiej Lebediew successfully took part in international as well as domestic skating competitions in the eighties. Since 1887 the era of Aleksander H. Panszyn (Grys 1980), the leading Russian skater, had started. In the nineties of this century skating clubs and special interest groups, as well as other sports clubs emerged in many towns in Russia. In 1889 the first championships in speed skating were played. At the time skaters, as well as cyclists, fencers and ballplayers, who won in domestic as well as in international rivalry became first sportsmen heroes of Russia.

In the eighties of 19th century cycling and organized cycling races became very popular. In the last decade of 19th century in urban environment in Russia, mainly in Petersburg, Moscow, Charkow, Kiev, Odessa, Riga many sports organizations such as skaters, cyclists, athletics, heavy athletics, footballers, ice skaters, skiers, and gymnastics organizations appear. The first football match was played in 1892 in Petersburg. In this city, in 1897, the first football club "Victoria" was established and in 1901 a local league started (Suchotin 1970).

At the beginning of 20th century the fastest growing organization was the Gymnastics Association called "Sokol", which along with scouts' teams (since 1910) had the biggest impact on urban youths' environment. As for team sports, the most popular was football, which became the favourite form of entertainment for people living in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Odessa. The footballers played for the first time at the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912. Of course, winter sports such as skating, skiing and, a little less, hockey on ice gained a special meaning. Traditionally wrestling, weight lifting and boxing were developed. There was also a considerable animation in athletics and swimming. The increased sports activity contributed to further forming of organizational structures and confrontation of the represented level in number of competitions and championships. The measure of popularity, commonness of sports, and also of the achieved results was the presence of Russian players at the Olympic Games in London in 1908 and next in Stockholm in 1912. The best achievements resulted in mobilizing of sporting environments organization of the First All-Russian Olympics in Kiev (1913) and the Second Whole-Russian Olympic in Riga (1914) played only days before the First World War broke out.

## Results of the research

The October Revolution meant the end of the old Russia. Along with taking over the rule by the communists the society was gradually taken into new direction set earlier by the ideologues of the new system. In many cases those were previously prepared concepts. However, it was soon found out that theories built in the minds of pseudo philosophers were not suitable for being used for long on living, social organism. The world of fiction was mixed with the real world generating several nonsense. The ideology of the system eroded with time. Its evolution was necessary or at least periodical decreasing of the intensity of indoctrination of the society.

There was also a similar problem concerning physical culture, which immediately became one of the pillars of communist propaganda, politics and an element of specifically understood legitimacy of the authorities. This was of course nothing new. The same goals and forms characterized the physical culture in the tsar's policy. Creating official ideas of the workers and farmers country it was necessary to reach for the works of socialist utopian philosophers Marks and Engels, who justified and foretold historical changes, leading by revolutionary road to the emergence of society of "working masses" without classes (Młodzikowski 1984). Because the opinions of educators, defining the directions of general education and physical education, were gaining more and more popularity the "progressive" idea created a base for socialistic physical culture in Soviet Russia. Beside an extensive theoretical legacy, propagandists had access to the West European experience of workers' sports development, especially in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Laskiewicz 1966, 1968).

Physical culture was indissoluble part of human culture, it was supposed to become a common value. Those were very significant slogans. It does not escape our attention that wide possibilities of the impact were supposed to be accessible only to the "working masses". Basically only urban ones, because of cultural, social and economic considerations, rural regions were at the time cut from sports, recreation and school physical activity. The official policy of the authorities was full of in consequence. On the way to create classless and socialistic society, according to the demagogy dialectic, communist ideas were left behind and barriers were deepened not only between nations closed in one, intolerant country but also between different environments and social levels ("classes").

From the very beginning, as mentioned above, the Soviet authority benefited from Tsar's Russia physical culture and policy experience output. Physical culture was harnessed into the system of society indoctrination, preparation to fulfill the needs of communist country production work and military mobilization. In each totalitarian political system domestic economy was transformed into arms production and human potential was used in the process of militarization. Its inefficiency resulted in using constraint and so called militarization of work, which consisted of using penalties of state of war for workers going on strike, those avoiding work and late workers (Smaga 1992). According to decisions of the 7th Convention of Party in March 1918 The Council of People's Commissars on April 8 adopted the resolution concerning the organization of territorial military stations. They were supposed to take care of military cadet corps of "working masses" of Soviet Russian Federation Republic on April 22, 1918 pursuant to Decree of All-Russian Central Committee of Workers Farmers and Army, which of course carried out orders of the Bolsheviks, military cadet corps became obligatory. Wsiewobucz, that is Main Office of Adoption of Red Army Reserves was established to control this. Preparation involved groups of recruits (aged 18–40) and pre military (aged 16–18). The organ of People's Office of Education with the help of Wsiewobucz was supposed to take care of school youths education (Czudinow 1959). Speedy creation of regular army was dictated by the pressure of rebellion of Czechoslovakian prisoners of war. The fact of imposing the obligation of education has shown that citizens were under full control and differentiated society as town and country "working people" and a category of

class strangers that is “enemies of the people”, who were not allowed to enter cadet corps. This category included owners of small producing plants, craftsmen, merchants, intelligentsia, rich farmers, that is all those who soon became objects of political persecution. Society mobilization limited its freedom, strengthened communists' power and made it impossible for the undecided to cross the anti-communist power. The need to prepare the directing staff for Wsiewobucz forced the organization of proper courses. In August 1919 Central Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow and in October of the same year the Institute of Physical Culture in Leningrad were established (Jakubowska 1959).

The first turning point of authorities' policy towards the matters of physical culture was establishing the Main Council for Physical Culture attached to Council of Peoples Commissars in 1923, which at the same time deprived the army of power of governing the sport. The process of establishing organizational frames of Soviet physical culture has started but not without clashing of views. Demands were put forward by Wsiewobucz and Komsomol (Laskiewicz 1967). All organizations defined as „bourgeois”, operating before The October Revolution, were disbanded. The First All-Union Festival of Physical Culture took place in Moscow in September 1923, the First Festival of Physical Culture All-Union-Council of Workers Association in 1925. In 1928 in Moscow the first summer workers athletic meeting was organized with guests from abroad (Laskiewicz 1973).

“The world of sport” became the representation of the “world of work” and was placed next to so called voluntary sports association, subject to the unions. It was not only the result of ideological reasons but also financial and organization ones. Along with the already operating association “Dynamo” (since 1923) many other association emerged: in 1935 – the sporting association of craftsmen cooperative “Spartak” and in 1936 another one – “Torpedo” (workers union of car industry), “Krylia Sowietow” (workers union of aviation industry), “Piszczewik” (workers union of the consumption industry), “Wodnik” (workers union of river and sea transport), “Bolszewik” (workers union of education institutions), “Zenit” (workers union of army devices and ammunition industry), “Lokomotiw” (workers union of USSR railway workers) and others (Encyklopedyczny słownik... 1961). Those were social organizations of sports movement of “city and village working masses”. However, in the republics where population was rather small usually only one sports association was established and it usually cooperated with enterprises and territorial authorities. Basic cell of the soviet physical culture mass movement became a sports circle within enterprise (Makarcew 1954). Its foundation was the badge called Ready for Work and Defense (GTO) established in 1931, officially as a result of Komsomol application. It included a set of norms to meet from specified sports competitions. In 1932 a second level of this badge was established and in 1934 a badge for children Be Ready for Work and Defense (BGTO) appeared. In 1934 a title of “Meritorious Master of Sport” and a badge “USSR Alpinist” were established. In 1936 a supreme state instance of physical culture – All-Union Committee of Physical Culture was founded. It meant a final creation of organizational forms of physical culture and sport in Soviet Union. The thirties were very special in the development of competitive sports and increasing their level. It was connected with so called Great Backward Trend, that is with a change in policy towards society and propagandist campaign showing the future “era of abundance”. Parks of culture and recreation were built, “mass” entertainment was organized, and sports were financed in a wider range (Fitzpatrick 2012). Further development of culture and spectacular benefits of sports in the gray reality of Soviet everyday life probably overlapped it. The stars of sports fields and running tracks stood in one line with the heroes of Soviet Russia, work heroes, fliers and polar explorers in the race to win with the West, and in the future maybe to defend their country. By the way, it might have been one of the most attractive benefits of playing sports, leading

athletes (and whole teams) benefited from the care of party elites and had access to goods unavailable for ordinary people.

Soviet Union, despite the external isolation (and of course internal limitation of population), used sport for propagandist actions, invigilation of socialistic and communist environments of Western Europe and intelligence activities. The Red Sports International (RSI) established in July 1921 (Kalpus and Rejsnier 1924; Laskiewicz 1961; Żołdak 1962) was used for this purpose. Meetings were organized with workers representations from Finland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, France and Norway.

## Conclusions

The organizational structure of soviet sport gradually changed as the internal situation was getting under control, and next, along with transformation of the governing system and civilization changes. "The Word of Sports" became, just as all other sides of life, subordinate to the central, state management. Without penetrating further into social awareness, morals and Russian culture it must be said that the philosophy of power and mechanisms of control over the society did not differ from the tsar's "samodzierzawie". The rhetoric changed, terror and invigilation increased, indoctrination of society was organized. The abuse of power was either the result of greed or the need to fulfill party obligations. Standards of new "elites", often crude, poorly educated urban groups of poor (usually of rural origin) or even social and criminal margin. Coercion became the general rule of governance, and fear induced among inhabitants became its foundation. Moreover, in Russian society lacking stable national and citizen ties it was the only way to keep the country strong and powerful, which was the main goal of communist leaders (Pipes 2012).

In the whole discussed period sport, contrary to primary intentions of authorities, was a social phenomenon of urban societies. In the society, where interpersonal ties were effectively destroyed, it became one of the few entertainments in Stalin's era of dullness and hopelessness. It soon gained applause among local party elites, highlighting local the particularisms. Participation in sports events triggered emotions and reactions which were unthinkable in everyday life.

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