1. Introduction

The mass gymnastic events, called Spartakiads, were the most important festival in post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia. From 1955 till 1985, they were organised every fifth year, with an exception in 1970, when the event was cancelled after the Soviet invasion. They were hierarchically divided into local, district and regional levels, involving up to two million Czechoslovak citizens, most of which were children and students. The event culminated in the Strahov Stadium, the world’s largest sports stadium: About 10,000 gymnasts, with occasionally up to four times as many, displayed for ten to twenty minutes synchronous gymnastic performances. These kinds of festival were not only gigantic but also quite expensive, with an estimated budget of almost a billion Czechoslovak Crowns each. The following article focusses on following aspects of the Spartakiads. It aims to highlight their didactic dimension, showing them both as a specific regime’s project and its...
function as a live experience, as well as touching upon the question of comparability of this kind of display in different dictatorial regimes and trying to find traces of cultural transfer between them.

Mass gymnastic display in stadiums became one of the key tools of political representation in dictatorial regimes ranging from Fascist Italy to present day Turkmenistan. The synchronous movement of gymnasts in a stadium literally embodied a visual answer to two intertwined political and aesthetic concerns dominant during the 1920s: First, the crisis of representational democracy, and second, the crisis of traditional theatre. In these displays the stadium had functions comparable to a film in which, as Benjamin suggests, the masses could see themselves without mediation. Unlike in theatre, the masses could enter the stage, and unlike in parliament, they could come into visually unmediated contact with themselves and their leader. This aspect of the unmediated self-representation of the masses seems to make these types of festivities «dictatorial». In the scholarship of liberal tradition these regimes compensated their «lack of legitimacy», here a lack of democratic institutions and elections, with these festivals. On the contrary, the regimes themselves did not perceive their policy in terms of «lack» but as an advantage, judging their celebratory style as the right answer to the perceived weakness of liberal regimes and their failure to respond to the emotional needs of their subjects. In contrast to other forms of festivities such as marches or parades, mass gymnastic displays have an added advantage for dictatorial regimes in their highly regimented and static form. Here the mass witnesses its own transformation into a highly disciplined and docile collectivity.

7 See Handelsman’s useful, if terminologically somewhat unfortunate distinction between modelling, presenting, and representing public events, in which he assigns the same role to both Nazi Nuremberg Rallies and Soviet parades: to present unequivocally, without any dialogue or dissonance of the society itself. D. Handelman, Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events (Cambridge, 1990). The various figurations of masses are most famously treated by E. Canetti, Crowds and Power (New York, 1962). The synchronised movement as trans-historical phenomena is discussed in a somehow overgeneralised way in W. H. McNeill, Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History (Cambridge/Mass., 1995). S. Sontag pointed out at the formal similarity of the synchronised mass movements under Nazism and Communism, noting however differences in their respective aspirations for utopian aesthetics and utopian morality, S. Sontag, Under the Sign of Saturn (New York, 1991). Mass rituals as means to refigure the Stalinist public sphere is discussed in M. Rolf, «Feste der Einheit und Schauspiele der Partizipation. Die Inszenierung von Öffentlichkeit in der Sowjetunion um 1930», Jahrbücher für ᅠ
Post-Stalinist displays, of which the Czechoslovak Spartakiads were the most spectacular example, however differ rather sharply from the way the interwar dictatorial regimes including Nazism and Stalinism designed the formations of bodies in stadiums. The main concern of post-Stalinist organisers of mass gymnastic displays was no longer the visualisation of the relationship between leader and masses, but rather a didactic project in which the masses would transform themselves «spontaneously» into a new synchronised and disciplined form. They were supposed to express the contradictory principle of communist ideology, seeing the masses simultaneously as both a sovereign and as a docile subject caring for the party. In addition, Czechoslovakia, just like the other satellite countries, had to visualise yet another contradiction of its own sovereignty and full dependence on the Soviet Union.

2. Cultural Transfer of Ritual Know-How

It is almost impossible to compare the festival styles of different dictatorial regimes as isolated units. Mass gymnastic performances were designed and organised by highly specialised professionals who actively sought inspiration and examples abroad and thus constituting a semi-formal international network of ritual specialists. Historically, mass gymnastic performances were a field in which cultural transfer was a rule rather than an exception. As a specific cultural practice, mass gymnastic performances (or Massenfreiübungen) emerged from the 1860’s festivities of the German movement, the so-called Turnfeste (Coburg 1860, Berlin 1861, Leipzig 1863). The synchronised movement of gymnasts represented a fusion of theatrical elements present in the Turner (gymnast) movement since Jahns’ radical beginnings of the militarization of physical education in the German school system. Mass gymnastic displays became not only the central feature of the German Turnfeste throughout their 150 year long history but also a specific central European genre of political representation. The synchronised movement of a male gymnast started to represent the ideal national community which was to be strong, virile, united, and, well synchronised. Once the model of visual political representation through mass gymnastics was developed, it was, to quote Anderson, «available for pirating.» In comparison with other types of piracy in the waters of nationalism, gymnastic piracy was facilitated by the specific nature of the medium of the festival – the human body. The symbolism of the human body was far more


accessible to designers from other national communities than any other form of verbal or visual mobilisation techniques.

The activity of the German community in Prague was essential for the transfer of mass gymnastic performances into the Czech Lands. Based on the experiences of the Leipzig gymnastic club, in 1861 the local German trainers prepared the establishment of the Prager Männer Turnverein which should have originally represented both national communities.\(^\text{10}\) Even before the Prague Male Gymnastic Club was founded, it split into independent German and Czech movements. Despite the fact that the Czech gymnastic movement, called Sokol (falcon), stood in sharp opposition to its German counterpart, its practice was based on the by then classical work Die deutsche Turnkunst by Jahn and Eiselen, as well as several later works of A. Spiesse.\(^\text{11}\) In designing their festivities, called Slets (the flocking of birds), the Sokol movement used the direct experiences of the German Turnfeste where its members were frequent, if sometimes unwelcome guests\(^\text{12}\) and systematic materials, presented in the official journal of German gymnastic movement Deutsche Turn-Zeitung, published since 1856. As a result, Czech Slets showed identical structures with the German Turnfeste: the greeting of arriving gymnasts at the main station(s) with particular emphasis on foreign guests, the parade of gymnasts through the city leading usually from the historical centre to the (proto) stadium, the culmination of rituals in mass gymnastic displays of separate age and gender groups, and the commemoration of the respective founders of the movements. This dependence on the German pattern, commented Thomas G. Masaryk wryly in his Czech Question, illustrated the futility of the «beer-hall patriotism» of the Young Czech Party:

«[… ] with such Slavism and Czechism, it is no wonder that they took over the German ideas and national institutions. The Sokol can serve as best example: a purely German concept transferred to us by an ethnic German and decked out with national eclectics.»\(^\text{13}\)

This by Masaryk titled «ethnic German» was the founder of the Czech Sokol, Miroslav Tyrš\(^\text{14}\) whose father was German and possibly also the Sokol co-founder Jindřich (Heinrich) Fügner, a German with strong pro-Czech sympathies and a weak command of Czech. Later on, when the Sokol movement became one of the pillars of his new interwar regime, Masaryk regretted this comment.

\(^{10}\) M. Waic, Sokol v české společnosti 1862–1938 (Prague, 1996), 12.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{14}\) Friedrich Tirsch or Bedřich Tirsch or Tirš or Tyrš.
Just as the German Turnfeste were used as a model for the Czech gymnastic Slets, so were these Slets used to form the pattern of bodily culture throughout Slavonic Eastern Europe. \(^{15}\) Whereas the former cultural transfer had the character of a hostile take-over, the latter was rather a form of gymnastic geopolitics. The Czech Sokol movement used its festivals extensively to spread the «Sokol idea» and create a pan-Slavonic gymnastic movement. Tyrš saw the task of the Czech Sokol to be a «shining model and leader to our brothers» \(^{16}\) when striving for the creation of «a new race, harder than its predecessors, which, in a strong body with a strong will, will once again unite the dovelike meekness of the Slav with the falconlike boldness of more glorious times.» \(^{17}\) From the early 1860s on, Sokol movements were established throughout Eastern Europe (1863 Ljubljana, 1866 L’viv, 1874 Zagreb etc.), a process in which Czech Sokols gave a model or were even more often their direct initiator, sending its instructors to head new formed clubs. The Prague Slets strengthened existing links with these movements, spread innovations in gymnastic practice and replicated themselves in numerous local gymnastic Slets. Each of the Prague Slets was visited by hundreds of guests from Slavonic countries (1,600 at the 1907 Prague Slet), who sometimes joined in the exercises, creating the illusion of a «synchronised» Slavonic community. On the other hand, the Czech Sokols visited the Slets of newly established Sokol movements in Slavonic countries, for instance in 1904, when the delegation of 365 Czech gymnasts outnumbered the 215 Slovenes and 60 Croats at the Slet of the Slovene Sokol in Ljubljana. \(^{18}\) As a political project, this «Synchronised Slavdom» was truly an illusion and the Prague Sokol Slets made the sharp differences between the single Slavonic national communities only more visible – at the 1912 First All-Slavic Slet conflicts took place between Poles and Ruthenians, Poles and Russians, Serbs and Bulgarians, etc. \(^{19}\) The failure of the political project of «Synchronised Slavdom» changed nothing in the fact that a specific type of political ritual and cultural practice was established throughout Eastern Europe and served as a basis for the celebratory style of many dictatorial regimes of the 20th century.

As the human body is an «ideological variable», \(^{20}\) the practice of mass gymnastic displays crossed the national boundaries and ideological divides easily. The established model of German Turnfeste was pirated not only by other emerging


\(^{16}\) Nolte, Sokol, 98.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{18}\) Nolte, Sokol, 165. See also W. Kessler, «Der Sokol in den jugoslawischen Gebieten (1863–1904)», in Blecking, Sokolbewegung, 203.

\(^{19}\) Nolte, Sokol, 175.

\(^{20}\) J. M. Hoberm an, Sport and Political Ideology (Austin/Tex., 1984), 53.
national movements but also by competing political streams. Initially, the social democratic leadership was hesitant about which role to give to sports in general and suspicious of ritualised gymnastic events in particular.\footnote{For the development of social democratic parties towards worker sport see A. Krüger and J. Riordan, The Story of Worker Sport (Champaign/Ill., 1996), though the only substantial reference to the Czech context is the poster for the 1934 Third Workers Olympiad by the leading Czech designer Ladislav Sutnar displayed on the cover.} A Czech Marxist literary critic, Ladislav Štoll, commented the 1932 Prague Sokol Slet as following «Prague will witness once again a great patriotic manifestation, the parade of thousands of healthy gymnasts disciplined in military fashion will charm the crowd of spectators. The passing illusion of mechanically perfect performance, the working of the healthy muscles, thrilling rhythm of unison marching bodies framed by the coloured paper will fill the heads of the spectators and mask for some time the reality of anarchy and class struggle in society.»\footnote{L. Štoll, Politický smysl sokolství (Prague, 1932), 5 quoted in Macura, «Spartakiáda», 69.}

Nevertheless the Social Democrats soon discovered that the symbolic potential of the co-ordinated mass movement of (male) bodies was too tempting to be left to the right. Shortly after World War I the left-wing gymnastic associations staged a number of festivals modelled upon the example of the German Turnfeste, the biggest of them being the I. Deutsches Arbeiter-Turn- und Sportfest 1922 in Leipzig with more than 100,000 active participants. A year before, Prague witnessed two competing gymnastic festivals, The First Workers Olympiad (Social Democrats)\footnote{For the Workers’ Olympiads see J. Riordan, «The Workers’ Olympics», in Five Ring Circus. Money, Power and Politics at the Olympic Games, ed. A. Tomlinson and G. Whannel, (Sydney, 1984), 98 –112.} and The First Workers Spartakiad (Communist), which occurred not only on the same date but who also had identical displays as the gymnasts originally trained for a common display to show the unity of the working class. As George Mosse noted, the left wing gymnasts shared the «impetus toward cult and ritual which seemed to be built into German gymnastics, whether directed toward national regeneration or social justice.»\footnote{G. L. Mosse, The Nationalisation of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich (New York, 1975), 134. Certain differences resulting from a less rigid approach to body culture were however visible at the Leipzig event concerning namely the participation of women (for the first time, women took part in all the gymnastic activities), nakedness (the display of «Nackttturnen» – gymnastics in swim-suits) and wider inclusions of competitive sports, see Rodekamp, Sport, 23.} 

Under communism, mass gymnastic displays remained a field of vivid cultural transfers, though the flow of information was framed by the process of sovietisation, which also informed the selective use of established gymnastic traditions. For the Czechoslovak organisers of the mass gymnastic displays the major sources of inspiration were the local tradition of Sokol Slets, which on the ideological level could be to some extent incorporated into the narrative of «pro-
gressive sporting traditions» and, on a more practical level, served as irreplaceable source of cadres. Nearly half of the organisers of the 1955 Spartakiad gained their organisational experience from the 1948 and previous Slets. Though the former Sokols failed to reach the very top of the organisational structure, they played a key role in the process of designing and training for the displays. The personal continuity goes even beyond communism, Jiří Zížka for instance designed a performance for the 1948 Slet, led the training for the 1965 Spartakiad, headed the short lived renewed Sokol movement in 1968, led the Spartakiad design committee during the «normalisation» period, and became the executive head of the renewed Sokol movement after 1989. In contrast with Czechoslovak Spartakiad organisers, their GDR colleagues had to deal with far more difficult challenges. They had to cope with the Nazi celebratory style in general and in particular with established patterns of Nazi mass gymnastic displays – the Turnfest in Stuttgart (1933) and Breslau (1938). Though the number of former members of NSDAP among the ranks of organisers of the GDR Turnfest was fairly high, there was a conscious attempt to avoid any symbolic resemblance to the Nazi displays which thus served as a negative inspirational source. The main step in the symbolic emancipation from the Nazi past was the allocation of the future Turnfest to Leipzig, which was the centre of the interwar left wing gymnastic movement. The decision to build a completely new stadium might have been also motivated by the desire to establish «uncontaminated» sacred ground for the mass gymnastic displays, but in reality it followed the unrealised plans of the Adolf-Hitler-Sportfeld Leipzig by Werner March, the designer of the Berlin Olympic Stadium very closely. Though the organisers of the Czechoslovak Spartakiads were far less concerned with parallels to Nazi parades, here one can also observe certain carefulness and hesitations when using symbols and stage effects associated with Nazism, particularly the avoidance of symbolism of lightness and darkness or the mythology of fire and death.

25 J. Šterc, Československé spartakiády. Nejmasovější projektnašitělesnévýchovy (Prague, 1975), 62, the author of the publication was also a former Sokol Slet organiser.
28 The GDR Turnfest organisers’ past was carefully monitored in the so called Kaderspiegel, which in 1956 for instance revealed that there were as many former NSDAP members among them as there were SPD and KPD former members together. «Einsatz von Mitarbeitern zur Vorbe reitung und Durchführung der II. DTSF», Organisationsbüro II DTSF, SAMPO DYT 12/ 2206, Bundesarchiv.
In contrast, the impact of the Soviet celebratory style was direct and the use of «Soviet experiences» was openly admitted. Due possibly to the insecurity vis-à-vis their Nazi predecessors, the dependence on the Soviet pattern was far bigger in the GDR than in Czechoslovakia. It is most visible in the practice of transforming part of the stadium’s tribune into a «background» creating slogans and symbols with the spectator-participants. This element became one of the key features of the GDR Turnfest but was never used at the Czechoslovak Spartakiads. This travesty of avant-garde dreams about the spectators’ fusion with the actors was directly borrowed from Soviet sport festivals. According to Heinz Spitzbarth, the main designer of these placard sections in the 1980s, this practice was brought to the GDR by the leading figure of GDR physical education, Erich Riedeberger. He was stunned by one of these displays witnessed in Moscow in 1955 and returned determined to test it at the newly built stadium in Leipzig. The practice transformed gradually from a «background» at the display on the Leipzig Centralstadium’s sporting field into the main feature of the GDR Turnfest. It seems, however, that the origins of the these displays in the Soviet Union itself were not a result of cultural transfer, even though the idea of making inscriptions with spectators was previously used both in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The main theoretician and chronicler of the Soviet sport festivals, Mikhail D. Segal, describes the evolution of the «inscriptions» as being a result of a practical difficulty caused by the fact that the «spectators dressed according to their own individual choice and taste» and thus «disturbed the over-all visual composition», a problem only realised when the Parad Fizkul’turnikov was moved from the Red Square to the Dynamo Stadium in 1946. It was only a small step from unifying the spectators’ clothing into turning them into signs and symbols, reversing thus the biblical «the Word became flesh».

Despite the fact that there was no practice of «inscriptions» on stadiums’ tribunes at Czechoslovak Spartakiads, the impact of the «soviet experiences» was particularly strong during the 1950s and early ’60s. Like all other fields of Czechoslovak public life, physical education also got sovietised. A unified state controlled institution was created that supervised the newly established Voluntary Sport Organisations; all sporting activities were instrumentalised through the local variant of the sporting badge «Ready for Work and Defence of the Home-

32 M. D. Segal, Fizkul’turnye prazdniki i zrelishcha (Moscow, 1977), 20–21.
land». However, the logic of the mass gymnastic displays and their stress on the beauty of human movement somehow ran contrary to these instrumental, record oriented goals. Though the symbolism of the first two Spartakiads in 1955 and 1960 bore many marks of Soviet influences – human pyramids, soviet marching style, use of extra-corporal elements at the performances (flags, pigeons or tanks), socialist realism design of the stadium – after the 1965 Spartakiad, the organisers tried to avoid direct borrowings from Soviet celebratory style, but let themselves inspire by the Sokol tradition. The Czechoslovakian sport historians also started to stress that the cultural transfer had originally worked in the opposite direction, with Czech gymnastic instructors playing an important, and even dominant, role in the development of Tsarist and Soviet sport. In fact, the importance of the Sokol performances as well as Czechoslovak Spartakiads in modelling the Soviet mass gymnastic displays is acknowledged in Segal’s work mentioned above. Parallel to this emancipatory effort, the organisers also sought to export their specialised knowledge to other socialist countries whether or not they were part of the Soviet Bloc. The Czechoslovak Sport Union for instance hosted an international conference on the subject of mass gymnastic performances in 1975 with some 40 foreign guests and inspired a similar event in Warsaw one year later. The organisers also practised a kind of «gymnastic colonialism», providing several «friendly» African leaderships with instructors and designs for mass gymnastic displays. For instance, the Czechoslovak Spartakiad organisers prepared «A plan of the large mass performance, which will take place to honour the tenth Anniversary of the founding of CCM (Chama cha Mapinduzi, the Revolutionary party of Tanzania).» The displays of more than 8,000 young gymnasts performing to the beat of ngoma drummers should symbolise «the successes in building up the nation on the bases of socialism and self-sufficiency.»

36 Segal, Prazdniki, 22.
3. Mass Gymnastic Displays as Didactic Project

When considering the mass gymnastic displays as didactic projects, they were characterised by an important duality – they were both a journey and a goal at the same time; both on the way there and already there. On the one hand the performances were a tool to redesign the individual into a new socialist man. On the other hand they served as a representation of the already transformed subject. The duality of the ritual reflects the duality of the term «the people», or more precisely, the socialist variant of the term «the working people». According to socialist Czechoslovakia’s constitution, «the working people» were the sovereign to whom all the power belonged, but was only given as a result of the care by the party which guards the people’s consciousness, corrects their mistakes, cares for their well-being, and leads them to communism. But most important was the fact that the party, due to its knowledge of the inevitable laws of historical development, was able to define the very content of the term «the working people», and to decide on the crucial question who does and who does not belong to this category. It was the task of the mass gymnastic displays to visualise, literally to embody, this nearly mystical relation between the party and «the working people». One way of looking at these displays is therefore to see them as an enactment of the birth myth of the free «working people»: whereas the subjects needed to be transformed through discipline during the training and the preparations for the displays, at the displays themselves, the fully communist «working people» were presented. This process was repeated with each new Spartakiad, every fifth year. The mystical, phoenix-like character of this enactment was reflected in contemporary discourse. The main ideologist of the Spartakiad in the fifties, Vilém Mucha, points out at the parallels between a pregnancy and the Spartakiad preparations: «from September 1954 (when the training start[ed P.R.]) till June 1955 [the final performer P. R.] it is just nine months – just the same time a human needs to be born.»

This dualism of a journey and a goal is particularly visible in the treatment of the youth, who were the primary focus of the didactic, disciplinary effort of the organisers. They believed that children and adolescents were especially in need of being transformed – their bodies being unskilled and unruly, their minds far easier tempted by the enemy propaganda, as «opinions are not hereditary». Yet at the same time, the youth served as representative of the happy new world, in other words of the «Advancing New [Work] shift» (the title of a mass gymnastic performance), for it had qualities that the older generation by definition could not have. As Vladimír Macura pointed out, the vision of «paradise» is closely associated with youth, as children and teenagers were not burdened – in contrast

39 V. Mucha, První celostátní spartakiáda (Prague, 1956), 11.  
40 «Metodický dopis k polit. vých. práci v přípravách ČSS75, Miroslav Jech», f. The 1975 Spartakiad, AČOS.
with their parents and grandparents – with the relics of the past.\footnote{Macura, Šťastný věk, 14.} Macura quotes Milan Kundera’s somewhat servile poem \emph{Old Woman} to demonstrate that only children are capable of being fully and unconditionally the inhabitants of the socialist paradise by stifling the uncertainties and doubts of the old through spontaneous joy and belief.\footnote{M. Kundera, Ólověk zahrada šírá (Prague, 1953), 20–21 (my translation).} In his poem, Kundera portrays an old woman «dressed in worm-eaten raiment», followed by the smell of «ancient drawers scented by quince», made tired by life, always grumbling over the incomprehensible new times embodied by «all the pioneers around». Yet it is her grandson-pioneer who in the end reconciles the old lady with the new world:

«He holds her hand. Now, the old woman is happy,
she runs with him along the meadow.
Now, she loves his red scarf.
Now she worries no more.»

The communist festivals served as didactic tool in many spheres of social practices and behaviour, they set norms in dressing, in ways of speech, way of eating and ways of drinking in particular. Though the Spartakiads also did this, their primarily concern was the material, physical body of the state’s subject. The training for the performances was supposed to «purify the movements from the unseemly unconscious habits of uncontrolled gesture»\footnote{M. Majerová, «Chvala partakiády», in Mucha, Spartakiáda, 7–8.} and to establish a set of procedures constituting the «docile gymnast». Strength, physical fitness or health of the trainees, though proclaimed as the main goals of the training, were in fact only of secondary importance. The primary task was to establish control over the gymnasts’ bodies through discipline. This is in line with what Braverman says about the managerial practices introduced by Taylor and others, which were also not designed to achieve a higher technological efficiency, but to gain greater control over the workers’ bodies. The «disassembly lines»\footnote{H. Braverman, Labour and Monopoly Capital (New York, 1974), 81.} – a mode of production in which the labour is subdivided into individual tasks, fully controllable by the management, strongly resembled the exercising process for the Spartakiad performances.\footnote{For the relationship between the capitalist mode of production and the synchronised displays see S. Kracauer, The Mass Ornament (Cambridge/Mass. 1955).} If running for instance was part of the performance, the training’s goal was not to train gymnasts to run fast or for a long time, but to run exactly as told and to keep in time with the others. Though Zátopek, the famous Olympic gold medallist, was given as an example for the Spartakiad trainees, in fact anybody who imitated his achievement would spoil the performance. The organisers spoke quite openly about discipline being the major goal of the training: «The trainees exercising in our performance can surpass the others only through the precision of
the march, uniformity in chanting the slogans, and synchronism of the display […]»

We see that these disciplining procedures can only superficially be described as Foucaultian disciplinary practices aimed at a increasing productivity of the body and thus creating ever greater efficacy of the regime’s power. In fact, what we are dealing here with is an aesthetic project, aiming at having a greater effect rather than a greater efficacy.

»Immediately after the entry to the sporting arena, the trainees must perform just those movements which belong to the exercise, and they must strictly avoid every movement which is not part of the exercise (backward glances, shaking head, adjusting the hair, cleaning hands), because to a certain extent such movements spoil the impression of performances executed in unison.»

In fact the main goal of the endless training and discipline was not so much to raise a new more productive and more docile subject but to create a new beautiful human being, as one excited trainer put it: «[…] today you see, how a man can be beautiful, if he is taken care of, if he is loved and is happy.»

Somewhat surprising is the stress the organisers of the displays put on the gendering of the young gymnasts’ bodies. Oates-Indruchova claims that the state-socialist’s concept of physical culture led to the formation of a «genderless
sporting body», so erasing the differences between male and female. However, the organisers of Spartakiads, paid great attention to the «boyish» or «girlish» character of the performances. One can see the importance of this aspect in the word for word transcripts of minutes of the Evaluation Committee of the Spartakiad Headquarters, which had the task of selecting the best designs for the performances, and in discussing the «shortcomings» with the authors in order to contribute to the gradual establishment of a model for creation of the mass gymnastic performances. The biggest stir among the members of the Evaluation Committee was caused by the proposal for a performance titled «My Country is a Flowering Field». The proposal suggested that teenage girls used a stick as exercise tool. Both the male and the female members of the committee stood in sharp disagreement with the authors of the performance. They argued against the use of the stick and said «corrections must be made, which would give the performance a stronger art-gymnastic flavour, and a more «girlish character»». The authors of the performance argued that the suggested replacement of a stick with a ribbon or a flower would spoil the whole performance as the stick was linked to the character of the movement of the display. Whether motivated by pragmatism, or forced by power, the authors eventually obeyed the decision of the chairman of the committee Chvalňy to «throw the sticks out, remake the first section in order to make it more girlish and not to look boyish,» and the teenage girls appeared at the Strahov Stadium exercising with ribbons and flowers.

Whereas many of these didactic efforts might have appeared easily under other power regimes, the stress on the education towards a collective spirit constitutes a specific communist project. The simplicity and relative ease of the exercises, the unified and inexpensive dresses, the sharing of living space during the preparations for the final performance in Prague were all designed to contribute to the creation of a collective feeling. This education towards a collective spirit drew on the traditional suspicion of the interwar Sokol gymnasts towards competitive sport. If for different reasons, both the Sokol trainers and the communist organisers of Spartakiads saw competitive sport as an embodiment of true opposition to their collectivist project. In the binary opposition of play and display, competitive sport was associated with individualism, passive spectatorship, «clubism», hero-worship, and, what is even worse, with competition and unpredictability, which dangerously resemble the workings of the free market. On the other hand, the opposition towards the individualism of competitive sport did not mean that the Spartakiad organisers’ goal was to create an undifferentiated mass. As the Guidelines for Pupils

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50 «Hodnocení skladeb 29/04/63», f. The 1965 Spartakiad, ČOS.
51 Ibid.
Training for the 1st All-State Spartakiad warned, pupils should not rely on the fact that they exercised with a mass of others:

«[…] do not think that anything could «disappear» in the multitude of bodies. Not only every slightest step away from a row, but also every single imprecise position of arms, every single head incorrectly bent or raised, every smallest movement with which you adjust your dress or hair, everything is seen and everything imprecise disturbs the over-all impression.»

The instruction even went so far as to order, «if someone near to you feels unwell, if he faints, do not pay any attention and keep exercising! This is not uncomradely behaviour, since you would not be able to help anyway and the paramedic service will take care of him.»

Merging of an individual in the mass thus did not mean that a person could «disappear» amidst the thousands of other trainees, but that he or she became one of the cogs in the great machine of the display. In fact, cogs played a rather prominent role in the symbolism of Spartakiads. At the 1955 Spartakiad the performance of «Working Reserves» reached its peak when thousands of male trainees formed into eleven giant turning cogwheels, while female trainees performed «the waving lines of corn». However, merging with the communist groups also meant the suppression of loyalties to other groups, particularly to the family. The performance of parents with children, which later became one of the peaks of the Spartakiads, was contested when first proposed in 1965 as it «evoked

\[52\] Pokyny pro žactvo a dorost cvičící na 1. celostátní spartakiádě (Prague, 1955), 24. 
\[53\] Ibid., 24.
undesirable associations with family values.»\(^\text{54}\) Speaking for an unidentified and somewhat mysterious collective body, Jiří Žižka, a member of the evaluating committee opposed the performance called «Children – Our Flowers» claiming: «The comrades believe, that this is not a correct expression and that it is illogical. We want our children to be in school, in collective, but here they are with their parents, they are playing with them.»\(^\text{55}\) As if that was not enough, the «comrades» complained that the playing of parents with their children resembled «caressing»\(^\text{56}\)

### 4. Representing the New Society

The near mystical transformation from a subject of discipline into an object of the representation of the new socialist person took place when the gymnasts passed through the gates of the Strahov Stadium in Prague. In fact, the main gate of the stadium, The Gate of Heroes, was surrounded by a feeling of mysticism, and crossing this threshold was supposed to be an unforgettable experience. Passing through this gate signified a great transformation, in which all the discipline suddenly ceased, and a fully disciplined sovereign was presented. At once, the trainees were no longer mere pupils or sportsmen, but became a representation of the specific interpretation of the term «the people». «This was not a Slet in another form,» claimed the writer Norbert Frýd, «this was a completely new type of splendid demonstration, in which the very people in front of the eyes of the world entered the Strahov Stadium […] to say what they love, what they know and where they belong to.»\(^\text{57}\) The trainees were thus transformed into a political metaphor, as one journalist put it, «the allegory of the importance of the individual is nowhere clearer, even in the largest and most complex whole, and in his weakness and obscurity in solitude. Who of you had ever recognised before this dialectic in its purest form?»\(^\text{58}\) The Spartakiads thus with their five-year cycles replaced elections: In their mutilated, one-candidate form they ceased to have any appeal long before, despite the 99.99% participation. «Spartakiad, that is not only the review of youth, strength and beauty, it is not only a festival of physical education.» wrote one, probably fictitious, listener to Czechoslovak Radio, «it is a public act of election in which our country and our regime will gloriously win.»\(^\text{59}\) The synchronised movement of thousands of bodies at the stadium was clearly far better suited to the existing political structure than the somewhat awkward and potentially divisive and unpredictable ritual of putting the ballots into boxes.

However, in order to play the role of elections, the gymnastic display had to communicate the idea that the whole of the people were represented at the stadium. The communist organisers used a number of ways to achieve this effect.

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\(^{54}\) «Hodnocení skladeb 29/04/63 (Děti naše květy)», f. The 1965 Spartakiad, ACOS.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.

\(^{57}\) N. Frýd, Literární noviny, 9 July 1955.

\(^{58}\) Svět Práce 16 (1985).

\(^{59}\) Mucha, Spartakiáda, 142.
First of all, the trainees’ selection should represent the whole country, «a mother from Domažlice or a student from Košice».\(^\text{60}\) Particular care was given to the proportional representation of Slovakia. The festival was composed of a set of performances representing «the people» in their variety, and yet «the people» as unity, fully concentrated towards the common goal».\(^\text{61}\) The staging of the event was to display the totality of the people clustered according to one of the two successive models, either the factory model of the fifties and sixties or the family model of the seventies and eighties. Though the performances represented the whole of the people, their message was also aimed at those who, if only for the time being, stood outside of the communist body politic.

«And those, who still at home, alone
barricaded themselves
the strong scent of the flower will daze their minds
and fire will burn through to their hearts,» wrote the poet Jiří Šotola.\(^\text{62}\)

Judging by the reactions of the distinguished foreign guests, this self-representational project was a success to a high degree. For the Indian author Ali Sardar Jafri, the gymnasts at the 1955 Spartakiad stood for the whole people, just as the designers of the performances hoped they would:

«I try to look behind the thousands of these young bodies and see, and I see that the stadium is spreading and spreading and covering the whole surface of Czechoslovakia. [...] In this huge stadium of the whole country, there stood firmly and orderly next to each other thirteen million bodies and twenty six million raised hands in order to beat swords into ploughshares, spears into sickles, and arms into bells.»\(^\text{63}\)

Ferdinand Leger, who visited the 1955 Spartakiad just few days before his death was less concerned with the subtleties of the official ideology of the display than with the mechanised beauty of the synchronised movements of thousands of bodies which must have been quite in line with his recent occupation with the «machine aesthetic.» «It is a fascinating spectacle particularly for a painter,» said Leger, «colours, an infinite variety of groups, the joy of the faces, the symphony of suntanned bodies – I was thrilled by all this. They told me, before I went to visit the people’s democracies: ‘There the people are dying of starvation, sorrow rules there!’ Dear, I have found a country with people so well fed, full of joy, with enthusiasm exercising at the Spartakiad.»\(^\text{64}\) Tristan Tzara also felt that he was «in the very middle of free and happy people, aware of their splendid perspectives.»\(^\text{65}\)

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 20.
\(^{61}\) Macura, «Spartakiáda», 67.
\(^{62}\) J. Šotola, Ruđe právo, 26 June 1955.
\(^{63}\) Mucha, Spartakiáda, 143.
\(^{64}\) Ibid., 44.
These utterances of «foreign friends» testify less the impact of the display on the spectator than the narcissistic desire of the communist regime to present the miraculous rebirth of «the people» on the exercise field of the stadium.

5. Consuming the Ritual –
Mass Gymnastic Displays as Cultural Practice

The left wing intellectuals were fairly easily convinced by the didactic message as they saw what they came to see. But to persuade the local audience, let alone to transform the trainees as planned, was an entirely different matter. The communist propaganda portrayed how the trainees were transformed into a new form of being, a socialist person, how these new socialist persons came together and how they embodied the new form of society in their geometric formations, a communist *communitas*, and finally how the whole people united around this symbolic core fused with it. The totalitarian analysis of communist rituals paints roughly the same model of fracturing the individual, anatomising the society, and forcing people to believe that this nightmarish vision was the desired paradise. Both these narratives give a rather precise description of the regime’s ambition, but have relatively little to do with the way the participants perceived the ritual. Besides producing a huge amount of propaganda material, the mammoth organisational structure of the Spartakiads also left hundreds of metres of archival materials behind. These files of the latter have none of the jubilant mood of the former, they testify considerable frustration among the organisers. The archives of the organisers,\(^66\) concentrating mostly on the trainees and only to a limited extent on the spectators, reveal a whole palette of responses, ranging from dark shades of outright resistance and refusal, through grey zones of moderate disruptive practices as described by de Certeau,\(^67\) to the light tones of enthusiastic consumption of what the regime had to offer, regardless of whether it was the spectacle of the ritual or the free food and beverages.

Quite understandably the outright resistance and refusal represents a relatively minor element in the typology of responses to the Spartakiad training and performances. The regime’s desire to represent the whole of the (working) people holds an invaluable collection of visual materials, their holdings of written materials are limited. Somewhat surprisingly the renewed Sokol movement preserves the most important Spartakiad archive (ACOS); a hundred meters of unprocessed material is waiting to be researched in the attic of the Tyrš House at the Lesser Quarter in Prague. The unprocessed materials are identified by the year of the Spartakiad and the name of the document.\(^67\) 

\(^{66}\) To my knowledge, there are four different archives holding the materials produced by the Spartakiad organisers. The only processed material is located in the State Central Archives (SU A) either in the funds of the Czechoslovak Sport and Physical Education Union (ČSTV) or in the funds of the state and party organs, particularly the fund of the *Poliburo*. The successor of ČSTV preserves part of the files related to the last three Spartakiads, the archives are located in the Eastern Stand of the Strahov Stadium (ACSTV). The Tyrš Museum of Physical Education and Sport holds an invaluable collection of visual materials, their holdings of written materials are limited.

was, however, only satisfied to a limited degree. The ethnic composition of the state was the major obstacle, with Slovaks and ethnic minorities less than enthusiastic about the Spartakiad performances. Slovakia, in contrast with Czech Lands, lacked the tradition of mass gymnastic performances, as there existed very few Slovak gymnastic clubs in the interwar Czechoslovakia, and those were associated with the unpopular idea of Czechoslovakism. In Slovakia the communist organisers had to struggle not only with their own unpopularity, but also with the unpopularity of what the interwar mass gymnastic displays stood for, particularly Czech imperialism and anticlericalism. Communist organisers thus met during the first few Spartakiads fairly vigorous opposition and refusal. A report from the 1955 Spartakiad speaks about cases of arson, tearing down of posters and the disruption of electricity supplies. In general, the report judges the impact of the «disruptive activities» as limited due to the «good cooperation with security organs.»

In contrast to Slovaks who gradually became accustomed to the ritual – even to such an extent that when discussing the abolishment of the 1990 Spartakiad, its retention had greater support in Slovakia than in Bohemia – the stand of the Polish minority was clearly and unchangeably negative.

«The nationality question is very serious in the Northern Moravian Region.

The Czechoslovak citizens of the Polish nationality [...] do not exercise in the clubs of trade unions or Sokol which consequently suffer from lack of membership and particularly of cadres [...] Just recently a Polish citizen was charged for incitement and agitation among trainees against their participation at the Spartakiad.»

Somewhat surprisingly for the organisers, the lukewarm reaction to the Spartakiad was not limited to the fringes of the state, but was recognised right in the centre, in Prague, where the population was often quite unhappy about the chaos caused by the nearly doubling of its population and frequently left the city for staying in their weekend houses – so the countryside, in what amounted to a carnival-like reversal, could enjoy the capital for few days. Prague opposition circles often went beyond the mere passive resistance and put up posters, and occasionally even tried to disrupt the «Spartakiad machine». During the 1975 Spartakiad, for instance, an incident was reported in which «hooligans» prevented trainees from Northern Moravian Region from entering a bus on their way from the Strahov Stadium, and «used improper words and provocative political expressions. They vilified history.»

Another way of actively refusing the ritual was the most effective weapon of the

70 «Denní hlášení», 28 June 1975, f. The 1975 Spartakiad, ACOS.
71 «Denní hlášení», 27 June 1975, f. The 1975 Spartakiad, ACOS.
weak – ridicule. The Spartakiads had something inherently comical in them. This was exploited by several attempts at staging an imitation Spartakiad. A performance with beer bottles instead of Indian clubs took place once, another was characterised by the exchange of dresses between male and female performers. The painting by surrealist artist Jan Švankmajer Physical Culture in the Service of Erotism and Militarism of 1976 is most notable, in which he combines the pictures from a soldiers’ performance at the 1975 Spartakiad with the illustrations of Marquis de Sade works.72 Regardless how strong and diverse the opposition to the Spartakiads was, ranging from resistance to ridicule, it remained either ethnically or politically limited to fringes of the mainstream society.

Though outright resistance or refusal was a serious problem, the organisers were far more concerned with petty but mass scale disruptive practices which in their simplicity presented a serious danger to the «geometrical» projects of the organisers. Whereas laughter or jokes, as we know from Kundera, might be a serious criminal act, it is hard to prosecute silence. Thus the organisers could only record the failure of the 1975 Spartakiad March, even though its participants were selected «with regards to political and ideological maturity»:

«We have to admit, however, that the prepared slogans were little used. It was interesting that at the beginning of the march, then again in Vodičkova street and further on, the atmosphere was much better than on Wenceslas square itself, [the location of the tribune with the Politburo. P.R.], where the spectators were very cold. The performers sensed that immediately and looked, as if they would freeze. The atmosphere in the march was not ideal. Despite the fact that we arranged a number of preparatory meetings, the organisation of chanting the slogans practically failed.»73

It was even more difficult to convince citizens to contribute their own free time to the success of the Spartakiads in voluntary work brigades. In 1985, the Spartakiad Headquarters were informed that the reconstruction of the Strahov Stadium would be delayed as the planned number of volunteers had not been reached. On one day for instance, instead of the planned 300 workers, only 78 turned up. Even those who did appear, did not stay long as the same report concludes:

«In general we have to point out that the volunteers are turning up late, and most of them do not stay the whole shift, some of them register in the morning and leave the workplace after a few minutes, often with the borrowed tools [...]»74

72 Another example is the lewd song Spartakiádní by prominent folk-singer Jaromír Nohavica, see <www.nohavica.cz>

73 «Denní hlášení», 27 June 1975, f. The 1975 Spartakiad, ACOS.

74 «Informace o účasti brigádníků na Strahově. Materiál pro schůzi vedení Ústředního stábu CS 85. 25. 4. 1985», f. The 1985 Spartakiad, ACOS.
Most of these disruptive practices however remained in a latent form and were only guessed by the regime’s organisers. The regime was constantly changing the ritual of the Spartakiads in its search for the smallest common denominator between trainees and spectators. This unceasing effort of the regime to follow «the mood of the people» constituted a peculiar dialogue of sorts, where, on the one side stood the leadership with all the power of expression and on the other one the silent masses which however often held the last word. The regime’s effort to please and to avoid all possible contentious issues was most visible during the 1975 Spartakiad, which was the first one following the 1968 Soviet invasion. The opening ceremony, for instance, witnessed a minor but telling shift, when the Soviet flag, which till then had always accompanied the Czechoslovak flag, was no longer carried into the stadium and raised, but replaced by a «symbolic red flag». As the «symbolic red flag» is not associated with any anthem, the advantage of this shift was that only the Czech anthem was sung. The regime thus avoided the potentially dangerous confrontation with the spectators who, in live TV coverage, might boycott the Soviet anthem. The price for preventing many of the potential disruptive practices from actually taking place was rather high – the regime had to perform its own political gymnastics.

The attitude of the majority of the trainees and spectators towards the Spartakiads was neither enthusiastic participation nor silent resistance but a mere consumption of the ritual. The Spartakiads with their huge expenditure, predictability and regularity offered a field for creating a whole range of cultural practices which always included a certain trade-off with the regime. If the leadership wanted the people to participate and enjoy it, it had to pay – in many ways: the Spartakiads put heavy burden on the state budget, it paid by allowing a behaviour standing in sharp contrast with the proclaimed goal of the ritual, and above all it paid by compromising the very idea of the ritual. At times it would thus seem that the regime was the principal victim, the loser in this peculiar give and take game as its bargaining position was weaker as it could not quit it without harming its prestige beyond repair.

The most visible and straightforward way of consuming the ritual was the potlatch style consumption of food and beverages. Particularly in the fifties and early sixties, the rite of plenty played an extremely important role since it stood in sharp contrast with the meagre living standard of the post-war generation, and was one of the most effective ways to give a real «taste» of the coming paradise of communism. This might be the reason why the supply of exotic fruits played such a prominent role. They easily communicated the exceptionality of the event and its Eden-like nature. The participants queued in long rows for the few oranges, which, as they recalled, were often their first ever taste of an exotic fruit. Whereas concerning the food, the motives of the regime and the participants were in tune, it was the drinking of alcohol that was a much more controversial matter. One report
complains: «Women and teenage girls went first to frequent «refreshments». The men would follow as soon as their timetable allowed it.»75 The organisers’ complaints about the excessive alcohol consumption was not only at odds with the model of the ideal gymnast, who besides being strong, disciplined and healthy, was also an abstinent and non-smoker, but they were also hypocritical as the regime was, of course, the main and sole supplier of alcohol. The organisers’ records suggest that the authorities tolerated the excessive alcohol consumption, and to some extent even the resulting violence and damages caused to «socialist property», and stepping in only when the alcohol consumption interfered directly with performances. Outraged by the sight of beer sellers passing through the rows of gymnasts, the organisers banned the selling of beer at the rostrum where the columns of the participants were formed into geometric formations for the march into the stadium.76

With the increase of living standards, food and drink became a less and less prominent topic and was soon overshadowed by the consumption of Prague as a capital city. The organisers soon realised that their concept of how the trainees should spend their time in Prague was unrealistic. Instead of visiting «politically valuable» sites, such as the Museum of the Working Class Movement, the participants, who were often in Prague for the first time, followed their own set of priorities. Shopping was obviously very popular, as the supply of durable goods in the capital was in general better than in the countryside, a fact only enhanced by the priorities given to Prague in the Spartakiad period. From the daily reports given by the department of political education, we know that the very Strahov Stadium was the centre of fairly busy commercial activity: «[… ] right at the stands of the Strahov [Stadium. P.R.], T-shirts with inappropriate inscriptions and names of capitalist states and firms are being sold.»77 Consumption in the city, however, went further. The city became a spectacle in itself, a spectacle in which the masses became the principle actor, though in an entirely different way from what the organisers had expected. The trainees who I interviewed spoke about a city in a state of chaos, in which it was as easy to get lost as it was to meet a long forgotten friend. The mixture of people from all regions of the state, soldiers, foreigners and especially blacks, the first ever most of the participants from the provinces had seen, medieval architecture and neon adverts created outside of the ritual of the stadium a truly festive atmosphere.

The feel of the city – surprising, liminal and dangerous – was further strengthened by the whole set of sexual mythologies surrounding the festival. One of the rumours which went around at the time and which are still believed by many today is that the Spartakiads led to a mass scale pre-marital sex and infidelity

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 24 and 25 June.
resulting in a five year demographic cycle of increased birth rate. This is clearly a myth, as the statistics of births or of intentional abortions do not show any correlation with the Spartakiad five year cycle. The myth however testifies the impression among the participants that everything was possible, though due to the accommodation policy and lack of privacy, very little was actually achieved. Though little was «done», a lot was seen. With the gradual feminisation of the performances, a telling shift occurred in the role of the male gymnast. His role changed from a 19th century disciplined warrior to a present day voyeur. The attention paid to the performances, especially by teenage girls, has very little to do with their qualities in terms of physical education, a fact the organisers were quite aware of. They utilised it in order to increase the attractiveness of the whole festival. The eroticisation of the performances can clearly be seen in the change of dresses of the teenage girls. In the fifties, they exercised in unappealing, «practical» gym suits, only to appear later on in carefully designed miniskirts. Without a single exception, the female teenage gymnasts appeared on the cover of the Spartakiad commemorative books. The voyeurism was only one aspect of the feminisation of the Spartakiads, which, though coming from a purely masculine 19th century ritual, attracted twice as many women than men in the 1970s and 1980s. Libora Oates-Indruchová claims that the high and ever increasing percentage of female participants could be explained as a form of regime sanctioned emancipation. For many women participating in the performances was a substitution for the male pub, the semi-autonomous sphere, a break through to the public sphere which their partners could only oppose with difficulty. This is yet another example of how the participants used the ritual in order to force the regime to do something for them, in this case to serve them against their partners.

6. Conclusion

As an illustrative example of post-Stalinist ritual, the Czechoslovak Spartakiads points out the contradictory character of the regimes’ didactic projects. On the one hand, the Czechoslovakian Spartakiads became a truly popular festival which the participants learned to consume and enjoy. In this sense the regime succeeded, by imposing its own ritual framework, in answering people’s needs for a more colourful reality and festive interruption of their daily routine. The heavy ideological load of the Spartakiad festivities did not prevent people from appropriating the ritual. This is nicely illustrated by a postcard sent by an old lady from a south-Moravian village to the Spartakiad Headquarters saying: «Dear Friends! I wish you only the best and lots of luck with your Spartakiad. I pray to Virgin Mary every

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78 On the male side, the performance of soldiers (sun-tanned on order) only dressed in white shorts played quite a similar role, with the exception that their performance was truly demanding.

79 Personal communication.
night that it may not rain!»

Furthermore, the stress on the physical education and the tradition of mass gymnastic performances of Sokols helped the participants to legitimise their own acceptance of the ritual. When the prepared 1990 Spartakiad was cancelled, the majority of the trainees protested claiming that they were not performing to support the communist regime but to continue the long established tradition of displays and to experience the «beautiful feeling of belonging to the human crowd».

Yet as a didactic project, on the other hand, the Spartakiads were clearly a failure. They neither created a new healthy, disciplined and beautiful socialist person. Nor did they transform society into geometrical communist *communitas*. This paradox of the popularity of the event among the participants on the one hand and its uselessness for the regime on the other creates the question why the state actually invested its ever scarcer resources into this lost cause. But, if the spectators and participants were not free to choose a different ritual framework, in a similar way, the regime was not free to abandon it. This seems to be a specific feature of festivals under dictatorships. In fact, they can not discard the excessive ritualisation of political life at will as this would irreparably harm the pretentious semiotic system, which, as Havel showed in *Power of the Powerless*, is both supporting and governing them.\(^8^2\) In other words, trapped in its own web, the Communist Czechoslovakia resembles the Balinese Theatre State, described by Clifford Geertz, where the ceremonies were no longer means to political ends but became the ends themselves. In its constant search for the smallest common denominator with the participants, the leadership eventually succeeded in transforming Czechoslovakia into a Theatre State in which «power served pomp, not pomp power.»\(^8^3\)

\(^8^0\) F. Zrušení CS 1990, AČOS.  
\(^8^1\) Ibid., letter of V. Latislavová from Sokolov.  
\(^8^3\) C. Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton/N. J., 1983), 13. Havel actually makes the same point saying that ideology no longer serves the power but that power serves ideology, see Havel, «Power», 138.
Vom didaktischen Projekt zum Zelebrieren eines Rituals:
Spartakiaden in der ČSSR 1955–1990


D'un projet didactique à la consommation d'un rituel:
les spartakiades tchécoslovaques 1955–1990

Au 20e siècle les manifestations de gymnastique de masse et les choréographies festives ont été des moyens de représentation centraux des régimes dictatoriaux. L'article montre à partir des spartakiades tchécoslovaques comment ces mises en scène ont été instrumentalisées aussi bien par les dirigeants politiques que par les participants. Les premiers voyaient dans ces manifestations de masse un moyen de former la nouvelle «personnalité socialiste» et espéraient modeler dans le nouvel ordre de la société socialiste une masse perçue comme chaotique. Les seconds voyaient au contraire dans ces festivités une occasion d'échapper à la routine de la vie quotidienne. L'article attire l'attention sur des formes de transfert culturel qui enjambaient les frontières nationales et politiques et que permettaient précisément ces manifestations dans la mesure où elles faisaient usage d'un répertoire généralement partagé de symbolique corporelle.

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