



Marek Waic et al.

In the Shadow of Totalitarianism

Sport and the Olympic Movement
in the “Visegrád Countries”
1945–1989

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Reviewed by: Prof. Jiří Kocian
Prof. Bernard Woltman

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Preface

Participation of the Visegrad countries in the creation and development of sport in Central Europe

If the 19th century is considered a century of nationalism and steam, then the 20th century is undoubtedly a century of sport. Its roots stretch back to the century before, but it becomes an important social phenomenon with political and economical consequences only in the 20th century, turning into the most universal, most popular and most watched phenomenon of our planet. It is symptomatic that at the very end of the 19th century, due to the Paris Congress in 1894 and the first Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, the modern Olympic movement was born. We must mention that among the founders of modern Olympism and the first members of the IOC were Ferenc Kemény and Jiří Stanislav Guth, the only representatives of nations deprived of their sovereignty – although it is not entirely the case of the Hungarian representative thanks to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise.

The end of the 19th century is, by the way, revolutionary for the development of Czech and Hungarian sport. In 1897, Czech sportsmen established the Czech Amateur Athletic Union, which associated the clubs of most of the branches of sport. Two years later, representatives of this Union contributed to the founding of the Czech Olympic Committee so that Czech athletes could participate as an independent Czech national representation at the II Olympic Games in Paris.

The development and popularity of Hungarian sport among the general public were supported by all sorts of sports competitions, which took place on the occasion of the Hungarian millennium celebrations in 1896 and were also visited by the Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary Francis Joseph I on June 2. The same year, Hungarian sportsmen represented Hungary at the first Olympic Games in Athens. They even applied to host the Games in Budapest.



Fig. 1 IOC Members in Athens, 1896

Sitting, from left: Pierre de Coubertin (France), D. Bikélas (Greece), A. Butovskij (Russia). Standing, from left: W. Gebhardt (Germany), Jiří Guth (Czech lands), F. Kamény (Hungary), V. Balck (Sweden)

The independent membership of Jiří Guth and Ferenc Kemény in the International Olympic Committee was a thorn in the eye of the representatives of Austrian sport; therefore, they demanded that both men represent the Austrian monarchy and not their sovereign nations. A much greater pressure was applied on Jiří Guth and Czech Olympic independence became a significant national and foreign policy problem that was solved at the highest levels of government before World War I. The representatives of the Austrian sport and government circles accepted Hungarian autonomy with considerably greater ease, due to the extensive political autonomy of the country.

Nevertheless, Ferenc Kemény didn't manage to defend his IOC membership against Hungarian opposition. In comparison to Czech society, there was a much greater proportion of aristocracy and its influence in the social elites of Hungary. This was naturally reflected in sport as well. Kemény, a mere high school teacher (as well as Jiří Guth), had to resign his membership in the IOC, and a year later he was replaced by Count Géza Andrassy.

Polish and Slovak sport did not assert itself that much on the international scene until World War I. Poland, divided among the three powers, had to resist strong denationalizing pressures. Where the political situation permitted, especially in Galicia, the Poles faced pressure within the physical culture with the Sokol movement. Slovakia had to face strong Magyarization pressures. Nevertheless, Slovak athletes represented Hungary at the Olympics, but mostly as members of the Budapest and Bratislava Hungarian sports clubs.

Around 1900, sport is understandably not free of nationalist influences. However, through its universality and adventurous romanticism it surpasses majority national tendencies, dominating political, economical and cultural life. These tendencies aim at national enclosure and at putting through national interests in more and more escalated conflicts with the “rightful” interests of citizens of other nations.

Sport, which was imported to the continent from English, i.e. a different political and cultural environment, is based namely on an individual human performance in an activity which is universal in essence. Of course, it is thrown into the battlefield of national aspirations, but this cannot affect it, because in a competition with unified rules, beyond the political and national spheres, the winners are still the fastest, the strongest and the most skillful. Sport, in order to reach its fulfillment, breaks down national borders. Its possibilities and limits are given by the dynamics of its development from the 1880s until World War I. These dynamics are fascinating, but it is still the phase of initial development of continental sport, which mainly clashes with technical, communication and economic limits. As a result of the natural needs of the development of sport and to the barriers of growth arising from the mentioned limitations, an independent sport area is formed and it is delimited by Vienna and Budapest in the south and by Berlin in the north. In its centre lies Prague, not only in a geographical sense, but also – thanks to unique historical circumstances – thanks to its importance.

In its beginnings, Central European sport was mostly inspired by the gentleman-amateur form imported from England and adopted by the Olympic movement. However, from the origins of modern sport, professional athletes have always been companions with amateurs and their performances enjoy the considerable attention of spectators.

The pioneers of most of the sports were young middle-class men – students, young officials, teachers and other men, who had some money (often from their fathers’ pockets), free time and enough of romantic eagerness for everything new and adventurous. Nevertheless, heavy ath-

letics, i.e. wrestling, weight-lifting and boxing, was the domain of strong men from the working class, whom generally soon started a professional career.

World War I and its results, codified by the concert of powers in Versailles, changed not only the map of Europe, but especially Europe itself. Czechoslovak, Hungarian and Polish sport crosses the borders of Central Europe and sets off for the world not only because of newly gained state sovereignty, but also because of improving technical, transport and communication possibilities and the boom of Olympic Games and other international competitions.

In the interwar era, Hungary persisted among the sport powers. The area of physical education and sport was partly enjoying support from the state, which can be proved by the establishment of a sports university in 1925. The merits of this act are attributed to Kuno Klebelsberg, the minister of culture who was also in charge of sport; in contrast to Czechoslovakia and Poland, which gained desired independency, Hungary was a part of the defeated states. The sense of injustice and bitterness over the territorial and other losses which made Hungary a smaller state in Central Europe even led to political interventions in the area of sport, which should have contributed to the rebirth of the Hungarian nation and an increase in military ability.

While in Czechoslovakia and in Poland the sphere of physical culture was dominated by gymnastic organizations headed by Sokol, in Hungary the physical culture was dominated by sport. However, it doesn't mean that Czechoslovakia and Poland would fall short of the level of sport.¹ Both newly established countries assumed important status in the international Olympic movement. In the interwar years, an independent Slovak sport was born and represented by Slovak sport clubs. Slovak representation within the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee and Czechoslovak sport federations was, however, insignificant.

During World War II, the evolution of sport in occupied Poland, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, serf Hungary and Slovakia differs a lot. But again, what these countries have in common is the enclosure to a national and state frame which was a consequence of the conditions imprinted on Europe by war. During 1947 and 1948, communists in Central Europe managed to gain absolute power and the character of sport in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland also changed under the Soviet

1 Waic, M.: Století středoevropského sportu – čas konfliktů i porozumění. In: Historie – Otázky – Problémy, 2, 2010, no. 2.

dictates. According to the Soviet model, in the first half of the 1950s sport was managed by different state organs, following the instructions of the communist party. Also, trade unions joined the sports life and sports competitions took place within different industrial branches. Sport at the top level was, also according to the Soviet model, largely centralized in army clubs.

In a totalitarian society, the nature of conflicts caused by the sporting events naturally changed. It was carried over from the national-political-club level of the inter-war period into a purely political realm which reflected all the changes in the development of Central European communism.

Sport in Czechoslovakia 1945-1989

After the long and tough years of Nazi occupation which were full of striving, humiliation as well as hope in liberation, the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia expected the restoration of democracy in a slightly different way than they knew from the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic. They believed that a restored Czechoslovakia would right the wrongs of Nazi occupation, cope with traitors and collaborators, limit the corruption and the power of political parties as well as provide its inhabitants with more social justice. There was a strong urge to create true national integrity, which was to be fulfilled after the expulsion of Sudeten Germans. It was the communists who were the most perceptive to detect this public expectation and who managed to oblige it. During the interwar period, they ostentatiously manifested leftist extremism which led to removing the parliamentary democracy and establishing “the dictatorship of the proletariat” under the patronage of Moscow, whereas after World War II they disguised themselves as a state nationalist party. This resulted in their unconditional victory during the 1946 elections in Bohemia.

Despite the heavy electoral loss in Slovakia, their rise to absolute power was not slowed down at all. They succeeded in limiting the executive and legislative power of Slovakian autonomous authorities established in 1945, enforced further confiscations and took over the post of prime Minister and other important offices, of which the Ministry of interior was to be a crucial player in the power politics. As early as in 1945, they accused the then leading political party of collaboration with the Nazis and later managed to impose its ban. As the agrarian party represented conservative right-wing leaning towards centrism during the First Republic, its ban shifted the Czechoslovakian political spectrum significantly to the left after World War II. The communists also had a strong

influence on the so-called National Front, a free alliance of political parties, trade unions (taken over completely) and other organisations with numerous members.

On their way to absolute power, the communists were threatened by various obstacles, one of them being various sport, physical education, tourist and scouting groups. They were organized and influenced the opinions of more than 2 million members. They were, except for the communist groups, based exclusively on democratic principles, their management being firmly anchored in parliamentary democracy. That is why the communists focused on sports and physical education to such a large extent.

Most of the sport, physical education, tourist and scouting organizations were restored after World War II. It was the case of the following organisations – catholic Orel, the social democratic Union of the Workers' Physical Education Clubs (*Svaz dělnických tělocvičných jednot*) and liberal Sokol. Orel cooperated with the traditional party of Czech Catholicism – Czechoslovak People's Party (*Československá strana lidová*), thus defining the political spectrum of its members who believed in traditional catholic values. On the other side of this spectrum was the Union of the Workers' Physical Education Clubs with its 71,000 members, a little less than Orel members. The members of the Union of the Workers' Physical Education Clubs were mostly social democrats; however, they did not, unlike a small part of Social Democratic Party members, lean towards communists.

By far, the largest and publicly acknowledged physical education organization was the Czech Sokol Organization (*Československá obec sokolská – ČOS*). During the interwar era, the number of its members tripled from a quarter million to more than three quarter million, playing the most significant role in the organization of life in interwar Czechoslovakia. The Czech public regarded Sokol as an organization that was beyond party and state. During World War II, many of its members joined the resistance movement against the Nazis, the group Jindra even participated in the assassination of Deputy Reich-Protector Reinhard Heydrich. In 1947, there were more than one million Sokol members – 567,850 adult men and women, 130,433 teenagers and 303,355 kids.² At the same time, Sokol had to count its casualties of war. During the Nazi occupation, thousands of Sokol members were tortured, executed or

2 Archive of the Collection of Physical Education and Sport of the National Museum in Prague (as ASTVS NM Prague), f. Sokol, Transcription of the 11th ČOS board meeting.

died in concentration camps. Thanks to their attitude and resistance, Sokols gained even greater respect within Czech society. However, the situation in Slovakia was quite different as Sokol failed to take roots there in the interwar period. Its members even had to fight hard in an effort to be restored. On December 1, 1947, the Slovakian National Council³ approved the restoration of Sokol as a fully-fledged organization.

As early as on May 9, 1945, the Sokol board gathered for the first time and elected its first chairman, 43-year old attorney Antonín Hřebík. As a holder of high Czechoslovakian honour – first degree medal, a member of former political prisoners, a National Socialist Party deputy (main rival of communists) and a chairman of the Defence Committee in parliament, Antonín Hřebík was highly respected by Sokol members. Another notable objector to communism within the Sokol board was also Marie Provazníková. Faithful to its tradition, the Sokol board took a strongly anti-German attitude, completely supporting the expulsion of Sudeten Germans, an attitude shared by all political parties as well as by an absolute majority of Czech society. Non-partyism and nationalism of the Sokol organisation, however, still remained as the basic Sokol principles. That is also why the Sokol board addressed “all National Front parties to take a proper look on the misuse of the Sokol name, Sokol badges and Sokol costumes in any political action. No politician should link his name with Sokol on any posters advertising his public speech and no politician should appear photographed in a Sokol costume in any political party publications”. The Sokol board particularly asked for “not overusing Sokol non-partyism in political discussions”.⁴

A significant change in the Sokol board’s attitude towards political parties, especially the communists, came after World War II. During the First Republic, recruiting new Sokol members out of communists had been strictly forbidden, however, they were warmly welcomed to Sokol after World War II. The reason for that was a shift in politics within the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. As Antonín Hřebík stated, “we are not ashamed to admit we respect our own code as the communists are not ashamed to admit there is a shift in their programme. They used

3 These authorities emerged after the World War as an executive and legislative body for Slovakia. Czechoslovakia was, until 1968, a kind of asymmetrical federation, where Slovakia had, unlike Czechs, its autonomous authorities. After February 1948, their existence was rather formal.

4 National Archive (NA Prague), f. ČOS, lib. 279. Speech of ČOS chairman 27.5. 1947 quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, pp. 108–109.

to be international, we used to be national. That excluded one another. Nowadays they are a national and state-forming party.”⁵

The Sokol board probably realized that the positive attitude towards state and nation, so abruptly and ostentatiously manifested by the communists, was just a disguise – a new tactic in their effort to seize the power. Nevertheless, as the Sokols were leaning to all-national reconciliation, they could only hardly ban recruiting communists who verbally identified with the political system of parliamentary democracy. This evident shift of attitude of the Sokol board caused the Malá Strana Sokol unit in Prague to welcome a new member, the chairman of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and Prime Minister Klement Gottwald. He was followed by an alleged non-party man and secret Communist Party of Czechoslovakia member, Minister of Defence Ludvík Svoboda, as well as by the chairman of the communist trade unions Antonín Zápotocký. Another new notable acquisition was also the Minister of Justice and chairman of National Socialist Party, Prokop Drtina.

In October 1947, Klement Gottwald gave a speech at the VIII Sokol congress, addressing the Sokol members to “be a true guard, moral and defensive, of our great national ambitions. That is against those who, as Tyrš says, tardily and short-sightedly defend old opinions on which they base their physical existence, i.e. against the reactionist powers.”⁶ Tyrš had never said anything similar but the communist leader did not hesitate to call for anybody, when the party interests could be advanced. The president Edvard Beneš also gave a speech at the congress, reminding everyone of the Sokol mission – all-national reconciliation. Prokop Drtina also spoke, “the Sokol has to be the adjustor of values between the past and future and must help in overcoming the differences in current life.”⁷

In their declaration, the participants of the VIII Sokol Congress stressed the Sokol devotion to parliamentary democracy and unconditional support of president Edvard Beneš. This poses the question, why all the political party leaders insinuated themselves into the favour of Sokol. As stated before, the Sokol members’ number reached one million and Sokol was highly esteemed by the whole society. In terms of its inner structure, the Sokol organisation remained, even after the World War II,

5 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 280. Debate transcription 14.12. 1946, quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 110.

6 Transcription from the VIII congress of ČOS, held 25–28 October, 1947, in Tyrš house in Prague. In: Zpravodaj VIII. valného sjezdu ČOS 23.2. 1948, p. 21.

7 Transcription from the VIII congress of ČOS, held 25–28 October, 1947, in Tyrš house in Prague. In: Zpravodaj VIII. valného sjezdu ČOS 23.2. 1948, p. 21.

a deeply democratic group, its members incessantly emphasizing their readiness to defend democracy as a fundamental principle of the Czechoslovakian state. This fact brought out anxiety in the communists as they very well remembered the precedent that occurred in 1918 during the proclamation of Czechoslovakia.⁸ Simultaneously, they were fully aware that they cannot, under their temporary disguise focusing exclusively on all-national goals, attack Sokol directly as it was publicly accepted as a non-party organisation. For that reason, they decided to weaken the Sokol defence of democracy from the inside. The Communist Party leadership ordered the former communist sports organisation members not to restore their group but to enter Sokol. These members, however unwillingly, obeyed. Within Sokol, they did not gain any influence. There were not many of them and had to, with the exception of communist leaders, pass a trial period before they became full-fledged members.

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia became the most eager supporter of unifying all Czechoslovakian sports, physical education and scouting organisations into one Czechoslovakian Sokol group. Thus, the communists wanted to diffuse the Sokol ideology and weaken it by disuniting the Sokol leadership. For most Sokol members, the very idea of unification corresponded to their idea of the future development of sports and physical education in Czechoslovakia. After the Munich Agreement signed by four powers in September 1938, which dictated Czechoslovakia to yield vast Sudetenland to Germany and resulted in the subsequent occupation of the rest of Czech and Moravia, there was a strong feeling within Czech society that the main cause of this catastrophe was a disunity in interwar Czechoslovakia. This feeling, smartly used by the communists to promote their political goals, gained control over the world of physical education and sports. The unification was to be made by the newly created Central National Committee for Physical Education (*Ústřední národní tělovýchovný výbor* – ÚNTV) with its newly appointed chairman Antonín Hřebík and a board that included leaders of other sports organisations as well as members of the former communist sports organisation. The answer to the question of why the communists were the most eager unification supporters can be found in a ÚNTV declaration from July 15, 1945. “At this time of great world social revolution, even the unification of Czechoslovakian physical education has to be an important state and political element of new national life.

8 When the independence of Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed on October 28, 1918, the Sokols established National Guards, which for a short, yet important, time (until December) replaced newly forming Czechoslovak army.

Modern sports methods, proved abroad, especially in the USSR, will be accordingly implemented in our traditional methods.”⁹

Ironically, the Sokol organization would probably, although unwillingly, shift towards the left after the unification in 1945–6, if it was not for other organisations. Not all of those wanted to enter a unified Sokol organisation. By far the largest Czech scouting organization Junák¹⁰ preferred to join the Czechoslovak Youth Union (*Československý svaz mládeže – ČSM*) as soon as 1945 because it provided a reasonable autonomy. From the very beginning, the so-called organic union project was rejected by the catholic Orel representatives. For Catholics, joining liberal Sokol under increasing communist influence would be a nightmare, a pact with the Devil. The Orel members were joined by representatives of the largest and most influential sport union, the football union. In August 1945, its plenary session insisted on the following requirements: “a) preservation of clubs as legal units, i.e. literally autonomous units, b) preservation of local and union organization, c) total autonomy in the management of football and football competitions.”¹¹

Therefore, the organic union project was not realized. The ČSO leadership came to terms with this fact quite easily, since 1946 focusing entirely on revitalization and the further development of Sokol activities. It was the communists who struggled when parting with the organic union project. In the beginning of 1946, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Ústřední výbor komunistické strany Československa – ÚVKŠČ*) formed a physical education board and considered the unification of physical education and sports by state power. They rejected it after all, announcing that “we would stand on one side while Sokol on the other side, which is what the party (KSČ) does not want.”¹² The time for a definitive clash of powers had not yet come, so the communists had to keep pretending to be supporting Sokol. In April 1946, Czechoslovak Union of Physical Education (*Československý tělovýchovný svaz – ČSTV*) was founded, summoning the representatives of all sports, tourist and physical education organizations, including Orel and the football union. The latter two joined this organisation, once

9 ASTVS NM Prague, f. Sokol, lib. 8. ÚNTV místním národním tělovýchovným výborům 15. 6. 1945 quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 101.

10 ASTVS NM Prague, f. Sokol, lib. 8. ÚNTV Všem klubům Českého svazu fotbalového 17. 8. 1945 quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, pp. 102–103.

11 ASTVS NM Prague, f. Sokol, lib. 8. ÚNTV Všem klubům Českého svazu fotbalového 17. 8. 1945 quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, pp. 102–103.

12 NA Prague, f. ČOS, Transcription from ÚV KSČ physical education secretariat meeting from 25. 6. 1946.

again presided by Antonín Hřebík, as it served merely as an umbrella organization, leaving to its subgroups total legal, organizational and economic autonomy.

Unfortunately, the victory of democracy in the sports sector was only temporary. The political situation in Czechoslovakia started to stiffen, mainly due to the pulling down of the Iron Curtain. Moscow regarded people's democratic countries in central and Eastern Europe as a scope of its unlimited influence, forcing the particular communist parties to seize power. Czechoslovakia was unscrupulously forced to reject the Marshall Plan. Czechoslovakian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Masaryk, commented on this event after meeting with Stalin: "we left for Moscow as diplomats and came back as footmen." Simultaneously, the economic situation in Czechoslovakia was getting worse. There was a rapid decrease in the production of confiscated industrial factories and, furthermore, central Europe was heavily affected by droughts in 1947. Crop supplies from war decimated USSR could not lift the spirits of people in Czechoslovakia. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was losing popularity and was about to face a tough defeat in the 1948 elections.

Stalin offered Gottwald his Red Army to seize power by force. Gottwald, hating and fearing Stalin, took courage and rejected the offer. He did believe he could seize the power by force, however, without bloodshed, which would bring him the power but the majority of society would never accept it. Unfortunately, democratic parties representatives in parliament and government offered him an almost perfect opportunity. Their ministers handed in their resignations because they were disgusted by the purges at the Ministry of the Interior where the communist minister dismissed all non-communist regional chiefs. They supposed that President Beneš, the patron of democracy to all non-communists in Czechoslovakia, would accept the resignation and appoint a temporary government that would provide free elections during which the communists would lose. However, as KSČ leaders already owned the Ministry of the Interior, they immediately responded with the secret police taking over the secretariats of democratic parties. Unlike democrats, the communists also managed to mobilize their supporters and summon them in the streets. KSČ started to provide weaponry for workers in factories. Minister of Defence Ludvík Svoboda, a secret communist, guaranteed the neutrality of the army in spite of the fact that the general staff was in hands of democratic officers. The prime Minister, a communist chief, offered Svoboda two alternatives of future development: either Beneš accepts the resignations of democratic ministers, does not dismiss gov-

ernment and adds its new members suggested by Gottwald, or there would be a civil war. After a brief hesitation, President Beneš made the second-most difficult decision¹³ of his life, rationally opting for the first alternative and thus yielding to Gottwald. On February 25, 1948, the die was cast. In the next elections in May 1948, Czechoslovakian inhabitants could only vote for persons from the list of National Guard candidates compiled by the communists.

On February 25, 1948, the emergency board of ČOS led by Antonín Hřebík met in Tyrš house, accepting the message to president Dr. Edvard Beneš in which they assure him of their devotedness and loyalty: “Brother President! We are coming to assure you, in the name of all Czechoslovak Sokols, that Sokol is standing behind you in these unsettling times as always, persisting on its rules unanimously ratified during the VIII congress in October 1947. The Sokol, an organization purely democratic since its beginning, stresses even today that it understands democracy as the democracy in the concept of T. G. Masaryk and Dr. Edvard Beneš. According to the resolution from the VIII congress of ČOS, the basic requirement of political democracy, as the rule of the people, is a rigidly exercised people’s will in the government of society, inevitably linked with freedom of thought and its manifestation, with free elections, unbiased public control and free sober criticism, as well as with all freedoms guaranteed by the constitution. The nation with all Czechoslovakian Sokols regards you as the highest constitutional factor, with full loyalty to your wisdom and with total devotedness. Brother President, we are loyally following you.”¹⁴

We can only ask ourselves whether the Sokols would have opposed the communists during the clash of powers at that time if president Beneš had asked them to do so. They would have probably tried, but could hardly have been successful. In 1945–8, the Sokols were rigidly out of the political spectrum and were not at all prepared for any intervention or clash of powers. On February 25, organizing such an intervention would probably have been too late. Still, the question remains merely on a hypothetical level. President Beneš did not want to risk any bloodshed and rejected the Sokol offer.

After seizing power in February 1948, there was nothing left to prevent the communists from unifying physical education and sports according to their plan. Right after February 25, 1948, the so-called op-

13 Similarly difficult was, naturally, the decision to accept the Munich dictate in September 1938.

14 Sokolský věstník, 46, 1948, no. 8, p. 113, quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waica, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 124.

erational committees were created in order to remove any opponents in organizations, companies or factories, and replace them with either KSC members or with at least those manifesting some loyalty to them. Many KSC representatives founded the operational committee of ČOS as early as on February 27, 1948. However, they did not manage to, and did not so far intended to “purify” ČOS leaders and replace them exclusively by persons totally subordinated to the new power. They forced Dr. Hřebík and other board members to immediate resignation but some communist opponents, namely Marie Provazníková, temporarily remained on the board. Communists did not want to threaten the course of the Sokol organisation and provoke mass member opposition. Therefore, they appointed Josef Truhlář, a 1939 Sokol chairman, to the position of new ČOS leader. He was arrested in 1940 and imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp. The newly elected 78 year-old former chairman had great respect at most Sokol units. Josef Truhlář accepted the new function as he sincerely cared about the future of Sokol, was devoted to it with his body and soul, and the communist managed to take advantage of it.

The central operational committee of Sokol asked all operational committees of every Sokol unit to remove “all reactionary thinking elements opposing the new people’s democratic republic.”¹⁵ However, its members had to admit in early March that some of the operational committees founded at regional levels introduced with their eagerness only a “disintegration and chaos into our Sokol development.”¹⁶ By the end of March, Sokol members were accepted by Prime Minister Klement Gottwald, who assured them of “the obvious preservation of Sokol development” and agreed that “the education of the Tyrš tradition will remain untouched.”¹⁷ The communists were hardly ever bothered with fulfilling their promises.

On March 31, 1948, sports and physical education were festively unified at the Smetana Hall in Municipal House. The central operational committee of Sokol ordered its subordinates to ensure that “the leading positions should be occupied only by persons with a positive attitude to the people’s democratic establishment.”¹⁸ It is also worth mentioning

15 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 440. Operational committee ČOS 29. 2. 1948 quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 126.

16 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 77, Operational committee ČOS to Central action committee, 8. 3. 1948. quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M. Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 128.

17 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 439. Transcription from ČOS operational committee 22. 3. 1948.

18 ASTVS NM Prague, f. Sokol, lib. 8. ÚNTV direction no. 1 quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 129.

that in July 1948, when the Soviet Union, and especially Czechoslovakia, fully supported a newly founded Israel, there was a strong dilemma whether to accept the members of the Jewish sports organization Macabi into the unified Sokol organization. The organizational division recommended to the ČOS board that “if they accept any Jewish citizens as Sokol members at all,” then they need to “thoroughly check whether the stated Jewish citizenship is the actual nationality admitted in 1930 and whether the particular applicant is fluent in Czech or another Slavic language.”¹⁹

Among the former sports organization members, the unified ČOS also registered 23 sport unions and tourist organizations led by the biggest tourist union, the Czech Tourist Club. Its property was mostly taken over by ČOS. As the unification process was demanding, it continued until 1949. What still remained unanswered was the question of potential autonomy of sports and physical education in Slovakia since its situation was very similar as in some other everyday life aspects, caused by prevailing tensions between Czechs and Slovaks.

The communists were quite reserved during their purges within the Sokol board because their main focus was the smooth course of the XIth Sokol Slet, for which they made intense preparations. The KSČ leaders boasted about gaining political power in a legal, parliamentary way. It was by the means of a successful congress that they wanted to manifest to the world, especially to Moscow, their control over the whole situation and the affection they get from the majority of the population. As Prime Minister Klement Gottwald declared during his meeting with ČOS representatives, “the congress must be a monumental manifestation of the unity of our nation, the unity of cheerful labour and loyalty to our people’s democratic code.” He was also convinced, that “the congress will help to promote our country as well as our physical education because many guests from all over the world will take part, especially our countrymen from America and other countries.”²⁰

Already at regional congresses, “considerable demonstrations of a political nature occurred at the parades and even on the training fields,”²¹ during which Sokol members expressed their dissatisfaction with the

19 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 430. Board meeting template 19. 7. 1948. Quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 130.

20 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 439. Transcription from ČOS operational committee 22. 3. 1948, quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 134.

21 NA Prague, f. Central operational committee NF, lib. 77 ČOS to all regional mayors 14. 6. 1948, quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 135.

new political system. Therefore, communists sent thousands of secret police members to the congress, some of them equipped with automatic weapons. Nevertheless, they were so occupied with the smooth course of congress that they did not want any public repression. The National Front's Sokol commission, former central operational committee, led by Klement Gottwald's son-in-law Alexej Čepička decided that "as it is stated in the agreement, there will be no arrests during potential incidents. The initiators will be just warned and identified. However, this does not eliminate intervention in the case of dangerous events."²²

On June 7, Edvard Beneš's resignation to this presidential office was officially announced. On June 14, the already communist parliament declared a new president, Klement Gottwald. He did not expect any eager ovations during the Sokol congress but still, he looked forward to a mild manifestation of loyalty. It was a misjudgment. The whole congress, especially the traditional closing parade, turned into a huge spontaneous demonstration against communist totalitarianism – the greatest until the late 1980s. While the participants were hailing to Edvard Beneš, the secret police registered 43 slogans by which tens of thousands parade participants refused the new regime in a polite, yet unequivocal way. "No one can dictate us who to love," was one of the chants of the parade participants. When passing the podium of Klement Gottwald and his team, the Sokol members went silently with their heads turned to the other side. The communists suddenly had someone to hate. In front of the whole Czechoslovakian society, the XI Sokol congress and especially its final parade undermined the February events as a victory of the working people, a fact which the communist were not going to leave without response. As early as on July 13, 1948, the new Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký, in his bulletin, appreciated the quality of congress performances, but simultaneously condemned the "bourgeois impoliteness and cockiness ... of plenty of sisters and several brothers, who turned their heads away when passing the stand with the president of republic."²³ the Sokol commission, presided over by Alexej Čepička, resolved that

- a) in its declaration, the ČOS board should condemn events of indiscipline and treason
- b) the members, who allowed these incidents to happen, should be expelled."²⁴

22 Ibid. Conference on the course of the XI Sokol slet 29. 6. 1948 at 10.30 AM, quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 137.

23 Sokolský věstník, 46, 1948, no. 29–30, p. 433.

24 NA Prague, f. Central operational committee NF, lib. 76. Minutes from the meeting of the

The parade participants were investigated by the State Security service, starting a new wave of expulsion from the Sokol organization, now aimed at all new regime opponents, including those who were pointed at by anyone for whatever reason. However, being expelled from Sokol did not mean an end to persecutions. New inquisitors rejected that “those affected by the purge should not be persecuted in their occupations”, reasoning with a question “what purge would that be?”²⁵ New ČOS leader, KSČ member Penninger encouraged mutual accusations in the Sokol units, “our regular members of progressive thought will charge against reactionary elements.”²⁶ Mayor Truhlář and other democratic members of the ČOS board fought vainly for preserving the rest of the inner democracy in Sokol. When evaluating the Sokol slet, KSČ leaders applied for the first time the theory of intensification of the class struggle, accepted at the Council of Communist Parties Information Bureau in Bucharest in June 1948. The proof can be found in the ÚVKŠČ board declaration on Sokol from, probably July or August, 1948. Taking a more thorough look at this declaration, one can see a speech of the most brutal Czechoslovakian communism period.

“The defeated February reactionaries have gathered all their power infiltrating in Sokol to misuse it politically. They managed to create several epicentres within Sokol, which manifested during the Slet parade by a reactionary scuffle, aimed at government, against the nation, against our people’s democratic republic. ... the defeated reactionary elements are trying to settle down and create vipers’ nests within Sokol ... the ÚVKŠČ board reminds us of the words of Lenin and Stalin that the transition between capitalism and socialism is a period of class struggle intensification ... all party organizational units are obliged to make a lesson out of the reactionary groups’ provocations at the XI Sokol congress.”²⁷

Nevertheless, the Sokol members were not giving up, especially at the local and regional levels, where the true Sokols still remained. The Moravian-Silesian board announced that it strictly condemned the purges, remarking that “Sokol was not treated like this not even under

Commission for Sokol 13. 7. 1948, quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 139.

25 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 430. Minutes from the meeting of the Commission for Sokol ÚAV NF, 23. 7. 1948. Quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 140.

26 Ibid.

27 NA Prague, f. Central operational committee NF, lib. 77. ÚV KSČ board proposal of the resolution on Sokol. Quoted in Uhlíř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 142.

Germanized Austria.”²⁸ Denis region representatives stated that “we took over the Sokolship from the dead hands of brothers and sisters tortured by executioners and it is our duty to pass it on clean and immaculate to the next generations. We cannot, and will not, condemn the display of free will in the same spirit as our famous national traditions. Our board asks the brotherly ČOS board to convey this manly standpoint, shared by all Sokol brotherhood, to government.”²⁹

The Sokol officials’ resistance to brutal political power, which did not think twice when using any means against its opponents, was not altogether in vain. Another breathtaking story could be written in Sokol history, a story of extraordinary bravery and loyalty to ideals, on which the Sokol organization was based. However, there was not any other victory than moral that these people could reach. All resistance officials were dismissed, many of them arrested and imprisoned. All democrats had to leave the ČOS board, Marie Provazníková emigrated. Furthermore, the communists were not satisfied with suppressing the democratic officials’ resistance. In September 1948, they took advantage of Edvard Beneš’s funeral, at which the Sokol members wanted to hold the last homage. This time, the Sokol officials, due to the current purges, were cautious and consulted their presence at the funeral with particular state authorities. However, State security spread false rumours that the Sokols were using the ex-president’s funeral to bring on the coup and assassination of Klement Gottwald. The mayor Josef Truhlář resigned, stating the anti-Sokol hysteria and State Security bullying at the time of Edvard Beneš’s funeral as his reasons. “What does Mladá Fronta write about sisters? They were furious with anger, not crying out of pity over Beneš, but because we failed to carry out a coup! What was that, when I was watched over as a ČOS mayor, the telephone was guarded; there was an entire police station down in the office! On the funeral day our board members were arrested!”³⁰

The communists did not desire the resignation of the ČOS mayor. He was the last one of the Sokol leaders who was still trusted and respected by Sokol members. The withdrawal of the last representative of the old team could result in a significant decrease in members, which was not

28 NA Prague, f. Central operational committee NF, lib. 76. Sokol Moravian-Silesian district to the board of ČOS, 3.8. 1948, quoted in Uhlř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 142.

29 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 441. Sokol Denis district to ČOS, 14.8. 1948, quoted in *ibid.*

30 NA Prague, f. ČOS, lib. 430. Board meeting 15. 9. 1948, quoted in Uhlř, J. B. – Waic, M.: Sokol proti totalitě 1938–1952. Praha 2001, p. 147.

very convenient to the communists who were boasting with the force of a unified physical education. At the same time, they knew that Josef Truhlář was too exhausted, old and lonely in his fight for the remains of Sokol rights and, therefore, he would comply with their requirements and sign anything they would lay before him. That is why they, without scruples and hesitation, promptly organized a campaign to keep Josef Truhlář as the head of the Sokols – “it is probably going to be necessary to promote an action to support him among Sokols, as well as in companies, possibly by official letters from well-known personalities. As agreed with the Prime Minister’s cabinet, a letter was sent to Josef Truhlář, apologizing for a mistake that prevented him from taking part in Dr. Beneš’s funeral in Sezimovo Ústí. Mayor Josef Truhlář is going to be visited and the role he had and will have in the history of Sokol and the people’s democracy will be pointed out to him.”³¹ Josef Truhlář eventually surrendered to abhorrent moral blackmail, changing his decision. However, he remained alone in the ČOS board, surrounded by the lackeys of new power, still not having any influence on the transformation of an organization thoroughly subordinated to political and ideological goals.

Between 1948 and 1949, considerable changes took place not only within the ČOS agenda, but also in creating new organizational structures. The traditional network of regional Sokol units were transformed into district and county organizations of ČOS – analogous to the state administrative structure. The most resolute alterations occurred within the cultural and educational activities of ČOS. Its agenda turned into an apologetics of the new “people’s democratic establishment”, the Sokol press was reorganized and a new ČOS edition plan was prepared.

Based on a ÚVKŠČ board resolution, the communist parliament (called the National Assembly) passed a law establishing “the State Committee of Physical Education and Sport (*Státní výbor pro tělesnou výchovu a sport*), formed by representatives of ČOS, national people’s organizations and excellent workers in the area of health, physical education and sports.”³² The members of this State Committee were to be named by the government. The law also established the State Office of Physical Education and Sport (*Státní úřad pro tělesnou výchovu a sport*), led by a government appointed member who was also head of the State Committee. General Ludvík Svoboda became the head of both the State Office and the State Committee. The communists assigned ČOS the ex-

31 NA Prague, f. Central operational committee NF, lib. 77. Cultural division 15. 9. 1948, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 147.

32 Law from 14. 7. 1949, On state care for physical education and sports.