

**“Neni Čechi neni doto ho!”**

“You’re not Czech if you’re not jumping up and down!”

Sport and Nationalism in Communist Czechoslovakia

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## **Introduction**

On March 28, 1969, the disheartened citizens of Czechoslovakia jumped up from in front of their televisions and ran outside to the streets to celebrate. In a country that had little reason to rejoice after being invaded by Soviet tanks seven months earlier, this was an extraordinary display of joy, nationalism, and Czech solidarity. The event that caused such excitement and later led to riots was the Czechoslovakian's defeat of the Soviet Union, 4-3, in the World Ice Hockey Championships.

During the past four centuries, the citizens of the modern day Czech Republic have survived under many oppressive rulers: the Hapsburgs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Nazis, and the communists of the Soviet Union. Throughout those years, the Czechs managed to maintain a sense of identity separate from that of their oppressors, and continued to fight for national liberation. They have demonstrated their spirit through many forms of resistance, including the creation of writer's unions, theater, student demonstrations, and worker's strikes. Another very important vehicle for nationalism, which is often overlooked, is sport. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the organization of sport into the Sokol, a mass gymnastics movement with nationalist ideology, played a key role for the Czechs. This role of sport in nationalism grew to an international scale with the Czechs' role in the conception of the modern day Olympic movement, and their participation in the Games.

In 1918, after the close of World War I, Czechoslovakia was established as a democracy. The citizen's, who I will refer to as Czechs, were free from foreign oppression for the first time since 1648. However, this freedom was cut short when the Nazis invaded in March of 1939, and proclaimed "The Protectorate of Bohemia and

Moravia.” The Nazis occupied these lands until the Red Army liberated Prague in May of 1945. It was a twist of fate that the American army, only 50 miles away in Plzen, waited for the Soviets to play the role of liberators. The American decision was one that would shape the next four decades for the Czech people, since a coup d’etat in 1948 proclaimed Czechoslovakia a communist nation under the watchful eye of the Soviet Union.

The communists encouraged participation in sport in Czechoslovakia, but the Soviets did not anticipate the nationalistic connotations of Czech sport. Opposition to the Soviet system of governance through sport reached its peak during and after the Prague Spring of 1968. Prague Spring was the attempt of the Czech people to free themselves from the restraints of Soviet ideology. For eight months, under the leadership of First Secretary Alexander Dubček, the Czech government reformed its laws (against Soviet wishes) with the aim of establishing a more democratic socialism. However, on August 21, 1968, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia with tanks. The Czech people were devastated by the failure of their efforts, and to them, the politicians who gave up the fight were at fault and therefore politics became tainted. As the cultural repression returned, the people gave up their political fight for freedom in a time period known as the normalization.

I will argue that during the normalization, because the Czechs and Soviets both attached such significance to it, sport remained a vehicle through which the Czechs could maintain their identity. Thus, a hockey game caused a celebration that turned into an anti-Soviet riot - exemplifying the connection between sport and nationalism for the Czechs. The first part of this thesis establishes the role of sport in Czech nationalism and

international politics, a role that enabled sport to remain a central part of Czech life under communist rule. This section relies on general studies of sport and international politics that look at the impact of sport worldwide, and then more specifically, in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War.

The second section provides a detailed history of sport in Czechoslovakia - its conception and connection with the nationalist movement for independence from the Hapsburgs, which would be repeated under communism. This information comes predominantly from a study of the Sokol movement by Claire Nolte and other books by Czechs on the sporting history of communist Czechoslovakia, translated into English. An explanation of how the Soviet Union used sport in its political ideology is provided in the third section, which discusses how Czech sport was used and viewed by the Soviets. This section elucidates how even under strict governance, the Czechs could express their hatred for their occupiers. Had the Soviets not attached such significance to sport, the Czechs would not have been able to celebrate sport in a nationalist manner during communism. James Riordan, a professor at the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom, is the expert in the history of sport under communism cited most.

In the fourth section, I use these three analyses to examine a specific moment in Czech history - the hockey game - where sport was able to play a nationalist role in a way that no other form of resistance could. Comparing Czechoslovakia to the Eastern European nations of Hungary and Poland shows how unique this expression of nationalism was to the Czechs. Since there are few resources on the history of sport in either of these countries, scholarly articles from the *International Journal of the History of Sport* provide the bulk of my information. In addition, the autobiography of Martina

Navratilova (a Czech born tennis star and winner of 18 singles grand slams, who is also famous for her defection to the United States in 1975) provides insight into the aforementioned hockey game and similar events that support my thesis. It also provides a unique perspective about life in communist Czechoslovakia and what sport meant to her. Navratilova's memoir and various historians' descriptions of the hockey game and the atmosphere surrounding Prague Spring and the normalization, symbolize the importance of sport as a vehicle for nationalism in Czech history.

**I. Sport, Nationalism, and International Competition:  
“Neni Čechi neni doto ho!” (“You’re not Czech if you’re not jumping up and down”<sup>1</sup>)**

Nationalism can be defined in terms of politics, culture, religion, and borders. Regardless of form, it is manifested in one nation exalting itself over another, creating a sense of pride that the people can celebrate and around which they can unify. One of the more powerful vehicles for nationalism is sport. Watching representatives of one's nation compete can intensify the sense of shared national identity. This intense feeling of identification is the heart of the relationship between sports and nationalism.

“[R]arely do these other human enterprises ‘enter into men’s daily disputes or lay claim to basic loyalties in the way or to the degree that sport does. It is sport that catches the interest and elicits the devotion of both young and old, the wise and foolish, the educated and the uneducated.’”<sup>2</sup>

One game or even one moment of glory can stay in the memory of an athlete, a spectator, a team, or a nation. Sport can enable a people to identify with their nation, thereby becoming a nationalist institution.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a common chant in the stands of major Czech sporting events.

<sup>2</sup> Baum, Gregory, and John Coleman, ed. *Sport*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989. p. 3

Once sport began to appear on the international scene, its meaning and the sense of nationalism that each nation brought to each contest increased exponentially, bringing sport to a new level of importance in history. Pierre de Coubertin, who founded the modern day Olympics, believed that sport could bring nations together in peaceful goodwill. He is quoted as saying: “[t]o ask the people to love one another...is childish. [But] to ask them to respect one another, it is first necessary to know one another<sup>3</sup>...through sport.” Instead, international play has shaped sport into a political and cultural competition between nations. In this forum sport plays a large role in nationalistic identities and in political decisions, and provides an acceptable arena for expressing feelings of hate towards one’s neighbors.

#### i) Czech Nationalism

Before the fall of Communism in 1989, the Czechs had experienced only twenty years of independence. Over the past four centuries, the Czech people never forgot their identity of being Czech first, and Austro-Hungarian, German, or Soviet second. There have been many vehicles that have maintained this nationalism, proving the Czechs’ ability to overcome their painful yet triumphant history of reoccurring repression. This history has become an inherent part of their national identity. Ernest Gellner, in his study of nationalism notes that “[t]here can be few nations in Europe which live on terms of quite such constant intimacy with their own history as do the Czechs. For Czechs, historicism is virtually a way of life.”<sup>4</sup> This memory of their past pushed them to

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<sup>3</sup> Daly, John A., intro. p. xviii. *Sport in the Global Village*. Wilcox, Ralph C. ed. West Virginia: Fitness Information Technology, Inc., 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Gellner, Ernest. *Encounters with Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994. p. 132

continue the struggle for freedom, so that today, the nation of the Czech Republic stands strong.

Tad Szulc, a prominent Polish writer and journalist, even labels the first section of his book “The Dusk: In which a Glance Backward at Certain Events and People Provides Insight into Things to Come.”<sup>5</sup> He does not write about sport and nationalism specifically, but what he does mention is that a hockey match caused the end of Dubček’s political career. In an historical account of two decades, it seems odd that a single sport match is mentioned. But in fact, Szulc is attributing to sport a role as an important vehicle for nationalism.

Sport is described by several observers of Czech culture as the foundation for the mass movement of nationalism aimed at building a democratic Czech movement. Some Czechs have said that the founder of the gymnastics movement, Miroslav Tyrš, “was one of those who assured the freedom of our nation.”<sup>6</sup> For the Czechs, sport has always been a forum to unify and promote their nationalist ideals and goals. However, it was not just Czech sport’s history that caused the commotion it did so often. Sporting matches that were international competitions against the communist nation occupying their country made sport important.

## ii) Sport as Politics at the International Level

James Riordan argues that sport became truly international after the First World War, for it was then that “politicians began to appreciate its potential as a vehicle of

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<sup>5</sup> Szulc, Tad. *Czechoslovakia Since World War II*. New York: The Viking Press, 1997. p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Domorázek, Karel. *Dr. Miroslav Tyrš: The Founder of the Sokol Union*. Prague: Czechoslovakian Foreigners Office, 1920. p. 4

national values and policies.”<sup>7</sup> After the War, sport was fully spread around the globe, in large part due to the promotion of British colonizers. International federations were created, guaranteeing consistent rules for international competitions such as the Olympics, the World Cup, (started in 1928) and other sports world championships.<sup>8</sup>

Competition of one foreign nation against another became more than a game, it became a political battle for superiority. The Treaty of Versailles, which concluded the war, had created ethnic nation-states based on the idea of self-determination. Sport became part of this nationalist idea, pitting one nation against another, and solidifying a national identity. For instance, France’s fear of not being victorious at the projected Berlin Games in 1916 “stimulated a vigorous debate about how to save its honor against a hereditary enemy”<sup>9</sup> - Germany. In addition, after the war, Britain banned Germany and its allies (Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey) from international competition because of their role in the War, and they were not invited to the 1920 Games.<sup>10</sup> Britain further claimed that other countries who agreed to play the losers of World War I should also be isolated from international competitions,<sup>11</sup> an obvious example of sport taking on a role bigger than itself. Thus, interests other than sport were taking precedence in international sporting competition; the Olympics were no longer just games, they were forums where world politics could play out as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Riordan, James, intro. *Sport and International Politics*. Arnaud, Pierre, and James Riordan, ed. London: E & FN Spon, 1998. p. 1

<sup>8</sup> Arnaud, Pierre. “Sport and International Relations.” Ed. Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan, *Sport and International Politics*... p. 20

<sup>9</sup> Holt, Richard. “Interwar sport and interwar relations: some conclusions.” Ed. Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan, *Sport and International Politics*... p. 211

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920\\_Summer\\_Olympics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_Summer_Olympics)

<sup>11</sup> Holt, Richard. “Interwar sport and interwar relations: some conclusions.” Ed. Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan, *Sport and International Politics*... p. 211

The interwar years also saw the rise of new totalitarian regimes- the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) and the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy- “that put the international sports movement on the horns of the dilemma.”<sup>12</sup> The new governments had something to prove to the world and to their own people. Sport became the forum. The most obvious example is Hitler’s use of the 1936 games in Berlin as a propaganda stunt to show the world the superiority of the Nazis and the Aryan Race.

The Cold War brought this use of sport to a higher level of awareness, and each competition between an eastern and western team became a battle between communism and capitalism. As George Orwell commented, during the Cold War, international sport provided a context that allowed “the lunatic modern habit of identifying oneself with large power units and seeing everything in terms of competitive prestige.”<sup>13</sup> Leaders of international sport did not want it to take on the meaning Orwell attributed to it, and made efforts to combine the supranational political and sporting organizations to ensure sport remained just sport. For example, in 1920, some statesmen discussed the possibility of replacing the IOC with the League of Nations. They thought it would be an appropriate body for organizing international sport because they “perceived that the two institutions subscribed to the same value system: pacifism and internationalism.”<sup>14</sup> However, “[s]port feeds into patriotism and reflects the social dramas and contradictions of the [national] culture.”<sup>15</sup> Once a game started, there was no way of stopping the political implications. Such was the fear of anti-communist IOC president Avery Brundage who initially opposed the Soviets’ involvement in the Olympics after so many

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<sup>12</sup> Arnaud, Pierre. “Sport- a means of national representation.” *Sport and International Politics...* p. 6

<sup>13</sup> Wagg, Stephen, and David L. Andrews, ed. and intro. *East Plays West*. London: Routledge, 2007. p. 3

<sup>14</sup> Arnaud, Pierre. “Sport- a means of national representation.” *Sport and International Politics...* pp. 10-11

<sup>15</sup> Baum and Coleman, *Sport...* p. 7

decades. However, after visiting the Soviet Union in 1954 (after the Soviet Union first competed in 1952) and witnessing dazzling sports parades, he became a promoter of communist sport and its relationship with the IOC. This relationship was permitted as long as Konstantin Andrianov, the Soviet representative in the IOC, could assure the rest of the world that

“[t]he Soviet athletes treat the Olympic Games not ‘as a major battle in the Cold War’ but as an international forum for dissemination of the noble Olympic ideas of peace and consolidation of friendship between the nations, he and the IOC did at least give the illusion of working together for peace.”<sup>16</sup>

And so, international sport continued with its leaders turning blind eye to its political implications.

### iii) Sport as War

Even though the IOC chose to ignore the politics that sport encompassed, most nations could not, especially as sport began to take on the characteristics of war, giving it an even more prominent political role. The most obvious reason for this connection is that in many countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia, athletes could quickly be turned into soldiers. Not only were they physically fit, but they were more mentally adapted for a soldier’s life. In addition, activities such as marching and shooting were competitive sporting events themselves.

George Orwell is often quoted as saying that sport is “war minus the shooting.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Stephen Wagg and David Andrews, this quote was not just an observation,

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<sup>16</sup> Parks, Jenifer. “Verbal Gymnastics: Sports, Bureaucracy, and the Soviet Union’s entrance into the Olympic Games, 1946-1952,” ed. Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, *East Plays West*...p. 41

<sup>17</sup> Gingrov, Vassil. “Fitness ‘Wars’: Purpose and Politics in Communist State-Building. Mangan, J.A., ed. *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War without Weapons*. London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003. p. 253

but a hostile social commentary on expressions of nationalism in sport. The quote is from “The Sporting Spirit,” an essay written soon after World War II ended in 1945. The less famous sentences that came before his well known quote show his true opinion: “[s]erious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting.”<sup>18</sup> International leaders claimed that sport would promote peaceful connections between enemy nations, but Orwell could not understand why Britain would allow competitions (such as the Soviet Dynamo football club tour in November of 1945) to take place when it would create “’orgies of hatred’ and ‘create more animosity.’”<sup>19</sup> This is indeed what happened. Athletes began carrying the hopes of a nation on their shoulders, and though no shots were fired in the Cold War, for many, each match was a small war.

Orwell did have a point, but perhaps this competition may have actually avoided direct military conflict,<sup>20</sup> as many have suggested. Sport was a way for political battles to take place in a “safe” environment. For both the athletes and the spectators, it was “a useful catharsis for innate human aggressive instincts, a kind of moral equivalent of war.”<sup>21</sup> This is what makes sport so successful as a vehicle for nationalism; these warlike emotions take on a role of great significance and a sporting event can seem like the success or failure of the nation. “[T]he mimic emotions of sport can act as a ‘safety valve’ in politics that they would express and deflate nationalist sentiment rather than

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<sup>18</sup> As quoted from Wagg and Andrews, *East Plays West*...p. 1

<sup>19</sup> Wagg and Andrews, intro., *East Plays West*... 1

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>21</sup> Baum and Coleman, *Sport*...p. 4

enhance it.”<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that Coakley uses Czechoslovak ice hockey victories over the Soviet Union as an example of this safety valve.

#### iv) Czech Sport at the International Level

For the Czechs, the link between sport and nationalism emerged almost 150 years ago, when the Czechs were under the control of the Hapsburg Empire. The gymnastics movement known as Sokol was one of the first nationalist sports movements. The Sokol movement opened the door to the Olympics where a Czech was a member of the first IOC, moving the Czechs as a nation into the international arena. With the Sokol pushing for independence for Czechoslovakia and the international acknowledgement of the IOC, through sport, the Czechs could claim that they belonged as a politically independent nation. Just as any other nationalist country, the Czechs were excited to beat other nations in the international arena. If they were organized enough to support an individual athlete or an entire team, they were surely able to run their own country. Sport was part of the nationalist drive in the Czechs gaining their independence in 1918.

Under communism, sport was to play a different role for the Czechs than it had under the Hapsburgs or while they were an independent nation. Unable to express their desire for independence, and prohibited from forming national organizations, sport remained a way for nationalism to be articulated. Navratilova reminisces how in “Czechoslovakia we always took pride in the fact that Jaroslav Drobny had won

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<sup>22</sup> Arbena, Joseph L. “Mexico City 1968” Ed. Jay Coakely and Eric Dunning, *Handbook of Sports Studies*. London: SAGE Publications, 2000. p. 351

Wimbledon back in 1954...and in Vera Sukova, who had been a finalist [in gymnastics] in 1962.”<sup>23</sup>

Sport took on an even more important role for Czech nationalism when it came to competing against the Soviets. From 1948 to 1989, the Soviets occupied Czechoslovakia, running its government, and oppressing its people. Under communist control, it was difficult for the Czech people to express themselves freely. From Stalin’s purges, the Slansky trials, and Novotny’s reign of terror, the Czechs had good reason to keep their hate for their oppressors quiet. However, the characteristics of sport in the international arena made conveying their hatred of the Soviets acceptable. By beating the Soviets in sport the Czech people could get revenge. “Sport provides a useful and apparently harmless way of expressing nationalist sentiments...For the Czech spectators at the rink-side or in front of the TV it provides a legitimate excuse to shout anti-Russian slogans,”<sup>24</sup> and not worry about being thrown out of the party or in jail. This concept is reaffirmed by Navratilova:

“In my country, sports were one way to show national pride, one of the few safe ways. You could cheer for a Czech hockey team or soccer team, even against the Soviet Union. It was a tradition going back to the nineteenth century when people formed sports clubs like Sokol, to compete in gymnastics. It was the only way you could say to the Hapsburgs, ‘Look, we’re still Czechs, even if we now belong to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.’”<sup>25</sup>

Here Navratilova is asserting how deep sport ran in the Czech’s nationalist tendencies, its historical importance, and its ability to express the true feelings of the people.

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<sup>23</sup>Navratilova, Martina, George Vecsey. *Martina*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1985. p. 165

<sup>24</sup>Freeman, Simon, and Roger Boyes. *Behind the Scenes of Sports: Sports behind the Iron Curtain*. London: Proteus Publishing Group, 1980. p. 25

<sup>25</sup>Navratilova and Vecsey, *Martina*...p. 32

## II. The History of Sport in Czechoslovakia: “To be Czech is to be a Sokol”<sup>26</sup>

With deep roots in the history of Czechoslovakia, sport played a central role in the Czech identity that existed during the Communist rule, serving as a source of pride for the people. The organization of Czech sport dates before most Eastern European countries established sporting institutions, and is connected to the nationalist movement for liberation. This role enabled sport to be a beacon of hope and a source of pride for the Czech people during the normalization, when nothing else was.

The official website of the Czech Republic boasts that sport in the Czech lands began with a “long tradition and collection of many titles and medals” starting with knights’ tournaments in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and sledging and skating in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> The first modern sport, however, dates back more than 100 years with the founding of the first Czech physical training organization, known as Sokol (falcon, in Czech).<sup>28</sup> This was the point where sport and the idea of the Czech nation were combined, and therefore the origin of Czech sporting nationalism. Miroslav Tyrš, the founder of the Sokol movement, was inspired by the national renewal that had been awakened by the 1848 Revolution. His newfound Czech spirit was accompanied by an articulation of a Czech national program, from which he would take upon himself the duty to turn it into a mass movement.

A student of philosophy in Prague, Tyrš was also a member and trainer of his local gymnastics club. It was the combination of the two that gave him the prestige and ability to translate his nationalistic goals into a national gymnastics organization for the

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<sup>26</sup> Van Bottenburg, Maarten. Trans. Beverley Jackson. *Global Games*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. p. 128

<sup>27</sup> [www.czech.cz](http://www.czech.cz) “Historical development of sports and sports organizations in the Czech Republic”

<sup>28</sup> Kotrba, Jan, Zenek Illman and Jiri Kossl. *Czechoslovakia and Olympic Games*. Prague: Orbis Press Agency, 1984. p. 9

masses.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, for Tyrš, “from the outset the idea of physical fitness was linked with political aims—primarily the struggle for national independence against the Austro-Hungarian cultural and political repression.”<sup>30</sup> This meant that sport continued to be linked with political aims for the Czechs as a way of expressing their nationalist claims for independence against their future occupiers.

The Sokol gymnastic movement was based ironically, on a German gymnastic movement, but Tyrš’ Sokol had a “spirit and direction that were peculiarly Czech.”<sup>31</sup> The German movement, *Turnverein*, had been created 50 years earlier by Friedrich Ludwig Jan. Jan aimed to “install his gymnasts with a sense of national duty and solidarity.”<sup>32</sup> Tyrš’ organization incorporated this sense with the drive for political freedom:

“Yes, we openly admit that we think of the club as a mere modest beginning, that we would little value our training if we were not totally convinced that the mature nation will someday embrace our cause, that it will put down roots throughout the breadth and depth of our homeland.... We do not train only for ourselves... rather we dedicate our fervent struggle to our homeland and nation, and because of this, the people welcome us and cheer our parades.”<sup>33</sup>

Tyrš’ reference is to the many parades that the Sokol clubs were able to stage with the influx of membership that occurred after the Sokol’s inception in 1862. Within three years, there were 19 Sokol clubs in Bohemia, Moravia, and lower Austria, with a totaled 1,712 memberships. By 1871, the number of clubs had leapt to 50 with 10,516 memberships.<sup>34</sup> The Czechs became known internationally for their Sokol rallies, which

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<sup>29</sup> Nolte, Claire E. *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002. p. 28

<sup>30</sup> Kostka, Vladimir “Czechoslovakia,” ed. Riordan, James, *Sport under Communism: The U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, The G.D.R., China, Cuba*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978. p. 58

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>32</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 5

<sup>33</sup> As Quoted in Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 56

<sup>34</sup> Table in Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 185

gathered clubs from all over the area to put on shows for people who had also traveled, some from other countries, to witness this extraordinary display of athleticism and talent.

Sport and nationalism were linked with military imagery and ideas in Czechoslovakia, as they were worldwide. With its uniforms, flags, and marching drills the Sokol was, in fact, very similar to an army, and the Sokol clubs were “[p]opularly known as the ‘Czech National Army.’”<sup>35</sup> In preparation for the looming war between Austria and Prussia in 1866, Tyrš proposed incorporating weapons training and other military exercises into the Sokol program to create, in his words, “the core of a future national armed force for the defense of the homeland.”<sup>36</sup> While his idea was rejected, Tyrš’ manifesto for the Sokol, “Our Task, Direction, and Goal,” does detail the political and military functions of the Sokol:

“[t]he Purpose of the Sokol, which is for all classes and levels, is for the present time the physical, and in part moral, education of the entire Czech nation, its upbringing to strength, courage, nobility and increased military preparedness. It must therefore see to it that in the end all the people find themselves in its ranks.”<sup>37</sup>

This is only one example of published work from the Sokol, which had a substantial body of literature and its own journal that helped promote ideological and professional unity.<sup>38</sup>

World War I was an opportunity for the Sokol to actually fight for an independent Czech nation. On the home front, before the Bohemia Sokol Movement (COŠ) was disbanded by the Hapsburgs in 1915, the Sokol clubs turned their training halls into hospitals and raised funds for the families of the dead and wounded. Josef Scheiner, Tyrš’s protégé, was also active in a secret committee that supported the international

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<sup>35</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 62

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76

<sup>37</sup> As quoted in Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 92

<sup>38</sup> Kostka, Vladimir “Czechoslovakia” ed. Riordan, James, *Sport Under Communism*...p. 59

efforts to create an independent Czech state after the war by Tomáš Masaryk, who became the president of the new nation.<sup>39</sup> The Sokol also had an important role on the fighting front, inspiring mass defections to the Russian side and sustaining the morale of thousands of Czech POWs. Masaryk noted the Sokol's function during the War by saying: "[t]he principles and ideas of the Sokol organization served as a standard; and though I was well aware of the difference between a soldier and a 'Sokol,' the influence of the Sokol was great and good."<sup>40</sup>

During the inter-war years of Czechoslovakia's independence, the Sokol became a governmental organization. In 1920, the number of clubs reached 2,630, with 557,000 adult members.<sup>41</sup> When the Second World War seemed imminent, the Sokol took up its role as a nationalist movement for the people once again, and by 1937, the Sokol had 800,000 members.<sup>42</sup> In 1938, on the eve of the ill-fated Munich Conference, the Sokol held a massive demonstration (known as a Slet) "which was intended as a show of defiance against the nation's enemies."<sup>43</sup> However, there was little the Czechs could do as their fate was decided for them by the west. When the Nazis took over, realizing the power of the Sokol movement, they disbanded it once again. Another futile Sokol effort for national revival took place in 1948, only a few months before the communists took over the government and Czech sport. The Sokol did make a comeback one last time during the Prague Spring of 1968, but after the Soviet invasion it was promptly disbanded once more.

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<sup>39</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 179

<sup>40</sup> As quoted in Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 180

<sup>41</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 180

<sup>42</sup> Guttman, Allen. *Sports*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. p. 281

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180

### i) Czechs in the Olympics

The modern day Olympics are another aspect of sport that is entwined with the history of Czech sport and Czech nationalism. The Czechs boast that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jan Amos Comenius, a famous Czech pedagogue, recommended that the Olympic Games be regularly organized.<sup>44</sup> While it would not be until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that a Frenchman, Pierre de Coubertin, would succeed in starting the movement for the reorganization of the games, the Czechs played a significant role. It was actually the Sokol movement that got the Czechs so deeply involved in the Olympics. Tyrš was an advocate of the “Olympic idea of antiquity...and emphasized the importance of physical training for the overall harmonic development of both individuals and society”<sup>45</sup> in his Sokol. He compared the first Sokol rally of 1882 to the Olympic Games and “labeled them as the Czech Olympics.”<sup>46</sup> The Czech’s success in organized sport led Coubertin to seek a Czech colleague to would join him in his efforts to reinvent the modern Olympics, using the Sokol as a model. Coubertin found Jiří Guth, a Czech high-school teacher and a member of the Sokol movement, and invited him to the 1894 Congress in Paris where he proposed that Guth should become a member of the newly established International Olympic Committee (IOC).<sup>47</sup>

As Guth brought Czech sport to the Olympic movement, he also brought the nationalist goal of independence from the Hapsburg rule to which Czech sport was dedicated. The Czech Olympic Committee (COV) was not linked to, nor did it necessarily get along with, the Sokol movement, but it was also an inspiration to the

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<sup>44</sup> Kotrba, Jan, *Czechoslovakia and Olympic Games...*p. 9

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>47</sup> Kolar, František and Jiri Kössl. “Origin and Development of the Czech and Czechoslovakian Olympic Committee.” *Journal of Olympic History*. Autumn, 1994, Vol. 2, No. 3, p.11-26

Czech people. The COV was founded on May 18, 1899, and sent five athletes and two officials to the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, where František Janda-Suk earned second place in the discus. “Independent participation in the Olympic Games and the fact that Jíří Guth was member of the IOC had a great political and cultural impact on Czech physical education and sport.”<sup>48</sup> This was the only area where “the Czechs appeared as an independent nation on the international forum, separately from the Austrians and Hungarians.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, by participating in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Olympic Games, the Czech’s sporting independence preceded its political independence,<sup>50</sup> and the country’s drive for independence was thus entwined with sport. Not only did the Czechs appear separately, they held a position “equal to that of others coming from developed and politically independent countries, demonstrating thus the cultural and political existence of the Czech nation,”<sup>51</sup> thereby ensuring that Czech sport and the Olympic movement became part of the struggle of the Czech people for national liberation.<sup>52</sup>

Participating as an independent nation in sport was in fact a struggle for the Czechs, for the Austro-Hungarians avidly protested the Czech lands being represented as more than an Austrian province.<sup>53</sup> It was not until the liberation in 1918 that Czechoslovakia could fully participate as an independent nation. The gymnastic movement in Central and Eastern Europe included sports such as fencing, archery, weightlifting, swimming, riding, and even dancing and singing.<sup>54</sup> The revival of the modern Olympics encouraged the Czechs to begin participating in the more team oriented

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<sup>48</sup> Kotrba, Jan, *Czechoslovakia and Olympic Games*...p. 11

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>50</sup> “Czechoslovakia and Olympism” *Olympic Review*, May 1977, No. 115, p. 318-336. p. 320.

<sup>51</sup> Kotrba, Jan, *Czechoslovakia and Olympic Game*...pp. 11-12

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

<sup>53</sup> Kolar and Kössl, “Origin and Development of the Czech and Czechoslovakian Olympic Committee”... p. 13

<sup>54</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*...p. 84

contests that were more popular in Western Europe at the time, such as tennis, football, ice hockey, athletics (track and field), rowing, and wrestling. While these sports had been played informally in Bohemia, they were not organized until the competition of the Olympics pressured the Czechs to succeed in them internationally.

## ii) The Sokol Lives On

Even though the communists disbanded the Sokol movement in 1948, its spirit remained, shaping events that would encourage nationalism in the future. The Czechs were allowed to compete as a separate nation from the Soviet Union in international events which fostered nationalist sentiments. In 1968, when the Sokol briefly returned, it was because of its link with the nationalist drive for independence that caused the Prague Spring. The excitement of the people in their political freedom is shown in sport as they optimistically began a movement to bring the 1980 Olympics to Prague. However, after the Soviet tanks rolled in and normalization began, the idea was promptly tabled.

Even the Soviet invasion could not quell the nationalist spirit behind sport. At the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, only months after the Soviets invaded, the Czech athletes became an icon for national liberation for their people. During the opening ceremony on October 12, the crowd loudly voiced its solidarity with the Czechs and gave only polite applause for the Soviets. After attempts to prohibit the Soviets from attending the Games failed, the Czech athletes requested to be placed in a different housing bloc than the Soviets, to demonstrate that they were not, in fact, comrades.

In gymnastics, the world cheered on Vera Čáslavská, the “tiny Czech [who took] on the Soviet Union, its gargantuan oppressor.”<sup>55</sup> Vera was a great gymnast who supported the Prague Spring, and after the Soviets invaded, she signed the Manifesto of 2000 Words (a document objecting to the Soviet’s violation of the Warsaw Pact). But afterwards, afraid of the consequences, she fled to the mountains to hide. To train for the upcoming games, it is said that Vera practiced by swinging on tree branches and by tumbling in grass fields.<sup>56</sup> Because of her status as a champion athlete, the government gave her amnesty and allowed her to compete in the games. In Mexico City, Vera became a hero to all oppressed people. Fans erupted into cheers whenever she appeared and even forced the judges to increase her score. The most dramatic showing of solidarity took place when Vera shared the podium with the Soviets during the awarding of medals for the floor exercise, and the Czech national anthem was intentionally played first. While the Soviet anthem was played, Vera turned her head so that she would not have to look at the red banner. When she returned home, Vera presented her medals to the leaders of Prague Spring as a gesture of strength and solidarity.<sup>57</sup>

### **III. Sports and Communism: “Learn to be victorious, learn from the Soviet Union”<sup>58</sup>**

In 1948, a communist coup d’etat put Czechoslovakia under Soviet control. As with every other satellite nation, the Czechs had to adapt to a communist government and a communist way of life. Luckily for the Czechs, the Soviet ideology of sport closely

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<sup>55</sup> The Olympic Century: The Official History of the Modern Olympic Movement, Volume 17. *The Olympiad: Mexico City 1968, Sapporo 1972*. Los Angeles: Sport Research & Publications Inc., 1996. p. 44

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47

<sup>57</sup> The Olympic Century: The Official History of the Modern Olympic Movement, Volume 17. *The Olympiad: Mexico City 1968, Sapporo 1972*...p. 49

<sup>58</sup> Freedman and Boyes, *Sports Behind the Iron Curtain*...p. 54

overlapped their own, and the Soviets even used the Sokol as a model in their mass movement. By allowing sport to remain an important activity, the Soviets were actually allowing the Czechs to hold on to a symbol of Czech nationalism. This attached an even greater significance to every game that they Czechs won, allowing sport to remain a vehicle for Czech identity and nationalism when little else remained.

### i) The Soviet Sports Machine

During the Cold War, the arms race was not the only competition with the West; the machine that was Soviet sport gave the West a good scare. In the Olympics and at other international sporting events the Soviets came out of nowhere, after decades of abstaining from participation, and dominated. The West tried to justify their defeats with assertions, based in fact, of drug use, amateurs paid by the state, and very masculine women athletes who were cogs of the giant communist machine. One line was that the communist athletes did so well because they feared that their failure would be punished by the state.<sup>59</sup> In reality, the Soviet sport machine was not a new phenomenon created by the Communists; it had its roots in Russian history and the people's traditions.<sup>60</sup>

The first gymnastics club in tsarist Russia was formed in 1830. Gymnastics (focusing on activities like rhythmic gymnastics and body building)<sup>61</sup> were encouraged to the nobility as being beneficial for health and education. Similar to the Czech and German movements, sport had its roots in a nationalist cause, though not one of the common people: "Russian gym was intended to refurbish the Russian aristocracy,

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<sup>59</sup> Riordan, James. *Soviet Sport...* p. 22

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93

especially after the Crimean War.”<sup>62</sup> Mass sport for the rest of the population generally lagged because of the rural demographics.

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the leaders of the Soviet Union had a difficult time deciding what role sport would play in the new socialist society. On one hand, competitive Western sport, such as many of those featured in the Olympics, were seen as a part of the hated capitalist system and bourgeois class- they were dangerous, irrational, and in Russia were accused of being “remnants of a decadent past.”<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, sport could morally raise and unify a people whose society had been shattered by the Revolution-“sport [was] the open gate to physical culture.”<sup>64</sup> The latter argument won, and the Soviet politicians used their country's sporting tradition to connect to people and make them conform to their ideology. The benefits that sport could provide outweighed all ideological uncertainty. For the Soviet Union to succeed, it had to unite the entire population. It was thought that widespread participation in sport was:

“a measure of the effectiveness with which the resources of the entire society can be brought to bear on the encouragement of participation at all levels and on the development of talents of all kinds.”<sup>65</sup>

To use sport to its full capability, the Soviet politicians had to make it fit within Marxist ideology. This was not difficult, as Marx had stressed the interdependence of the mental and physical states of human beings.<sup>66</sup> By referring to sport not as a game, but as a useful activity to fill leisure time, Marx appeared to encourage sport. As he said: “in socialism, free time becomes a period of full development of the person only when it

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p 94

<sup>63</sup> Arnaud, Pierre, James Riordan. Ed. *Sport and International Politics*. p. 68.

<sup>64</sup> Riordan *Soviet Sport*...p. 30

<sup>65</sup> Riordan, James, *Soviet Sport*... p. 25

<sup>66</sup> Riordan, James. “The impact of Communism on sport.” *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, ed. James Riordan and Arnd Krüger. London: E & FN Spon, 1999. p. 49.

impacts on their labour productivity."<sup>67</sup> Communist ideology could therefore make a strong athlete and a worker using his free time responsibly, interchangeable. Lenin brought Marx's ideas of participation even further to involve competition. He argued that socialism put everyone on an equal plane and that competitive sport had the political utility of identifying and eliminating the enemy, or parasites as he called them, from blending in.

"In order to render these parasites harmless to socialist society we must organize the accounting and control of the amount of work done and the production and distribution by the entire people...we must rouse among them-and organize on a national scale-competition in the sphere of organizational achievement."<sup>68</sup>

Once sport was proclaimed a matter of state interest, it became a mandatory part of everyday life. Those not participating were considered to be lacking "Communist consciousness."<sup>69</sup>

In the 1920's, Soviet sport began to play the role of transforming the general population. The reach of sport was extremely broad, as the health minister, Nikolai Semashko, described:

"[i]t not only fortifies the various organs of the body, it aids mental development, teaches attentiveness, punctuality and precision of movement; it develops will power, strength and skill- the very virtues that should distinguish Soviet people."<sup>70</sup>

Sport's first role was to rebuild the Red Army that had been devastated by World War II, and the characteristics that Semashko described as being developed by sport also described what a soldier should be. All sports clubs and their equipment were handed

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<sup>67</sup> As quoted in Gingrov, Vassil. "Fitness 'Wars': Purpose and Politics in Communist State-Building. Mangan, J.A., ed. *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War without Weapons* ... p. 254

<sup>68</sup> As quoted *Ibid.*, p. 262

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262

<sup>70</sup> Riordan, James, *Soviet Sport*...p. 30

over to the military and a “crash programme [was] designed to promote physical fitness in all people of recruitable age.”<sup>71</sup> Military drill and weapon handling was also added to the general gymnastics education programs.<sup>72</sup> One notable example of the use of sport for the military was the Dynamo sports club, which was established to keep the infamous KGB fit.<sup>73</sup>

Sport was also used as a mechanism to spread the Soviet ideology to the proletariat in the outreaches of the country and unify these citizens under the new system. Sport was further utilized to promote general health standards for the majority of the population. For instance, in the uncultured rural regions, of which there were many in Russia, encouraging sport was a positive and useful alternative to the drinking, fighting, and generally unhealthy atmosphere that could be detrimental to the new nation. Slogans demonstrating this use of sport were: “Physical Culture 24 Hours a Day!” and “Help the Country with a Toothbrush!”<sup>74</sup>

To accomplish all this, the state put on sporting festivals and rituals such as the Spartakiad (similar to those of the Sokol) to bring the proletariat together “to crystallize the meaning it sought to attach to physical culture.”<sup>75</sup> Events such as the Spartakiad could “[p]resent an alternative mechanism for using primordial loyalties to build political unity and allegiance to the modern civil state.”<sup>76</sup> However, Robert Edelman, a professor of Russian history and the history of sport, argues that these events did not really work, for spectators did not want to watch the gymnastic sports and less than a third of the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>73</sup> Freeman and Boyes. *Behind the Iron Curtain...* p. 75

<sup>74</sup> Riordan, James, *Soviet Sport...* p. 28

<sup>75</sup> Edelman, Robert, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. p. 37

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

participants were actually working class or peasants.<sup>77</sup> However, he notes that "spectator sports" such as football, ice hockey, and basketball could still draw a large crowd that the communist leaders used to showcase the greatness of the system that allowed for these events to exist.

As the country stabilized, the Soviets started to look at the international scene and began to promote relations with their neighbors in the event that they might need an ally. Not surprisingly, sport was a perfect vehicle: “[s]port, in cutting across social, ethnic, religious and language barriers, was seen as one of the most suitable vehicles for Soviet cultural diplomacy.”<sup>78</sup> And so, Moscow staged the First Worker Spartakiad to not only demonstrate proletarian internationalism, but also counteract the 1928 Olympic Games that were taking place at the same time in Amsterdam.<sup>79</sup> This was also the same year that Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union. His motto of “socialism in one country” forced a nationalist character on all Soviet endeavors, including sport, pushing the Soviets to take pride together in their nation’s athletic representatives.<sup>80</sup>

The Soviet Union emerged from World War II an international power for the first time in decades. Since it was also at this time that sports nationalism and international sport began playing such a large political role, it was inevitable that the Soviet sport would seek to contend in the international arena. Stalin, however, refused to compete in the Olympics unless victory was ensured. Consequently, the Soviet Union began putting great effort and significant resources into competitive international sport. This meant that they needed more than just fit soldiers - they needed flawless athletes. So, they turned

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>78</sup> Riordan, James, “The sports policy of the Soviet Union, 1917-1941,” *Sport and International Politics*...p. 73

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70

<sup>80</sup> Freeman and Boyes, *Sports Behind the Iron Curtain*... p. 45

toward the youth of the country. A mandatory part of education became physical fitness in a program called “*Gotov k trudu i oborne*” (Ready for Labor and Defense or GTO). Physical education became a part of the public school system, and schools had a fitness syllabus and achievement quotas.<sup>81</sup> The promising athletes were sent to sports oriented schools, given special coaches, and had the backing of the Soviet government. Some children, especially female gymnasts, were even selected before primary school. The ultimate goal of each child/athlete was to acquire the status of Merited Master of the USSR.<sup>82</sup> The Soviets had thus created a pool from which they could hand pick the champions that would exalt their political system worldwide.

The life of the Soviet athletes was far better than that of the average Soviet citizen. Though they could not be paid by the state, champions were given better apartments, cars, and full access to all that the government had to offer in terms of equipment, instruction, and resources. To maintain an amateur ranking that would qualify the athletes for international games like the Olympics, the government insisted that these heroes were workers first and athletes second. Indeed, most athletes had jobs or were in the military. However, the time they actually spent at work was minimal and they instead devoted their days to mastering their sport. These athletes, with little choice in the matter, became the groomed athletic specimens of a nation. The government used them as model citizens for the general public who would inspire their comrades to achieve physical fitness and to believe in the ideology that allowed such fine athletes to prosper. The athlete played a similar role to that of the Stakhanovite labor hero's (a

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92

<sup>82</sup> Riordan, James, *Soviet Sport* ...p. 47

laborer who produced more than his quota), for the "qualities that made an individual worker a labor hero were thought to be similar to those exhibited by great sportsmen."<sup>83</sup>

On the international front, during the Cold War, sport marches became metaphors for the military war that was waiting to erupt. Sport and its nationalistic link with politics and warlike imagery became the physical battlefield of the great ideological and political war between capitalism in the west and communism in the east. Therefore, the Soviets viewed their sporting victories as a symbol of socialist superiority.

“The Soviet Union regarded itself as a progressive society, qualitatively different from a bourgeois society, a country in which all conditions necessary to the development of the individual were created and guaranteed by the Constitution. Participation, excellence, and victories in international competitions were thus viewed as proving and confirming the superiority of a socialist society over capitalism.”<sup>84</sup>

The Soviets participated in their first Olympics since 1912 in the 1952 Helsinki games. They shocked the world by winning 29% of the medals,<sup>85</sup> and ending up second behind the United States in overall standings. Since victories in athletic events were comparable to political and ideological victories,

“to see a Soviet sprinter flash past the winning post is the ultimate reassurance for the Russian people and the sportsmen themselves that their way of life is the correct one....Not only is a gold medal a triumph-it is concrete proof that the communist system actually works better than the capitalist system does in the West.”<sup>86</sup>

Tales of gold medals and other victories were fed to the population as a source of pride,<sup>87</sup> and to promote participation and interest in sport. This propaganda resulted in so much

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<sup>83</sup> Edelman, Robert, *Serious Fun*...p. 36

<sup>84</sup> Shneidman, Norman N. *The Soviet Road to Olympus: Theory and Practice of Soviet Physical Culture and Sport*. Ontario: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1978. p. 24

<sup>85</sup> Freeman and Boyes. *Sports Behind the Iron Curtain*...p. 7

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>87</sup> Allison, Lincoln. “Sport and Nationalism.” Ed. Jay Coakely and Eric Dunning, *Handbook of Sports Studies*...p. 52

activity that only championships were reported in the main newspapers. Thirty-one other publications were circulated to deal with general physical education and sport.<sup>88</sup>

## ii) Sport in the “Satellite States”

Just as the Soviets used sport to serve the state in their own country, as they took over the governments of their new satellite states they required the puppet governments to adopt their sports ideology as well.

“Soviet leaders used sport to try to integrate the various socialist countries, to bind them to Soviet institutions and policies, and to maintain and reinforce the USSR’s ‘vanguard’ position within the community.”<sup>89</sup>

The Soviets also hoped that sport could unify all the satellite states into a gigantic socialist front. To promote the camaraderie of the Eastern European countries, the Soviets encouraged competition among all the socialist nations, and held mass international events.

Since virtually all the states in the communist block had their own tradition of sport, the Soviet Union only needed to centralize already existing sport by combining smaller organizations into one massive system controlled by the government, under the watchful eye of the Kremlin. The political implications of sport were also not foreign to the satellite nations. Most country’s sports movements had nationalistic aims that were entwined with politics, and so they “already saw sport as politicized when the Soviets took over.”<sup>90</sup> The Soviet Union also portrayed their satellites’ sporting victories as an

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<sup>88</sup> Freeman and Boyes. *Sports Behind the Iron Curtain* ...p. 13

<sup>89</sup> Riordan, Jim. “Russia and Eastern Europe in the Future of the Modern Olympic Movement.” *Critical Reflections on Olympic Ideology: Second International Symposium for Olympic Research*. October, 1994, pp.1-9. p. 6

<sup>90</sup> Anthony, Don. Introduction. *Sport under Communism*, ed. James Riordan...p. 5

accomplishment of the Soviet political system; an Olympic gold for one of these nations was a gold for the Soviets because it was a gold for communism. And so, in all of Eastern Europe, and especially in Czechoslovakia, sport continued to develop with little opposition from the people. However, just because the government controlled sport, that did not mean that it could control the nationalist goals that were deeply rooted in the culture of sport, as they were in Czechoslovakia. Therefore, the Soviet's emphasis on sport in Czechoslovakia actually encouraged the Czech nationalist movement for independence.

### iii) Communist Sport in Czechoslovakia

Much of the Soviet sport system overlapped with the system of sport already in place in Czechoslovakia that had been developed by the Sokol. In fact, since the Soviet Union strove to imitate the Czech Sokol in its own country and the other satellite nations,<sup>91</sup> Czech sport and its nationalist movement were not greatly disrupted by the Soviet takeover. The new Czech government only needed to centralize the movement and insert Soviet ideology and propaganda. Moreover, the Soviet ideology was familiar, because the Czechs had their own history of socialism in sport. The first socialist sports club, the Workers' Gymnastic Club, had been founded in 1897 after many socialists were expelled from their respective Sokol clubs due to their political beliefs.<sup>92</sup> After Czechoslovakia's independence, the Czechoslovakian Worker Gymnastics Association, which opposed the Olympics for political and social reasons, hosted the first unofficial

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<sup>91</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands...* p. 166

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143

Worker Olympics in 1921.<sup>93</sup> Athletes from 12 countries came to Prague to take part in the festival, which, in addition to sport, featured mass artistic displays, choral recitals, political plays, and the singing of revolutionary songs.<sup>94</sup>

In 1948, after the Soviets took over the Czech government, the entire Czech sport movement was unified and “the new national sports organization became a paramount part of the social life of Czechoslovakia.”<sup>95</sup> In 1952, a new physical training law was passed that’s prime emphasis was on mass participation.<sup>96</sup> The Czech government also installed the same GTO program as the Soviets had to make “[t]he entire activity of the Czech sports movement aimed at preparing citizens for work and defense.”<sup>97</sup> Even though the Soviets discontinued the Sokol, the nationalist association with sport was able to survive because the Soviet’s acknowledgement of the importance of sport. Dr. Vladimir Kostka, a prominent Czech in physical culture, was thus able to write in a publication on Czech sport that “the national character of Czech sport and physical education was fully retained as an expression of Czech national culture.”<sup>98</sup> However, the communists wanted this national culture to celebrate Czech communism. The Soviets hoped that by encouraging sport they could spread their ideology to the Czechs and give them a new sense of nationalism that was connected to Soviet nationalism.

One way this was done was through propaganda. For instance, the Soviets made it a “rule that Spartakiads should be associated with anniversaries commemorating the national liberation struggle and the Czechoslovakian’s liberation by the Soviet Army in

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<sup>93</sup> Riordan, James. “The Worker Sports Movement.” Ed. James Riordan and Arnd Krüger, *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*...pp. 109-110

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110

<sup>95</sup> Kostka, Vladimir. “Czechoslovakia.” Ed. James Riordan *Sport under Communism*...p. 60

<sup>96</sup> Zemanova, Marie. *Czechoslovak Sport Goes Ahead*. Prague: Orbis, 1955. p. 7

<sup>97</sup> Kostka, Vladimir. “Czechoslovakia.” Ed. James Riordan *Sport under Communism*...p. 65

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

the last war.”<sup>99</sup> This meant celebrating the communist “independence” of 1945, not the democratic independence of 1918. The Soviets were basically trying to have the people believe they were a free nation thanks to the Soviets, and therefore should celebrate communism. Communist propaganda on Czech sport promoted the idea that while Czech sport was good before communism, communism made it great. In a propagandist book, *Czech Sport Goes Ahead*, the author boasts of the communists’ advancement of sport in Czechoslovakia, stating that although sport was on the rise during the nation’s independence:

“the low living standard of the great majority of the population, particularly at the time of economic crisis and growing unemployment, prevented the majority of working people and of youth from systematically participating in sporting events.”<sup>100</sup>

The author claims that the reorganization of physical training and sport “made possible even greater progress.”<sup>101</sup> Statistics were provided to prove progress, including the rise in the number of youth and the overall population participating in physical fitness activities, the number of new facilities, and the increase in medals won in the 1952 Olympics. In other words: “[t]he condition for achieving sports championship is the largest possible number of sportsmen.”<sup>102</sup> The communists even claimed that their Spartakiads were better than all previous events of a similar nature, and that “[t]hose who had seen the pre-war Sokol Festivals...were astonished anew.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62

<sup>100</sup> Zemanova, Marie. *Czechoslovak Sport Goes Ahead*. Prague: Orbis, 1955. p. 7

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>102</sup> Československý svaz tělesné výchovy. *20 Years of Czechoslovak Physical Training 1945-1965*. Prague: The Sport and Tourism Publishing House, 1965. p. 12

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52

#### iv) Martina Navratilova

Martina Navratilova was born in Czechoslovakia in 1956 and was a product of the communist sports system. A natural athlete and avid tennis player, her talent was recognized by the state. In her extraordinary career spanning over 30 years, she won 177 career titles. Navratilova acknowledged that her success was due to the communist government's emphasis on sport: "[t]here [was] nothing in the Czech culture that would prohibit me from being the best I could."<sup>104</sup> While communism gave Navratilova the environment for her development, it did not brainwash her into supporting the communist government as the Soviet's desired. She describes how unhappy she and her family were under the communist rule. Her family's property was confiscated and they lived in a small house overlooking the grove of apple trees they had once owned. Navratilova tells of how, as a small child, she used to steal fallen apples as an act of defiance, taking what rightly belonged to her family. Growing up on the tennis court, Navratilova could dream of traveling and independence, and so for her, sport served as a path to freedom, just as it did for her people.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Navratilova's unhappiness with communism was that although the government allowed her to play tennis, it was not for her enjoyment, but to promote the Czechoslovakian national program.

"In the mid-sixties, the Communists could see the value of sports as a way of making people proud and keeping their minds off the less pleasant aspects of life. They approached sports the same way they approached the economy: with a plan."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Navratilova and Vecsey, *Martina*...p. 53

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25- 31

She also recalls how learning to play tennis in the communist system was not like a social outing or recreation.<sup>106</sup> Sport was a mandatory part of school and everyone was expected to practice or take additional lessons outside of school. Once the sports authorities designated her as a youth with potential, Navratilova's career and life came under their control. She was assigned a coach, was told when, where, and how often to practice. She was also told which tournaments she would play in, and in which hotels she would stay at while she competed. Finally, any prize money she won was to be "given" to the state. After a few tournaments in the West, the government decided that Navratilova was becoming too "Americanized" and they were considering not letting her play in the U.S. Open.

"To me, that's typical Communist thinking. The Czech government had put a lot of time, and money, and energy into my tennis, and now that I had gotten to the top, they were nervous....[T]hey just couldn't deal with a Czech...starting to get ideas of her own about how to train, how to play, which tournaments to enter. They wanted total control, but the more I won, the less they could control me. They were willing to sacrifice my tennis career in order to control me. And I wasn't going to stand for that."<sup>107</sup>

This shows that the communist system was backfiring: Navratilova's success caused her to resent the Soviets even more. Like most athletes, Navratilova had not succumbed to the communist propaganda, especially its role in sport. The political crackdown after the Prague Spring gave her a further reason for resentment. In 1975, Navratilova, unable to stand silently by and watch her career falter, defected to the United States. The rest of the Czechs could not defect as easily, but still used sport to make their voices heard.

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30

<sup>107</sup> Navratilova and Vescey. *Martina*...p. 125

#### **IV. Czech Sport as a Vehicle for Nationalism during Normalization: “You need a tank to beat me”<sup>108</sup>**

The events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia changed the history of the nation. The Czechs were forced to quickly switch from a period of liberalization, the Prague Spring, to a period of intense governmental oppression, the normalization. This caused them to depoliticize, abandoning faith in the ability of politics to represent a nationalist cause. However, throughout the turmoil, one part of Czech society remained constant – sport – so much so that it became one of the few vehicles for nationalism left in the country, and thus took on a paramount role in the political drama.

In 1968, Alexander Dubček was appointed by the Czech Central Committee to replace First Secretary Antonin Novotny, who was a Stalinist. Novotny had led the country into a long period of economic depression, and Dubček was given leeway in order to stabilize the country. Dubček saw liberal reforms as the way for the country to succeed, and soon Czechoslovakia underwent a cultural revival. Under Dubček, the “insatiable appetites of a people who had once tasted democracy and material comfort... craved both again.”<sup>109</sup> Writers, students, and artists led the people in a liberal quest for “socialism with a human face.” Dubček assured the Kremlin that they were not trying to split from the Soviets, merely trying to find some freedom in the communist system. Consequently, among other liberalizing measures, censorship was lifted, communication with and travel to the west was allowed, and political prisoners were released.

During the Prague Spring, sport was also seen as being liberalized, though, because of the Soviet support, it had never been oppressed to the extent that other institutions had. Navratilova, though only eleven at the time, remembered a sporting

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<sup>108</sup> Navratilova and Vescey. *Martina*...pp. 73-74

<sup>109</sup> Littell, Robert. ed. *The Czech Black Book*. New York: Rederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969. p. vi

event only a month into Prague Spring, an ice hockey game in the 1968 Winter Olympics at Grenoble. The Czechs defeated the Soviets 5-4:

“[s]ome people said the game was a good omen for the year. They were convinced that under Novotny our national team would not have been allowed to beat the Russians, but under Dubček they’d been free to play to their limits.”<sup>110</sup>

While there is no proof that the Czechs were not permitted to play their best under Novotny, this sentiment reflects how wary the Czechs were of their oppressors and how sport continued to play a nationalistic role within the cultural revival.

To go a step further, one Czech historian’s recollection of the game even includes a story of a “beerhouse statesman” claiming that the Prague Spring started because of the hockey game.<sup>111</sup> Though the historian promptly denies that the game instigated the Prague Spring, the fact that a Czech could think that a sporting event could start a political and cultural event of such prominence shows the importance of sport to the Czech people. Indeed, moments after the game, the people took to the streets writing “5-4” on the walls and sidewalks. Tad Szulc, then a reporter for the New York Times, who was in Prague for the game, describes how the “[v]ictory over the Soviet Union with its obvious symbolism electrified the nation” and was a means for the people to equate domestic liberalization with anti-Soviet sentiment.<sup>112</sup>

This domestic liberalization of Prague Spring could be seen in the revival of the historically nationalistic sports organizations. The Czechs reopened Sokol clubs<sup>113</sup> and the Czech IOC even proposed Prague as the location of the 1980 Olympic Games.<sup>114</sup> The

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<sup>110</sup> Navratilova and Vecsey. *Martina...*p. 66.

<sup>111</sup> Wechsberg, Joseph. *The Voices*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969. p. 2

<sup>112</sup> Szulc, Tad. *Czechoslovakia Since World War II*. New York: The Viking Press, 1997. pp. 274-5

<sup>113</sup> Nolte, Claire, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands...*p. 180

<sup>114</sup> Kolar and Kössl. “Origin and Development of the Czech and Czechoslovakian Olympic Committee”...p. 19

institutions that had helped liberate the Czechs from the Hapsburgs were back to revive the political nationalist drive, renewing the prominence of sport in the political arena.

For eight months, Dubček repeatedly reassured the anxious Kremlin that Czechoslovakia had no plans to break off foreign relations like the Hungarians had tried to do in 1956. But, to add to the Kremlin's fear, radicals were forming new socialist parties and mass demonstrations were becoming more and more anti-Soviet. In frustration, on July 28, 1968, Soviet divisions surrounded the country. For a month, the Czechs continued with their liberalization despite the spreading sense of impending doom. On August 20<sup>th</sup> at 11pm, the Soviet tanks crossed the border and by morning they filled Wenceslas Square in the center of Prague and also the city of Bratislava, now the capital of modern day Slovakia. Tens of thousands more tanks covered the countryside. This first wave of tanks consisted of 100,000 Russian, 40,000 Polish, 10,000 Hungarian, 10,000 East German, and finally 5,000 Bulgarian troops.<sup>115</sup> The people of Czechoslovakia felt betrayed by this action because all five nations had broken the Warsaw Pact, in which they had sworn not to interfere with each other's governance. As one Czech put it: "Christ had only one Judas but we have five."<sup>116</sup>

At the request of Dubček, the Czechs did not fight back. But, still full of hope from the progress of the past eight months, they did everything in their power to passively resist the Soviets. In addition to peaceful demonstrations and "The Manifesto of 2000 Words," the Czechs tore down street signs so the troops could not find their way, established an underground resistance radio, and even tried to convince individual soldiers that their actions were wrong and that they should leave the country. However,

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<sup>115</sup> Kusin, Vladimir V. *From Dubcek to Charter 77: A study of 'normalization' in Czechoslovakia 1968-1978*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978. p. 9

<sup>116</sup> Wechsberg, Joseph, *The Voices...*p. 50

after five days of non-violent protests, Dubček succumbed to the Kremlin by signing the Moscow Protocol, thereby revoking all the liberal decrees that had been instituted during the thaw. As Kenneth Skoug Jr., an American ambassador in Prague at the time put it: at “2:30 [when the Protocol was signed] the cheering stopped, not to resume for over 21 years.”<sup>117</sup> And so Czechoslovakia entered into a period of normalization, in which the country submitted to political repression and returned to the Soviet ideology.

After the “spring” of cultural revival, the normalization was a “winter of discontent.”<sup>118</sup> Not only was the spirit of the people destroyed by the invasion, but they were confused and disillusioned by their leaders’ rapid acquiescence. Since they could do nothing but watch their dream be signed away, many formed “the lasting and unshakable conviction that politics [was] a filthy business.”<sup>119</sup> Then, as if that was not enough, large sections of society were persecuted - over 100,000 Czechs lost their jobs<sup>120</sup> and the intelligentsia was wiped out. “The lesson that people drew from the fate of the persecuted intelligentsia was that it does not pay to meddle in politics,”<sup>121</sup> and the Czechs developed an attitude of de-politicization.

“[H]arsh repression of every opposition voice, numerous arrests and political trials...revived fears of a return of the Stalinist terror...all the more so because the reign of terror of the 1950’s was still fresh in people’s minds due to the disclosures of the Prague Spring.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Skoug, Kenneth N. Jr. *Czechoslovakia’s Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969: An American Embassy Perspective*. Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999. p. 180

<sup>118</sup> Navratilova and Vescey, *Martina*...p. 73

<sup>119</sup> Falk, Barbara J. *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003. p. 32

<sup>120</sup> Simecka, Milan. *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia 1969-1976*. Bratislava, 1984. p. 65

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

<sup>122</sup> Renner, Hans. *A History of Czechoslovakia Since 1945*. London: Routledge, 1989. p. 107

Life returned to how it had been before the Prague Spring, but this time it was worse. Now the people had tasted a new future, but were forced back into their depressing past, making their present and future extremely miserable. Navratilova remembers how during the normalization,

“[t]he Czechs and Slovaks learned to swallow their feelings after 1968. We became a depressed society. You could see the difference: people just weren’t optimistic about the future. It was all pretty gloomy....There’s nothing to laugh about, everybody looks very stern....They’re going through the motions....But there is little joy...I saw my country lose its verve, lose its productivity, lose its soul.”<sup>123</sup>

However, throughout the political turbulence and normalization, sport continued as usual because the Soviets appreciated its uses. In fact, one source argues that the new government put in place by the Soviets sought to demonstrate Czech economic prosperity during the normalization by excelling in sport. Part of the socialist agenda had always been to showcase the political system’s success through sport, but the Czech government put in place even more mechanisms to insure sport’s development. For instance, the Czechoslovakian System of High Performance<sup>124</sup> was created “to identify a number of gifted athletes and provide them the best possible conditions for training.”<sup>125</sup> Though this was perhaps no different than before, but the new government hoped that focusing on and supporting sport, given its central role, would calm the political unrest. In the international arena, Czechoslovakia did improve in sport, and the Czechs scored more points than ever before in the Mexico and Tokyo Olympics of 1968.<sup>126</sup> During the normalization, the Soviet Union also used sport to try to maintain a friendly relationship

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<sup>123</sup> Navratilova and Vescey, *Martina*...p. 75

<sup>124</sup> Arben, Joseph L. “Mexico City 1968.” *Sport in the Global Village*. Ed. Wilcox, Ralph C. West Virginia: Fitness Information Technology, Inc., 1994. p. 342

<sup>125</sup> Arben, Joseph L. “Mexico City 1968” Ed. Jay Coakely and Eric Dunning, *Handbook of Sports Studies*...p. 342

<sup>126</sup> Wilcox, Ralph C. *Sport in the Global Village*...p. 341

with the Czechs, whom did not hold the Soviets in great esteem after the invasion, and the two nations engaged in 127 competitions in 1969 alone.<sup>127</sup>

Therefore, the Soviet Union attached an even greater significance to Czech sport than before, increasing the political implications that came with it. Sport took on the nationalist role that politics no longer could. This is illustrated by Navratilova's memory of how the "first major event after the August invasion was the Mexico City Olympics, so we rooted for our people, and when we couldn't win we rooted for the Americans,"<sup>128</sup> not the Soviets. It was not just the spectators who felt this way about the Soviets; the athletic community protested Soviet sport because of the country's dishonorable political behavior. Thus, the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee wrote a letter to the IOC, requesting that they call on the governments of the five invading nations to leave Czechoslovakia.<sup>129</sup>

The spirit that sport brought to the Czech people is described by Navratilova, who reminisces on the atmosphere at a Sparta game (one of the best football teams in the country): "[t]he stadium is one of the few places where you can see any signs of emotion from the young people anymore....When Sparta scores, the roar is like a decade of emotion that has been waiting to erupt."<sup>130</sup> These are examples of how sport overcame the political silence of the people during the normalization, and showed that their nationalist spirit was still alive.

Sport was more than just a release of pent up energy and nationalism. The Soviets had created an atmosphere that when the Czechs played them, sport became an

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<sup>127</sup> Arnaud, Pierre, James Riordan. Ed. *Sport and International Politics...* p. 330

<sup>128</sup> Navratilova and Vescey, *Martina...*p. 66

<sup>129</sup> Littell, Robert, *The Czech Black Book...*p. 180

<sup>130</sup> Navratilova and Vescey, *Martina...*p. 82

instrument for revenge. Navratilova describes how her resentment towards the Russians made her a better tennis player, and how it impacted her interaction with her opponents.

In a match against a Soviet doubles pair,

“when my partner and I won the match, this blond Russian was so conceited, she just stuck out her hand and tapped mine. She wouldn’t even shake, palm to palm, which was all right with me. ‘You need a tank to beat me,’ I told her.”<sup>131</sup>

This was indeed how the rest of the country felt. They felt that the Soviets were in political control only because they had the tanks. Sport was the playing field where the Czechs could face and triumph over the Soviets who no longer had the unfair advantage of arms.

#### i) Ice Hockey

The March 1969 World Ice Hockey Championships demonstrated the role sport could play for the broader Czech population during the normalization, due to the significance that the Soviets attached to it. The tournament was originally scheduled to take place in Prague, but shortly after the invasion, the officials said it would have to be moved to Stockholm. On March 21<sup>st</sup>, the Czechs beat the Soviets 2-0, with 8,000 spectators waving Czech flags and jeering at the Soviet team. Every Czech who owned a TV was watching at home and it was a “small but symbolic catharsis.”<sup>132</sup> For a least a few hours, the Czechs had a way to express their hatred towards their occupiers and revel in their nation’s success.

The next showdown between the two teams took place a week later, on March 28<sup>th</sup>. This game had a lot more at stake in the tournament, and a journalist for The

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74

<sup>132</sup> Skoug, Kenneth N. Jr., *Czechoslovakia’s Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*...p. 227

London Times speculated that had the Czechs not won after the growing tension from the last game “[a] defeat would have been almost a national disaster.”<sup>133</sup> But since the Czech team did win 4-3, the people poured into the streets back at home in joyful celebration. Ambassador Skoug noted that the demonstration, in a country where shouting was rare showed “the love of sport that always had characterized the Czech people.”<sup>134</sup> He went so far as to say that “[he] had never seen Czechs so happy. Clearly, the city had not experienced such joy since the defeat of the Nazis.”<sup>135</sup> Equating the Soviets with the Nazis is a bold step to take, but the fact that Skoug does so is an indication of how unhappy the Czechs were in their daily lives and how much this one game meant to them.

Though winning the hockey championship in itself was a booster for national pride, the fact that the Czechs had beaten the Soviets made it a monumental accomplishment and “[f]or a moment sport took over the role of politics, where politics failed.”<sup>136</sup> The Czechs ran through the streets to Wenceslas Square, where the Soviet tanks had so recently invaded, screaming “4-3!”<sup>137</sup> One author describes it as “a classic example of a sporting victory making up for a military defeat in the minds of the people.”<sup>138</sup> As Skoug explained it:

“[t]he Russians had no tanks in Stockholm and they [had] been beaten. For a small humiliated nation, deprived of the last vestige of free expression...it was the moment of truth. The night air throbbed with the sound of national redemption.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> London Times: Late Edition. March 29.

<sup>134</sup> Skoug, Kenneth N. Jr., *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*...p. 228

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229

<sup>136</sup> Renner Hans. *A History of Czechoslovakia Since 1945*...p. 94

<sup>137</sup> Skoug, Kenneth N. Jr., *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*...p. 228

<sup>138</sup> Lowe, Benjamin, David B. Kanin, and Andrew Strenk Ed. *Sport and International Relations*. Illinois: Stipes Publishing Company, 1978. p. 333.

<sup>139</sup> Skoug, Kenneth N. Jr., *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*...p. 229

On that day, sport was able to produce a proclamation of political nationalism that the victory of the Soviets and their tanks had otherwise silenced.

Not only were the Czechs able to proclaim their nationalism, they were also able to proclaim their hate for their occupiers in a way that they could not have done otherwise. Sport was allowed to be “a useful and apparently harmless way of expressing nationalist sentiments....For the Czech spectators at the rink-side or in front of the TV it provides a legitimate excuse to shout anti-Russian slogans.”<sup>140</sup> Since the Soviets placed such importance on sport, they actually encouraged the celebration of the hockey victory. However, that celebration quickly turned into “violent anti-Soviet riots.”<sup>141</sup> The Soviet Aeroflot office on Wenceslas Square was broken into and turned into a bonfire. Soviet military headquarters around the country were ransacked and Soviet vehicles were burned.<sup>142</sup> Even the Czech police, who usually worked for the communist government, even joined in the riots.<sup>143</sup>

Though sports nationalism was common in international play and was considered to be an acceptable forum for hateful slurs, the Soviets could not allow the second demonstration in a week to go unnoticed or unpunished. The Czech government, still under Dubček, tried to prevent repercussions by preemptively apologizing and condemning the demonstration.<sup>144</sup> However, a Soviet delegation arrived in Prague two days later to let it be known that the Kremlin “thought the situation ‘more serious than in August 1968’ and threatened in an ultimatum to put things right in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>145</sup>

Czech President Svoboda was warned that if the government was unable to maintain

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<sup>140</sup> Freeman and Boyes, *Behind the Scenes of Sports...* p. 25

<sup>141</sup> Szulc, Tad. *Czechoslovakia Since World War II...* p. 474

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p 474

<sup>143</sup> Kusin, Vladimir V. *From Dubcek to Charter 77...* p. 91

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63

<sup>145</sup> Renner, Hans. *A History of Czechoslovakia Since 1945...* p. 95

peace, the Red Army would intervene again. While no tanks were sent in, preventative censorship was reestablished, police measures were tightened, and patrols appeared on the streets.<sup>146</sup>

The Soviet newspaper *Pravda* reported that the “events of recent days have shown that the right-wing antisocialist forces once again seek to aggravate the situation in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>147</sup> Thus, the Soviets gave the game more political significance than it actually had by claiming that a nationalist group had been waiting for an opportunity to destroy communist offices, and used the game as an excuse to break into the Aeroflot office. Interestingly, plain clothes officers (presumed to be Soviet KGB or Czech communist police) were seen throwing the first bricks through the Aeroflot’s window. The Soviets may have been feeding the fire to give themselves an excuse to intervene politically. In fact, Dubček was forced to resign as First Secretary only a few weeks after the game, in April of 1969. He was then expelled from the communist party in 1970. Gustáv Husák, a communist loyal to the Kremlin, was appointed Prime Minister in Dubček’s place.

There are many different ways to analyze the hockey game of March 28, 1969, and its impact on Czech history. I argue that sport was the one vehicle that could be used to express the nationalist feelings so deeply buried by the de-politicization during normalization. However, other sources look at the game from a different perspective, in effect arguing that the normalization had not yet begun, so that the hockey game was not the only expression of nationalism. Vladimir V. Kusin’s analysis suggests that various acts of defiance, such as public demonstrations of anti-Soviet sentiment, a student strike,

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<sup>146</sup> Szulc, Tad. *Czechoslovakia Since World War II...*p. 474

<sup>147</sup> As quoted in Szulc, Tad. *Czechoslovakia Since World War II...*p. 474

and a Czech student, Jan Palac's, self-immolation and his funeral in Wenceslas Square, were examples of normalization not proceeding as planned, and that the hockey game did not occur during the normalization.<sup>148</sup> Skoug maintains that the normalization started in April when Husák was appointed Prime Minister and implemented vast political purges. It was only then that the "dispirited people went back to their shells."<sup>149</sup> These forms of resistance suggest that normalization never truly did effectively depoliticize the entire population. However, it is impossible to ascertain when the period that is referred to as the normalization actually began. There is no documentation detailing the day or even year when it was supposed to officially begin and how. According to Dubček's autobiography, the term normalization first appeared in the Soviet draft of the Moscow Protocol, and gained its "historic notoriety" in the period that began at the end of August 1968.<sup>150</sup> Regardless of the exact date, no vehicle other than sport could engage as high a percentage of the population in the spirit of nationalism, as exemplified by the hockey game on March 28. Sport, with its unique importance in both Czech history and Soviet ideology, showed the Soviets and the world that the Czechs would return as an independent nation once more.

Renner denies that Czech society was total depoliticized outside the athletic arena. He describes two main resistance movements that existed during the normalization period. The first was the radical HMR (Movement of Revolutionary Youth), which was founded in 1968 in opposition to Dubček's liberalism; the second was the Socialist Movement, whose optimism did not allow its members to believe that Prague Spring was

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<sup>148</sup> Kusin, Vladimir V. *From Dubcek to Charter 77*...pp. 58-59

<sup>149</sup> Skoug, Kenneth N. Jr., *Czechoslovakia's Lost Fight for Freedom 1967-1969*...p 238

<sup>150</sup> Dubcek, Alexander. *Hope Dies Last: The Autobiography of Alexander Dubcek*. Trans. and Ed. Jiri Hochman. Tokyo: Kodansha International 1993. p. 215

actually over. These organizations however, were not able to last long during the normalization. The HMR was promptly infiltrated and destroyed by the secret service, and the Socialist Movement gave up after a failed approach at a boycotted election in 1971.<sup>151</sup> Though as Renner says, some segments of the population were still engaged in politics, these movements had nowhere near the same reach as sport. Sport was the most effective and accessible means for Czechs to show their nationalism, especially because the communist system encouraged it.

#### ii) Czechoslovakia Compared to Hungary and Poland

The importance of sport as a vehicle for nationalism in Czechoslovakia can be reinforced by comparing the role of sport in similar Eastern European nations. Hungary and Poland are the two satellite countries to which Czechoslovakia is frequently compared. During the Soviet rule, both countries revolted like Czechoslovakia did in 1968: Hungary rebelled in 1956, and Poland in both 1956 and 1980. In return, all were invaded by Soviet tanks and the revolts were brutally suppressed. However, since sport was more deeply implanted in the Czech movement for national liberation and Czechoslovakia had a stricter period of normalization with more suppression, sport played a more significant role in maintaining the spirit of nationalism.

The Hungarians, like the Czechs, had a great love of sport that originated far back in history and became part of the national identity. “Sport has always contributed greatly to the warp and weave of the Hungarian cultural fabric.”<sup>152</sup> Hungary participated in the

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<sup>151</sup> Renner, Hans. *A History of Czechoslovakia Since 1945*...pp. 121-123

<sup>152</sup> Rinehart, Robert E. “‘Fists flew and blood flowed’: Symbolic Resistance and International Response in Hungarian Water Polo at the Melbourne Olympics, 1956.” *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 23, No.2 (Summer 1996). p. 125

first Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, with a team separate from the Austrians with whom they shared the political crown. After the fall of the Hapsburgs in World War I, sport took a back seat to politics as Hungary fought for its place in Eastern Europe, and then fought with the axis powers in World War II. In 1945, the Soviets pushed the Nazis out of Hungary and established a puppet government in Budapest. On October 3, 1956, the Hungarians rebelled against their communist government and its Soviet-imposed policies. The revolt began as a student demonstration, but it spread quickly throughout the capital, until the communist government fell. The Soviet sent tanks that entered Hungary on November 4<sup>th</sup>. The Hungarians organized themselves into militias to fight the tanks, and a week of violent street fighting ensued. The organized resistance gave up after they were savagely slaughtered.”<sup>153</sup>

When the Soviets invaded, the Hungarian water-polo team was on a boat with the Russians on their way to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. These athletes had come to Melbourne to tell the world about their revolution, and were unaware of the invasion. To show their patriotism, the Hungarian delegation changed their flag from the one imposed by the communists to the Hungarian nationalist flag. However, once they landed and learned of the invasion, the Games changed for them. As one athlete put it: “[a]fter what I heard on my arrival in Melbourne. I will never mix with those butchers again.”<sup>154</sup>

Unfortunately the team did have to mix with the Soviets again - in a semi-finals match that became infamous worldwide. As Ken Knox, a Melbourne writer said: “when you also have- as yesterday- the political feelings among players and a demonstrative

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127

crowd, serious trouble is inevitable.”<sup>155</sup> And indeed the match was full of fighting above and below the water. In the final minutes, a Soviet player threw a violent blow to the right eye of Hungarian Ervin Zador that split his brow and “stained the water red.”<sup>156</sup> The game was cancelled soon afterwards when a fight broke out, and the Hungarians were given the 4-0 win.

Newspapers worldwide jumped on the story with pictures of Zador coming out of the pool with blood running down his face. His blood was a symbol of Soviet oppression, but the team’s victory was the Hungarian’s metaphorical political triumph. Most sources, however, focus on the athletes rather than on the Hungarian reaction at home, unlike the reports on the Czech hockey game. Here, the athletes saw that their participation and victories “could form oppositional signs of political resistance to the Soviet regime in Hungary. [They] believed they could demonstrate Hungary’s resilience to the World.”<sup>157</sup>

“If Western-style, traditional nationalism was to prevail in Hungary, shared and crystallized cultural moments in time like the Olympic water polo matches between the Soviet Union and Hungary might serve to keep it alive, albeit simmering below the surface.”<sup>158</sup>

This game was more a symbol of nationalism than a mock battle of the Hungarian people with their oppressors.

Sport also played a different role for the Hungarians because the aftermath of their rebellion was distinctly different from the end of the Prague Spring. The Hungarians did not have normalization. There was a period of repression and reprisals,

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<sup>155</sup> As Quoted *Ibid.*, p. 130

<sup>156</sup> As Quoted *Ibid.*, p. 131

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136

and Prime Minister Imre Nagy and other leaders of the revolt were executed, but that was the extent of the Soviet response. Compared to the Czech normalization, which was considered a return to Stalinism, the Hungarians had what was referred to as “Kádárite ‘soft’ or ‘goulash’ communism.”<sup>159</sup> Hungary’s communist regime, in order to gain support, removed

“politics and the obtrusive nature of the party from the people’s daily lives, [so] the perception of liberal and open society could be cultivated. The price to be paid, as Hungarian support for the WTO invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 attests, was adherence to the Moscow line in foreign affairs.”<sup>160</sup>

After the initial struggle, life was not that restricted. For example, the cultural scene was able to thrive, as the cultural czar, György Aczél, gave writers, playwrights, poets, and filmmakers considerable artistic space and license to criticize.<sup>161</sup> Therefore, the Hungarians did not have a difficult time maintaining their nationalist identity, and sport did not have to play as significant a role. Even if sport did have to play a large role, it would have been almost impossible to spread it to the entire population as effectively as the Czechs did. This is because the deep social stratifications in Hungary also created inequalities in sport, causing the lower class physical education and sport system to be dysfunctional.<sup>162</sup>

Poland did not have a singular defining sporting experience that became known internationally as did the Czechs and Hungarians. Nonetheless, as a writer on Eastern European sports, Vassil Girginov, argues “[p]erhaps nowhere else in Eastern Europe was

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<sup>159</sup> Falk, Barbara J. *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*...p. 112

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121

<sup>162</sup> Földesi, Gyöngyi. “Easter Europe.” ed. Coakley and Dunning, *The Handbook of Sports Studies*...p.531

sport used so vigorously to defend national identity and traditions as in Poland.”<sup>163</sup>

However, the history of Polish sport is stunted compared to that of Czechoslovakia, for in 1795, the control of Poland was split between Russia, Austria, and Prussia and all national institutions were abolished, including sport. While sport “was used as valuable means of strengthening and preserving a national ‘*élan vital*’, any victories that Polish athletes participated in were wins for the respective occupying country.”<sup>164</sup> In the Austrian sector during the liberal times of the 1860’s, a Sokol was organized but had an officially German status. Another very limited Sokol was opened in Prussia in 1885, but the Russians prohibited any national sporting organizations until 1905, when the Russians were looking to quell the discontent after the Revolution.<sup>165</sup> But even then the organizations were very restricted, as members of the Polish Sokol were not allowed to parade or display their organization’s symbols, and offenders who were caught were sent to Siberia.<sup>166</sup>

In the early twentieth century, more Polish sports associations were allowed, and as in Czechoslovakia “[b]ecause of the political plight of Poland, every sports organization was not only a centre of sporting activities, but also a meeting place where Polish culture was celebrated, secretly.”<sup>167</sup> Sport, however, was not accepted by all members of society as a medium for nationalism. “Some intellectuals denied its cultural

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<sup>163</sup> Gingrov, Vassil. “Eastern European Sport: *Nomen*.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Vol. 21, Issue 5. 2002 pp. 690-709. p. 698

<sup>164</sup> Lipoński, Wojciech. “Still an Unknown European tradition: Polish Sport in the European Cultural Heritage.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Vol. 13, No.2 (Aug. 1996), pp.1-41. Published by Frank Cass, London. p. 10.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13

<sup>166</sup> Guttman, Allen. *Sports*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. p. 282

<sup>167</sup> Lipoński, Wojciech. “Still an Unknown European tradition: Polish Sport in the European Cultural Heritage”...p. 16

importance. They saw in sport a threat to a truly cultured way of living.”<sup>168</sup> Nonetheless, as World War I approached, the patriotic spirit of the Poles was intensified and the Sokol became a paramilitary organization which even held a cultural festival in 1912, featuring military maneuvers. When Poland gained its independence in 1918, the government faced many serious problems in its attempts to organize anything on a national level, and Polish sport would suffer as a result. Nevertheless, new sporting schools were started and in 1924 the Poles even sent a team to the Olympics for the first time. Those athletes who played internationally “[a]ll served to promote and consolidate a Polish political identity throughout the world.”<sup>169</sup>

During World War II, Poland was split again, this time in two parts between the Nazis and the Soviets. In the Nazi sector, sport was prohibited, and 30% of those connected with sport were murdered (equivalent to one out of every six Poles),<sup>170</sup> because “Polish sport had a strong tradition of resistance against political oppressors dating back as far as the nineteenth century.”<sup>171</sup> However, the Poles initiated underground sports activities:

“[t]o practice sport against Nazi rule was at first glance an unnecessary waste of national energy which eventually would be needed for survival in other areas more important than sport. But sport was treated as a symbol of national vitality, a kind of demonstration of biological strength and an important factor in forging a common psychological attitude towards political oppression. In addition, sport was prohibited by the Germans and this single fact was enough to encourage resistance.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

In the Russian sector, only sport at the local level was allowed, the higher structures were entirely destroyed. Most of the people who held a high rank in sport were sent deep into Russian territory, jailed, or murdered.<sup>173</sup>

Sport did play a role as a vehicle for nationalism during World War II, but because of Poland's fractured history and the extensive damage from the War, sport did not have a solid foundation that would last through communism. In December of 1948, under the new communist government, the Soviet model of physical culture was imposed, eliminating all old nationalist organizations. The Soviets did not encourage sport in Poland to the same extent that it did in Czechoslovakia. In an article about leisure and sport, it was estimated that only 25 percent of the population participated in sport in their leisure time.<sup>174</sup> The communist government cared little about a healthy lifestyle for the majority of the population; rather they were interested only in international victories.<sup>175</sup>

The communist ideology did not play as important a role in sport in Poland as it did in Czechoslovakia. One reason was that the Poles remained very Catholic and were therefore unresponsive to much of the communist ideological propaganda.<sup>176</sup> In addition, “[t]here was a tacit compromise between propagandists and those sport officials and activists who tried to preserve sport as an expression of the Polish national character.”<sup>177</sup> This included an agreement that some public offices would be reserved for those who had been members of the Polish Socialist Party before the Soviet rule. Sport was one of these

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>174</sup> Jung, Bohdan. “The Evolution of Leisure and Sport Participation in Poland” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Vol. 21, No. 5, November 2004, pp.727-741. p. 728

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 739

<sup>176</sup> Falk, Barbara J. *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*...p. 13

<sup>177</sup> Lipoński, Wojciech. “Sport in the Slavic World before Communism: Cultural Traditions and national Functions”...p. 31

offices, and as a result, the athletes were not forced to act as models for the general population to propagate Soviet ideology.<sup>178</sup> This diminished the importance that the Soviets placed on Polish sport, and therefore, minimized the importance of sport to the general Polish population. Another significant difference between the Czech and Polish sport systems was that the Polish system of physical education did not support competitive sport. The Poles refused to adopt Western play to the extent that high school students were not allowed to be members of the sports clubs or participate in public competitions.<sup>179</sup> Thus sport was not as much a part of Polish culture, and it is therefore not surprising that there is no one match that stands out in Polish history, as a symbol of struggle against repression.

Riordan supports my thesis with his analysis that in countries such as Hungary and Poland, “the elite sports system and its attainments tended to provoke some popular resentment”<sup>180</sup> because sport was thrust upon them by the communists. In contrast, in countries like Czechoslovakia, “the patriotic pride in sporting success and heroes would appear to have been genuine. One reason for this may be that the socialist revolution...came out of their own experience and had some popular support.”<sup>181</sup>

In spite of the differences, there was a sense of camaraderie between these oppressed Eastern European nations. Navratilova expressed strong feelings of solidarity with the other satellite nations, and “always had a special feeling for the Hungarians because they had been invaded in 1956.”<sup>182</sup> However, Navratilova viewed her home country as special and different: “I also had a feeling that we Czechs were our own

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>180</sup> Riordan, Jim. “Russia and Eastern Europe in the Future of the Modern Olympic Movement”...p. 6

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>182</sup> Navratilova and Vescey, *Martina*...p. 68

people. We had such a rich history that I always felt separate from people of other nations, even Slovaks.”<sup>183</sup>

Thus, while many of the Eastern European countries are often clumped together in many studies, Czechoslovakia stands apart. The role of sport in the nationalist movement that was cemented in Czech history, the Soviet use of sport in Czechoslovakia, and the harsh response to Prague Spring are all specific to Czechoslovakia. These circumstances allowed all sporting events against the Soviets, especially the ice hockey game of March 28, 1969, to take on an unprecedented significance in Czechoslovakia.

## **Conclusion**

Today, the Czech Republic stands strong as an independent democratic nation. This feat would have been much more difficult without the nationalist drive for independence that survived during communism. Sport has long been an irreplaceable component of Czech nationalism, as symbolized by the ice hockey game of March 28, 1969. For the ice hockey game to have the significance that it did, many pre-existing conditions came together in a manner that set Czechoslovakia apart from the rest of its Eastern European neighbors.

Czech nationalism began with the resistance to the occupation and cultural oppression of the Hapsburgs. For over three centuries, the Czechs relied on nationalist movements to maintain their sense of identity. During the nineteenth century, nationalism began to be expressed through international sport, and sport began to play a political role. Starting with the modern Olympic Games and the nationalism that

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68

followed World War I, sport was transformed from a popular form of leisure into a mock battle.

Within Czechoslovakia, the Sokol created the link between Czech sport and Czech nationalism that exists today, by organizing nationalism into a mass movement that was easily accessible to the majority of the population. In addition, its success brought the Czechs into a prominent international light, as shown by the Czechs' role in the foundation of the modern day Olympics. In the international arena, the Czechs could prove to their occupiers and the world that they deserved their independence. This sporting nationalism maintained the Czech spirit through two wars and two occupations, and supported the Czechs when they needed it most, during the normalization that followed the end of Prague Spring.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the rise of communism gave international sport an added meaning. During the Cold war, a game between the east and west became a symbolic battle between a capitalism and communism. A victory was an indication that a particular ideology was superior. In response to this political role of sport, the Soviet Union put great effort into creating a sports movement that could guarantee victory. Sport became part of the communist ideology and the government began building a state system to make sport a part of every Soviet's daily routine.

The Soviets used the Czech Sokol movement as a model to spread sport to the masses. When Czechoslovakia became a Soviet satellite in 1948, the familiar form of mass sport was centralized under the new Czech communist government with the Soviet ideology. However, because this sports movement was still irrevocably entwined with the Czech nationalism that longed for independence, the Soviets were allowing and even

encouraging the Czechs to keep and express their nationalist spirit and identity through sport.

During the normalization, defeating the Soviets in the ice hockey game prompted the Czechs to express their nationalism and their hate for their occupiers in a way that no other vehicle for nationalism could. The game symbolized the role that sport could play for the nation of Czechoslovakia. When Czechs today think back on great moments in their history, a triumphant smile comes to their faces when they think of the defeat of the Soviets in ice hockey.

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