The Involvement of Politics in the Sporting Relationships of East and West Germany, 1945-1972

G. A. Carr*

During its early years of existence in East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party launched a vigorous propaganda campaign designed to bring the whole of Germany under the control of the Eastern bloc. It avoided compromise with the West, instead hoping that a massive campaign of propaganda and agitation would successfully break West Germany and West Berlin away from their allies.¹

The Deutscher Sportauschuss (The German Sport Committee) founded in 1948 and organized with the approval of the Soviet Military Administration to represent East German sport, promoted unity between East and West Germans under the slogan of “Deutsche an einem Tische!” (All Germans at the same table!).² In support of East-West sport relationships, Waldemar Borde, president of the German Sport Committee, declared, “The only German championships which satisfy us are those which determine . . . the best athletes from all provinces and from all zones. . . ”.³ Arguing that “. . . the Democratic Sport Movement is fighting against the intrigues of the United States imperialists and their lackeys to separate Germans from Germans . . . “,⁴ the German Sport Committee was given the task by the Socialist Unity Party of furthering sport relationships between East and West Germany. To this end the Committee declared that it favored the promotion of East-West sport conferences, joint German championships and discussions on “. . . unity and freedom in German sport . . ”.⁵ This philosophy was supported with proclamations that:

The athletes of our German Democratic Republic extend a hand to every sport-friend in West Germany providing they are willing to help secure peace and stand up for a united, peace-loving, independent Germany.⁶

Overtures of friendship such as these were at the same time associated with

*Mr. Carr is an Associate Professor in the School of Physical Education, Faculty of Education, at the University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
efforts to discredit West Germany and to drive a wedge between the West German sport fraternity and its leadership. The West German government was invariably blamed for tension and misunderstanding between East and West and for deceiving the West German population. Walter Ulbricht, at that time First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, argued that East Germans must convince West Germans that the Adenauer government had war-mongering intentions. Speaking at the German Sport Committee’s 7th Congress on January 15, 1951, he said:

We must use every contact with West German sportsmen to influence them to resist re-militarization. Each individual sportsman and sport association in West Germany must be convinced that we have to struggle together for peace.

In West Germany declarations of this nature were immediately considered as agitation and propaganda. Reports from sportsmen fleeing the Eastern zone reinforced this assessment.

On April 22, 1951, the Socialist Unity Party founded the National Olympic Committee of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) which triggered new political dispute. The Party declared that one of its major objectives would be to make “every effort to create, in co-operation with the National Olympic Committee of the Federal Republic, a joint National Olympic Committee for all Germany.” This intention was announced by the East German leadership as yet another attempt to “continue the struggle for unity and democratic development in German sport . . . and to further Olympic ideals in both German states.” Founded and directly controlled by the Socialist Unity Party, the National Olympic Committee of the GDR openly contravened Olympic rules and regulations which demand a separation of sport and politics. Together with the East German Sports Committee, the (East) German National Olympic Committee began a sport-political offensive which forced West Germans onto the defensive, for it had initially been the hope of the (West) German Sport Union that sporting relationships with the East Germans could be promoted free from political and ideological manipulation.

Prior to the 22nd of April, the West Germans had already experienced East German attitudes at the All German Sport Conference at Oberhof, held in the month of February. Under the slogan of “All Germans at the same table”, the (East) German Sport Committee promoted a series of all-German discussions, the object of which was to improve sporting relations and increase the contact between East and West Germany. The East German delegation at these talks was led by Walter Ulbricht. Conducted, according to the East German assessment, in a “spirit of mutual respect and equality,” these “fruitful talks concerning the future development of German sport” were, in the West German viewpoint, manipulated and distorted by “East Berlin specialists for agitation and propaganda.” Although the (West) German Sport Union had main-
tained an attitude of extreme caution towards these talks, the Union had not prohibited West German sports enthusiasts from travelling to Oberhof to take part in accompanying meetings and discussions. It later became apparent from statements made in East German propaganda that many of these people had unwittingly become pawns in the hands of East German political experts. Willi Knecht, a commentator on East German sport for Deutschland Archiv, noted:

Quite a few (of the West German sport enthusiasts) . . . were honestly concerned about the possibilities of compromise between the East and the West; others . . . out of political experience followed the will-o-the-wisps conjured up by the East Berlin agitators—both groups, in a sense, Lenin’s useful idiots. . . . 14

Each side blamed the other for the subsequent failure of the Oberhof talks.

The East German account blamed the West German government, saying:

These meetings which were carried out in a spirit of mutual respect and equality did not correspond to the concepts of the West German imperialists. . . . They wanted to control sport in the German Democratic Republic and they thought they could put on airs as representatives for all German sport. They were not at all concerned with democratic reunification, but with the annexation of the German Democratic Republic and with the expansion of imperialistic class rule throughout all Germany.15

In West Germany the Oberhof talks were regarded by the (West) German Sport Union as yet another painful lesson in the GDR’s use of sport to gain political objectives. Since the (West) German Sport Union was reluctant to grant the GDR concessions which would damage their own position, many West Germans considered the talks fruitless for “. . . not in a single concrete instance did the discussions bring about the improvement of athletic relations between the East and the West . . . merely spoken avowals of no practical consequence.” 16

The impasse at Oberhof, and the manner in which both East and West Germany blamed each other, reflected in no small way the strained world political situation at that time. A sharp division had arisen between “West” and “East” with the two Germanies set in opposing camps. Such was the situation which faced the idealists who, with the 1952 Olympic Games close at hand, vainly hoped that the spirit of Olympism would surmount all political differences and bring the two Germanies together as one nation competing under one flag.

At the International Olympic Committee’s 45th Congress in Vienna on May 7, 1951, applications for approval and recognition of the National Olympic Committees of the Soviet Union and of the Federal Republic of Germany were both approved. The Soviet Union’s acceptance occurred in spite of con-
siderable Western resistance from those who feared that her membership in
the I.O.C. would generate a split in the Olympic movement.17

The application to the I.O.C. for approval of the National Olympic Commit-
tee of the GDR which followed soon after that of the Soviet Union, met with
even greater opposition. The I.O.C. considered the GDR simply a Soviet sat-
ellite and, furthermore, part of a divided but single country in which there
already existed a National Olympic Committee (that of West Germany).18 The
I.O.C. denied the request of the GDR on the basis that only one National
Olympic Committee can exist in any one country. West Germany’s National
Olympic Committee, by already being in existence, thus took precedence.

Since the National Olympic Committee of the GDR had previously declared
that its mission was to create a joint German National Olympic Committee
with the West Germans, its application for recognition by the I.O.C. indicated
that while the Socialist Unity Party was pursuing a ‘one-state concept’ (i.e.,
all Germany under socialist control), it had also decided to follow a ‘two-state
concept’ at the same time. Thus, if its effort to unify Germany under socialist
control failed, it would then pursue separate development, facing West Ger-
many as an ideological competitor.

One of the decisions of the 45th Congress of the I.O.C. was a demand that the
Olympic committees of both East and West Germany strive to form a joint
National Olympic Committee with members chosen from both sides. How-
ever, with their own National Olympic Committee accepted, and with un-
happy memories of past dealings with the East Germans, the West Germans
saw a joint German National Olympic Committee as simply an invitation for
further Socialist Unity Party agitation and hardly a desirable development.
Consequently, an initial meeting by representatives of both sides in Hanover,
on May 17, 1951, was doomed from the outset.19

In spite of this failure, both National Olympic Committees met with the
I.O.C. in Lausanne, Switzerland on May 21 and 22, 1951. At this meeting the
I.O.C. again repeated that only one National Olympic Committee could rep-
resent Germany. With the knowledge that their Olympic Committee was al-
ready accepted, the West Germans successfully resisted the inclusion of the
East Germans. The result was that the West Germans maintained full control
of the German National Olympic Committee.

At the same meeting, Carl Ritter von Halt, representing the West Germans,
and Kurt Edel for the East Germans, were willing to agree that a joint German
team would represent Germany at the 1952 Olympic Games with the best ath-
letes chosen irrespective of whether they lived in East or West Germany. By
I.O.C. regulation the leadership of this team was placed in the hands of the National Olympic Committee of West Germany. The agreements of Lausanne were to be short-lived. On their return to East Germany the East German representatives, Kurt Edel and Kurt Scharch, were bitterly censured for loss of political face. In an announcement rejecting the Lausanne agreement, the Socialist Unity Party declared that East German athletes would compete in the 1952 Olympic Games only on the proviso that their own National Olympic Committee be recognized. Further meetings between East and West German representatives were then held in Kassel on November 15, 1951, and in Hamburg on November 20, 1951. Neither meeting produced an agreement through which Germany could be represented in the 1952 Olympic Games by a “genuinely” German team. On February 8, 1952, I.O.C. President, Sigfried Edstrom, made a final effort to break the deadlock and invited both National Olympic Committees to meet with him in Helsinki. Although the East German representatives came to the meeting, they refused to take part in any discussions. No alternative remained but to cancel the meeting. This insult to Edstrom drove East German relationships with the I.O.C. to a very low level. The final outcome was that at the Olympic Games of 1952, West German competitors represented all Germany.

The East Germans immediately blamed the West Germans for what had occurred. Claiming that the recognition of the (West) German National Olympic Committee had been obtained by fraudulent means and that West German representatives had spoken out against the formation of a second committee in the Soviet zone, Heinz Koch wrote:

Sporting relationships between the East and the West were put to a further test in 1952 when the (East) German Sport Committee attempted to set up specific conditions for West Berlin even though West Berlin’s sport organizations were officially integrated with those of the (West) German Sport Union. The (East) German Sport Committee openly admitted to the West Berlin Sport Union that it intended to use sport meetings as a platform for political action. In addition, the (East) German Sport Committee had already attempted to force West Berlin sport enthusiasts to agree to public declarations against the Adenauer government and the rearmament measures being undertaken in West Germany. The West Berliners were not prepared to conduct sporting relationships with East Germany under these conditions; and, as a demonstration of support, their parent organization, the (West) German Sport Union, broke off all sport contacts with the GDR on September 22, 1952. By Decem-
ber 12, 1952, both sides again agreed to seek a compromise on the basis that neither side wanted a complete breakdown. In West Berlin both sides met and agreed that in future East-West sport would be conducted according to Olympic ideals and that East-West sport would be divorced from political objectives. Specifically, the two sides agreed to exclude from joint German sporting events:

... party-political speeches or addresses ... decorations that promote party political relationship of participating sport unions ... raising flags other than the black-red-gold and those of participating sport organizations, (furthermore) ... West Berlin athletes are subject to no special conditions ... 25

Agreement to a contract of this nature must have been a tongue-in-cheek affair for the (East) German Sport Committee, for under the terms of its own constitution it was committed to political activity and to carrying out the resolutions of the Socialist Unity Party. This fact was demonstrated following the Berlin meeting, for the East German sport leadership considered itself bound only by the agreements concerning West Berlin. Beyond the West Berlin issue, they continued their agitation and propaganda as before. 26

Following 1952, several important events occurred which paved the way for the recognition of East German sport in the world. At the 50th International Olympic Committee Congress held in Paris, from June 13-18, 1955, by a vote of 27 to 7 in favor, the National Olympic Committee of the GDR was provisionally recognized, but with the specific rider that East and West Germany carry out the necessary steps to send a joint German team to the 1956 Olympic Games. 27

Seeing this as a definite step forward, and also faced with the clause of the I.O.C. that the provisional recognition of their National Olympic Committee lapsed if a joint German team was not formed, the East Germans came to a series of agreements with the West Germans by which neither side would be caused political embarrassment. As a non-partisan flag for the joint German team, a banner with the German colours of black, red, and gold was chosen with the five Olympic rings in white set in the center. Later decisions brought about the same design for a team emblem with Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from the 9th Symphony chosen as the anthem for honoring any German winners. 28

As a result of East-West qualifications to provide team members for the joint team, the East Germans at this phase in their sporting developments were numerically in a minority. At the 1956 Olympic Winter Games in Cortina d’Empezzo, the East Germans provided 18 team members to 58 for the West Germans. At the 1956 Summer Olympic Games in Melbourne, they provided 37 team members, the West Germans, 138. 29
Subsequent to the 1956 Olympic Games, the GDR continued to press vigorously for full acceptance of its National Olympic Committee and for parity in sport with West Germany. In support of its claim to full recognition, the GDR made the greatest possible propaganda usage out of the increasing acceptance of its sport unions by international federations. In 1950, the East German chess “union” was the first to be accepted by an international federation; and, with each successive year, additional East German sport unions gained international recognition. In West Germany, however, it was argued that international recognition of the sport unions of the GDR in no way related to approval of its National Olympic Committee. Knecht wrote:

... world sport federations admit no “states” and do not concern themselves with diplomatic accreditations; rather they recognize only sport unions which exercise control over organizations and competition in sports within a particular geographical area.\(^{30}\)

As additional arguments to support their claim for full recognition, the East Germans attacked the joint-team situation that had existed at the 1956 Olympic Games. Attempts were made to show that athletes representing different ideologies produced poorer team efforts and had less collective spirit than would have been the case had the East Germans competed alone.\(^{31}\) The GDR also demonstrated its drive for independence by denying that it existed as part of a divided Germany and had equal right to represent all of Germany. In sport this was expressed with a series of title changes. The (East) German Sport Committee in 1957 was named the German Gymnastic and Sport Union and became the counterpart to the (West) German Sport Union. Its sport unions likewise were renamed “German Sport Unions.” Championships became “German Championships,” records “German records” and the East German team, the “German National Team.”\(^{32}\)

The newly formed German Gymnastic and Sport Union was as politically committed as the (East) German Sport Union had been. When the West Germans were angered at the open avowal of political activity by the German Gymnastic and Sport Union, they were answered with derision and told that to suggest that a sport program could be free from politics was simply failing to recognize the obvious and inevitable. The East Germans added they “did not invent political influence in sport, but rather altered its character. . . . bourgeois politics in sport had merely been replaced by the politics of the proletariat.”\(^{33}\)

Although the East Germans agreed to the I.O.C. decision made in Munich on May 29, 1959, to again form a joint German team with the West Germans for the 1960 Olympic Games, they nevertheless used every available opportunity to continue their drive toward independence and separate recognition. At international sporting events, the East German teams appeared wearing the “DDR” (GDR) insignia with its accompanying badge showing the hammer,
It was not long before a situation occurred which demonstrated the East German claim that West German sport was also politically manipulated and hardly free from governmental intervention. At the ice hockey world championships in Geneva, Switzerland in 1961, West Germany had to play East Germany. The West Germans knew that if they lost the competition, they would then have to pay due respect to the East German flag and anthem. If they left the rink before the ceremonies took place, the West German Ice Hockey Association would then be threatened with suspension from the International Ice Hockey Association. The decision made was not to play at all. Since the East Germans were left as sole German representatives in the competition, they used the situation to support their claim to represent all Germany.  

It was not, however, totally a political offensive from the East. The existence of West Berlin as an ‘island’ of the West within East Germany, and (prior to the building of the wall in 1961), its role as passage from East to West, made the city a constant source of irritation to East German leadership. The Berlin blockade in June of 1948 had been a Soviet effort to remove advantages gained by the West from the city’s position within the Eastern bloc. On the basis of Berlin’s injurious effects on the consolidation of socialism in East Germany, it is understandable that further ‘attacks’ were then mounted against the city. These took the form of attempts to isolate West Berlin politically. The counterpart in sport was an effort to separate Berlin from the (West) German Sport Union, a campaign which reached a high point when the Berlin Wall was built. At this time, the (East) German Gynmastic and Sport Union called for ‘voluntary’ service of East German athletes in the National Peoples’ Army to protect the “Fatherland” and guard the frontier against Western aggression.  

The Berlin Wall was answered in sport by the (West) German National Olympic Committee and (West) German Sport Union, which countered with the Dusseldorf resolution of August 16, 1961. This resolution claimed that:

...the Soviet Occupied Zone has put an end to mutual joint German sports relationships. ... So long as normal relationships between the Soviet Occupied Zone and Berlin, as well as the Federal Republic are not possible, our leading (sport) unions can no longer grant permission for the implementation of sporting events in the Soviet Occupied Zone or with sport groups from the Soviet
Occupied Zone in the Federal Republic. Likewise the sport unions of the Federal Republic cannot take part in international sport meetings in the Soviet Occupied Zone as long as this state of affairs exists. . . . 36

In spite of this breakdown of East-West relationships, in 1962 the I.O.C. pressed yet again for a joint team to be formed for the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo and Innsbruck. The (East) German National Olympic Committee agreed to the joint team realizing that if they did not accept the proposal, they would leave German representation solely in the hands of the West Germans. The West German National Olympic Committee was invited to meet with them and discuss the arrangements. Embittered as a result of the Berlin Wall, the (West) German National Olympic Committee argued that the diplomacy and protocol governing basic sporting relationships should be discussed prior to the formation of any joint team. It added that:

. . . with the building of the wall, the whole territory of the Soviet Occupied Zone has been cordoned off from the rest of Germany. It’s simple common sense that a political regime which brutally seals in its population to prevent mass flight from its territory and employs the death penalty as a further safeguard, cannot tolerate the existence of an escape route brought about by joint German sport relations. Considering what’s involved in the negotiations for the formation and delegation of the team, a more unsuitable time could not have been chosen than the present.37

In further counterattack, the (West) German National Olympic Committee demanded of the I.O.C. that, if a joint German team be formed, West Berlin must be included as a host city for qualifying competitions for the team. Furthermore, Eastern runaway athletes residing in the West must be able to participate without fear of retribution.38

This demand was accepted by the I.O.C. on October 22, 1962, and West Germans won a further victory by the reaffirmation that West Berlin’s sport associations were integrated with those of the (West) German Sport Union. The GDR grudgingly complied.39

Subsequent to these agreements, the National Olympic Committees of East and West Germany met at the I.O.C. headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, on December 8, 1962 to confer further on the I.O.C. demand that a joint German team be formed if German representation was to be made at the 1964 Olympic Games. At this meeting the Swiss I.O.C. member, Albert Mayer, in an effort to bring the endless confrontations to some form of compromise proposed a solution which all but gave independence to the East Germans. East and West Germany would select their own teams for the 1964 Olympic Games and would march under a common flag, emblem, and anthem.40

The National Olympic Committee of the GDR delightedly gave its approval to the proposal on December 20, 1962. However, on January 12, 1963, the
(West) German National Olympic Committee balked and refused to compromise. Willi Daume, President of the (West) German National Olympic Committee, had personally flown to Chicago and conferred with Avery Brundage, arguing strongly for the preservation of an all-German team. Brundage, as I.O.C. President, supported Daume and nullified Mayer’s proposal on the basis that it did not abide by existing I.O.C. laws and resolutions. He further decreed that, not only would a joint German team be formed again, but that the proposals agreed upon by the I.O.C. on October 22, 1962, would still be enforced. 41

The incredible difficulties which occurred thereafter in forming a joint German team for the 1964 Olympic Games led to a total of 15 National Olympic Committee conferences and 96 meetings of the sport associations of East and West Germany. Over a thousand hours of discussions took place, with the East Germans still pressing for special relationships to be set up for West Berlin. The East German demand that West Berlin should have its own National Olympic Committee and provide a separate team to the Olympic Games was again defeated, but not left to rest. In October, 1963, the Soviet I.O.C. member, Konstantin Andrianov, attempted not only to set up a separate National Olympic Committee for West Berlin, but also attempted to have the recognition of the National Olympic Committee of the GDR changed from provisional to full. Included in his proposal was an attempt to reduce the all-German title of the “National Olympic Committee for Germany,” which the West Germans had themselves adopted, and limit it to the “National Olympic Committee for the Federal Republic.” 42

Andrianov failed, but so did Avery Brundage and Willi Daume in seeking to prolong the joint German team for yet another Olympic Games (1968), since the (East) German National Olympic Committee in 1965 categorically refused to be involved in any more joint-team ventures. At the I.O.C. Congress in Madrid, on October 8, 1965, only five members were willing to vote in favor of yet another joint German team. Instrumental in the massive opposition to the joint German team was the knowledge that the International Track and Field Association had voted for separate teams for the 1966 European Championships. As a result, separate teams were authorized to represent East and West Germany in the 1968 Olympic Games, with the stipulation that they march into the Olympic Stadium under the same flag and using the same emblem and anthem. Thus, in the Winter Olympic Games in Grenoble in 1968, and in Mexico City for the Summer Games, two banners of black, red, and gold with five white Olympic rings made their appearance. 43

The last phase in the GDR’s long struggle for full recognition occurred at the 67th I.O.C. Congress in Mexico City in 1968, where with 44 votes in favor and 4 against, the (East) German National Olympic Committee was given full
power of representation as the National Olympic Committee for the GDR with
the added right, in future Olympic Games, to present an independent team,
flag, emblem, and anthem. Ueberhorst, commenting on the occasion men-
tioned that the I.O.C. was simply “tired of the continued bitterness of the
German issue,’’ and that the members of the West German National Olympic
Committee soon realized that they stood alone in their hopes of preventing
further East German independence. A small measure of comfort was that the
status of West Berlin remained unchanged.44

The choice of Munich as a host city for the Olympic Games of 1972 posed
problems for both East and West Germany. Since the GDR had been granted
full rights by the I.O.C., the decision forced recognition of the East German
flag, emblem, and anthem on West German soil. This fact did not go unno-
ticed by the West Germans. At the same meeting in which the GDR gained its
sporting sovereignty, Prince Georg Wilhelm of Hanover, the President of the
International Olympic Academy, made a last ditch effort to avoid honoring
the GDR in Munich. He proposed that:

. . . the playing of the national anthem and the raising of the national flag be dispensed with and
instead the Olympic flag should be raised and a neutral anthem played.45

This proposal was subsequently defeated, and the West Germans were finally
committed to absolute recognition of the GDR on their own soil. The East
Germans had achieved their ultimate objective.

Notes

1. West Germany is also known as the Federal Republic of Germany. In English the shortened form is F.R.G.;
in German, B.R.D. East Germany is also known as the German Democratic Republic. In English the shortened
form is G.D.R.; in German, D.D.R.


3. Waldemar Borde. Die Aufgaben unserer Demokratischen Sportbewegung. Deutsches Sport-Echo (Berlin),
October, 1948, p. 3.


8. Gründungsfeier der NOK der DDR (Prot.) (Published by the National Olympic Committee of the German

9. Ibid.

10. Olympic Rules and Regulations, Comité International Olympique, Chateau de Vidy. 1007 Lausanne, II,


14. Ibid., p. 32.
15. Wonneberger. p. 141.
17. Wonneberger, p. 35.
18. Knecht, p. 36.
20. Knecht, p. 36.
21. Ibid.
22. Ihmels, p. 93.
24. Ihmels, p. 84.
27. Ueberhorst. p. 119.
29. Knecht, p. 57.
34. Knecht, pp. 61-64.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., pp. 142-143.
41. Ueberhorst, p. 143.
42. Knecht, pp. 68-69.
43. Kruger, p. 130.
44. Ueberhorst, pp. 175-176.
45. Ueberhorst, pp. 175-176.