CHAPTER ONE

BETWEEN GERMAN TRADITION AND SOVIET HEGEMONY: THE POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION OF SPORTS

Since the early nineteenth century, the Turnverein or Sportverein, the local gymnastics or sports association, has been a fixture in Germany. Members of Vereine, whether middle class or working class, have taken pride in history and traditions. Even today, citizens of reunited Germany maintain private sports archives in their homes and celebrate the history of their Vereine in public. Hockey player Werner Holtzschke wrote a history of his hockey club, the Allgemeiner Turnverein zu Leipzig, for a 1995 Festschrift commemorating its 150th anniversary. Cyclist Heinz Rühlicke is writing a “Chronicle” of his artistic cycling (Kunstradfahren) club in Annaburg, consulting files from the city archive and from the private archives of fellow athletes. Other athletes display mementos of family sports history in their homes. Rower Horst Evers exhibits not only his own rowing trophies, won during the East German years, but also those of his father, who died in 1944 in World War Two.¹

In the years after World War Two, the East German government and its Socialist Unity Party (SED) leaders hoped to establish East Germany’s historical legitimacy as a nation state by highlighting its origins in indigenous German traditions. Recognizing the significance of the German sports and gymnastics clubs to individuals and their communities, leaders built upon that history by promoting athletic activities and organizing sports clubs. They celebrated their work on behalf of sports as proof that the socialist East Germany cultivated the best German traditions. They hoped thereby to enhance the historical legitimacy of the new East German state and to disguise the reality that the government’s new

sports programs dismantled German sports traditions and introduced heavily centralized Soviet models in their place.

As part of this official celebration of German sports history, the Committee for Physical Culture and Sports in Leipzig issued guidelines in October 1952 advising historians how to research and write the history of German sports in order to prepare a museum exhibit. This museum exhibit would celebrate how socialist East Germany, not West Germany, best carried forward the indigenous German traditions of gymnastics and sports. The Committee encouraged historians not only to consult archival records, but also to gather memorabilia from old Vereine, such as leaflets, newspapers, old flags, posters, and photographs. The guidelines also suggested that the historians talk to as many athletes as possible. The Committee particularly encouraged historians to seek out “the oldest athletes in villages and towns…. These old ‘sports friends’ will be able to report much and give us valuable information for our work.”

By interviewing citizens and gathering and placing their mementos into a museum, the government intended to demonstrate that German traditions lived on in the new socialist East German state. The goal was to make the history of sports in Germany not an abstraction, but rather a tradition of which many individual citizens were a part.

Beneath the surface of this celebration of tradition, however, lies a dynamic more complicated than a straightforward celebration of history. The guidelines for the historians reveal a carefully managed, state-mandated historical narrative. Old athletes were not to write the history of their Sportvereine or of German sports traditions themselves. Rather, they would provide evidence, examples, stories, and material artifacts. Then, professional historians would interweave these memories and artifacts into an official historical narrative carefully established by the SED. Thus, rather than inviting citizens to celebrate and continue their indigenous traditions, the government wanted to manage history, bringing all stories and evidence together into one pre-established,