CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIALIST SPECTATORSHIP: THE FRIEDEMFAHRT AND CHAMPION TÄVE SCHUR

In 1948 Czechoslovakia and Poland launched the *Friedensfahrt* (Ride of Peace), a long-distance cycling competition that took cyclists from Warsaw to Prague.\(^1\) In 1952 East Berlin joined Warsaw and Prague as an anchor city. The race took place for approximately two weeks every May, with the number of stages varying somewhat from year to year. The official goals of the *Friedensfahrt* included promoting peace and international understanding. The dove—symbol of peace—was a fixture on both the yellow jersey worn by the individual leader and the blue jerseys worn by the leading team. The cycling teams were amateur and represented individual nations, in contrast to the multinational, corporate-sponsored teams that participated in other international cycling competitions such as the Tour de France.\(^2\)

The *Friedensfahrt* became a mass phenomenon in East Germany in the 1950s. Whereas people had to travel to Leipzig to experience the Gymnastics and Sports Festivals in person, the *Friedensfahrt* reached citizens directly. Each May, as more than one hundred cyclists from all around the world rode across East Germany, thousands of East German citizens turned out to cheer them as they passed by.

An East German team first won this competition in 1953, gaining for East Germany its first major international athletic success. Two years later, Gustav-Adolf “Täve” Schur became the GDR’s first athletic hero with his individual *Friedensfahrt* victory, a feat that he repeated in 1959. Schur was indisputably the most celebrated athlete in the GDR in the 1950s. The government cultivated him as a socialist role model, and fans embraced him, sending him thousands of fan letters. Schur’s popularity persisted even a decade after the demise of the GDR as

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2 Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisation im Bundesarchiv (hereafter SAPMO-BArch), DY 12 491, “Program IX Friedensfahrt,” Bl. 130. The *Friedensfahrt* cycling tour last took place in 2006; it was funded by private sponsors.
a state. Due largely to the votes of former East German citizens, he served in the Parliament of the united Germany from 1998 until 2002 as a representative of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the GDR’s SED Party.

The *Friedensfahrt* reflected the dual strategy pursued by East Germany in the 1950s. On the one hand, leaders emphasized the GDR as the embodiment of the best of German traditions and called for German reunification in a socialist state. On the other hand, leaders simultaneously worked to achieve diplomatic recognition and attain international respect for East Germany’s status as an autonomous state. Sports culture reflected this duality. East Germany planned the Gymnastics and Sports Festivals as “German” festivals and invited West German guests. At the same time, it worked to gain recognition from international sports federations for East German athletes and teams—dubbing its athletes “Diplomats in Track Suits” (*Diplomaten im Trainingsanzug*) and it seized upon international sports competitions in which East Germans excelled, chief among them the *Friedensfahrt*, as a way to cultivate in its citizens a specifically East German, as opposed to German, patriotism.

The *Friedensfahrt* emerged as a hugely popular and successful mass mobilization event in the 1950s. SED leaders’ success in using the *Friedensfahrt* to elicit patriotism and to encourage active participation was due not only to the careful orchestration of state mobilization campaigns, but also to the genuine resonance that the *Friedensfahrt* cycling tour, East Germany’s successes, and the Täve Schur phenomenon found with the

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4 Reflecting the government’s dual discourse and the extent to which German identity remained fluid for so many citizens in the 1950s, some of the same citizens who celebrated the *Friedensfahrt* also celebrated the victory of the West German soccer team in the 1954 World Cup Championship. Several interviewees for this project described listening to the 1954 World Cup finals on the radio and celebrating the “German” victory. See Manfred Jentzsch, Horst Heck, and Siegfried Rössner, interview by Molly Wilkinson Johnson (hereafter author), Wittenberg, Germany, 17 May 2005; Wilfried Gärtner, interview by author, Wittenberg, Germany, 2 July 2004; and Heinz Rühlicke, interview by author, Annaburg, Germany, 5 May 2005. Peter Hähnel remembered that he read a book written by Fritz Walter, the West German team captain, three times. He received the book as a gift from his brother. Peter Hähnel, interview by author, Chemnitz, Germany, 10 July 2004. For further insights on the reception of the 1954 World Cup in East Germany, see Christian Becker and Wolfgang Buss, “Das ‘Wunder von Bern’ und die DDR,” *Deutschland Archiv* 37, no. 3 (2004): 389–399.