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# Sport or Political Organization? Structures and Characteristics of the Red Sport International, 1921-1937

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At its foundation in Moscow on 23 June 1921, the International Union of Red Sports and Gymnastics Associations, better known as Red Sport International (RSI),<sup>1</sup> defined its mission as “the creation and amalgamation of revolutionary proletarian sports and gymnastics organizations in all countries of the world and their transformation into support centers for the proletariat in its class struggle.”<sup>2</sup> The creation of a revolutionary organization in the field of sport reflected the division of the international labor movement after the First World War into a communist branch that believed that capitalism could only be beaten through revolutions, and a socialist one that believed in a social reform. Thus, the aim of the communist RSI was to act as a counterbalance to the Lucerne Sport International (LSI), established in 1920 by representatives of European worker sports federations and allied, in its ideology, to the socialist labor movement. At the end of the 1920s, the RSI included several national sections in Europe and in North and South America. During the sixteen years of its existence (the RSI was disbanded by the presidium of the Comintern in April 1937),<sup>3</sup> however, it was never able to seriously challenge the LSI’s dominant position in international worker sport.<sup>4</sup>

The RSI was founded on the initiative of Nikolai Podvoisky, chairman of the Russian organization for military training (*Vsevobuch*), after a series of meetings about sport issues with communists coming from eight countries.<sup>5</sup> Far from being directly involved in the RSI’s founding,<sup>6</sup> the Comintern executive practically ignored worker sport at this time. The RSI, however, considered itself from the beginning an auxiliary organization, conforming to the aims of the Comintern and operating under its political authority in the

area of working-class leisure. Finally, in autumn 1924, the RSI was publicly recognized by the Fifth World Congress of the Communist International as an integral part of the international communist movement.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1: The International Worker Sport Movement, 1931**

Places	RSI sections	SWSI sections
Germany	125,000	1,211,468
Austria	10,000	293,700
Czechoslovakia		
Czechoslovak federations	80,000	136,977
German federations of Sudetenland	8,000	70,730
Finland		30,257
Switzerland		21,624
Denmark		20,000
The Netherlands		16,795
Belgium		12,909
France	10,000	6,000
Alsace-Lorraine	10,000	5,000
Spain	9,000	
Poland		
Polish federation		7,000
Jewish federation		4,369
German federation		938
Ukrainian federation		1,925
Sweden	8,000	
Norway	5,500	10,000
Lithuania		5,171
United Kingdom	5,000	5,000
Palestine		4,250
Canada	4,000	
USA	1,000	697
Romania		2,500
Greece	2,000	
Yugoslavia		1,800
Hungary		1,750
Estonia		1,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>277,500</b>	<b>1,872,460</b>

The detailed numbers on the sections of the Socialist Worker Sports International are taken from the sections' reports to the 6th SWSI Congress in Liege (Belgium) in 1932, published as *Berichte zum VI. Kongreß der Sozialistischen Arbeitersport-Internationale in Lüttich über die Jahre 1930-31* (Prague, 1932). The numbers concerning the RSI are essentially estimations based on various sources, mainly the issues of *Internationaler Arbeiterreport* for 1930 and 1931, and "Mitgliederbewegung der Kampfgemeinschaft von Juni bis Oktober 1931", in SAPMO-BArch, Ry/I 2 70/1. N.B. RSI membership reached its peak in 1931.

Was the RSI a typical communist organization, comparable to the Young Communist International and other communist “mass organizations,” or did it possess instead the features of a proletarian sport organization? What was more important to the RSI: its political mission or its role in providing organized sports for the workers?

In investigating these questions one must consider the two main spheres in which the RSI developed its activities. On the one hand, it was at the very center of international communism. From 1924-25 onward, its executive committee belonged to the extended apparatus of the Communist International. On the other, it also operated on the periphery of the communist movement, where the aim was to engage with workers who did not belong to a political party. These two dimensions are in keeping with both restrictive and broad conceptions of the RSI. Its executive bodies made the RSI, firstly, the “policy maker” or “headquarters” of the international communist worker sports movement. Secondly, it was a voluntary amalgamation of worker sport federations of various countries, counting among its members all worker sportsmen of the sections affiliated to it.

This article, based on documents contained in the archives of the communist movement in Moscow, Berlin, and Paris, makes use of the broad definition of the organization and examines the different patterns of behavior of the RSI executive and the RSI members.<sup>8</sup> So doing, it focuses on the position of the RSI within the structures of international communism as a particular handicap in exercising its influence. Indeed, in its attempt to attract the masses the RSI’s agitation encapsulated—not least on account of the nature of worker sport federations as proletarian leisure organizations—the fundamental problem of the communist movement: with the Revolution still beyond the horizon, it was difficult to convince worker sportsmen that it was nonetheless imperative to join the revolutionary movement and that it was not sufficient to gratify one’s sporting needs in the all-party community of worker sport clubs. Moreover, the obligation to follow the general lines of Comintern policy was often at variance with heeding the special demands of worker sport in different countries. In discussing the high level of dependence that characterized the RSI’s relations with the Comintern, and considering the social and cultural mechanisms in worker sport clubs, the article will reveal the specific problems faced by the RSI in its attempts to use sport—a relatively autonomous practice—for political ends. It will also show that the RSI’s position in a power oriented movement left little chance for the RSI to introduce significant changes in the sport practices of worker sport clubs.

### The “Bolshevization” of the RSI’s leadership

The term “Bolshevization” generally denotes the process by which, in the 1920s the various Communist Parties adopted the Bolshevik Party model of a strictly disciplined organization that allowed neither individual deviation, no matter how slight, from the official party line nor the forming of factions within the party. An important element of Bolshevization was the acceptance of the untouchable authority of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) by the Communist Parties of all countries.<sup>9</sup> As the example of the RSI shows, the Bolshevization affected not only the relations between the Comintern and its sections, but also those with its mass organizations. This process, which can also be described as the progressive destruction of democratic decision making, started for the RSI with its subordination to the Young Communist International in 1923.

**Table 2: RSI sections and their creation periods**

1921-23	1924	1929-33
Russia	Norway	Sweden
Czechoslovakia	Uruguay	Spain
France	Argentina	USA
	Canada	Greece
		Iceland
		Germany
		United Kingdom
		Switzerland
		Netherlands
		Austria
		Sudetenland
		Alsace-Lorraine

The Spanish FCDO officially affiliated with the RSI only in 1934, but practically was a RSI section since its formation in 1931. See Internationale Sportrundschaу, *Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Körperkultur* (Kopenhagen, 1933), pp. 20-24; *ibid.*, 1934, p. 17.

While at the beginning of the 1920s the Comintern still paid little attention to worker sport, similar to its neglect of mass politics in the field of worker culture, the Young Communist International increasingly considered worker sport a crucial area of involvement.<sup>10</sup> The Third YCI Congress in 1922 marked a turning point in its political program as far as sport was concerned. If its policy on sport had hitherto been equivocal and contradictory, there was now a general consensus that sport should be integrated into communist politics and especially into communist youth politics since it unquestionably belonged to the most important leisure activities of working-class youth.<sup>11</sup> Henceforth, the YCI pursued new goals, with the aim of taking over a key share of the responsibility for communist sport policy and thus ultimately of attaining greater significance within the spectrum of international communist organizations.

The resulting dispute with the RSI over their respective powers was closely connected with the quarrel which had broken out in 1921 about the organization and control of Soviet sport, which was claimed by the Russian Communist Youth League, the *Komsomol*. This federation wished to create a number of *faits accomplis* at the international level which would subsequently be applied to Soviet circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Late in 1922, the Comintern intervened in the dispute and, under the influence of the Russian Communist Party, sided with the YCI.<sup>13</sup> The organizational “independence” of the RSI was mere propaganda, as revealed in a secret resolution passed by representatives of the YCI, the Comintern and the RSI at an assembly in February 1923:

For the purpose of recruiting non-communist elements the R.S.I. is formally an independent organization which, on the basis of complete legal equality, works in co-operation with the C.I, the Youth International and the Red Trade Union International.... In point of fact, the Sportintern executive carries out its work according to the political directives of the C.I. The Y.C.I. takes particu-

lar interest in the work of the Sportintern, and its involvement in sports work makes a responsible contribution since it is the Y.C.I.'s task to influence the mass of working-class youth active in sports. For this reason the Y.C.I. should play a particularly active role in the work of the Sportintern.<sup>14</sup>

The Comintern in fact delegated responsibility for the Sport International to the YCI, although it reserved the right to have the final say on questions of the Sport International and take unilateral decisions.<sup>15</sup> The representatives of the worker sports movement were only granted a limited amount of autonomy in sport technical matters.<sup>16</sup>

At all levels—whether organizational, structural or psychological—the resolutions passed at the assembly of February 1923 reduced the RSI's power. This process reached its completion after the official Bolshevization decisions of the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern in 1924.<sup>17</sup> The RSI was bound even more closely in the structures of the Comintern, as was made clear by the Comintern secretariat in December 1924 in a confidential memorandum to RSI secretary Fritz Reussner: before the RSI published any form of proclamation, the contents had to be checked and approved by the secretariat. Further, the RSI was required to consult the Comintern presidium directly before addressing important political issues.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it was no longer up to the RSI to decide in which cases and to what extent it should ask the Comintern authorities for advice. Comintern authorities controlled its publications and even its official and confidential resolutions. Even in questions of internal organization, especially personnel matters, the supervisory role of the Comintern took on a more imperial quality.<sup>19</sup> The RSI headquarters virtually assumed the role of a Comintern sport committee.<sup>20</sup>

The ever-increasing political control over RSI personnel went hand in hand with a loss of creativity and efficiency. Whenever it wished to formulate its aims and intentions, the RSI leadership had to take the utmost care lest an imprudently chosen term might arouse even the slightest suspicion of disagreement with the momentarily prevailing political views and guidelines of the Comintern. Whether the RSI's directives would be of any practical use for the activities of the national federations was not only of secondary importance to the RSI leadership but also, in principle, superfluous: after all, obedience to the dogma of the infallibility of the Comintern's policies also meant embodying its firm belief in the absolute rightness of the instructions which it conveyed to the communist worker sports movement and which were derived from these policies. Any failures would necessarily have to be interpreted as an inadequate or inconsistent implementation of the unerring directives.

Since at the same time the Comintern was increasingly becoming a tool of Soviet domestic and foreign policy, the RSI's dependence on the Comintern was accompanied, almost inevitably, by the Soviet section's dominance within the RSI. The interests of the Soviet Union and Soviet sport were decisive factors in the RSI's decisions and actions—even if, as was frequently the case, they were incompatible with those of European worker sport.<sup>21</sup> This added handicap to the organization's activities and reinforced any passive tendencies that the members of the executive may have had. Given the unconditional obedience which established itself in the RSI's executive, the RSI began to resemble the type of organization which Max Weber, in his conceptualization of legitimate power and authority,<sup>22</sup> defined as having a traditional feudal character. According to Weber, such an

organization is guided above all by a belief in certain principles and values, which resembles common cult worship; rational thought and efficiency consequently play only a minor role.

A further facet of the process of Bolshevization is to be seen in the (self-)appointment of the Comintern-dependent RSI executive as the unassailable authority of the international communist worker sport movement, which virtually meant the exclusion of the rank and file from the decision making process. That little heed was paid to the opinions as well as the moods prevailing in the sections is revealed by the fact that the Third Congress in 1924 was also the penultimate congress held by the organization including participation of elected delegates from the different national federations. The last RSI congress took place in 1928 in the wake of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern. It was not marked in any way by a serious discussion of political or sporting issues; on the contrary, its main achievement—or misachievement—was to take the highly problematic and extraordinarily hypothetical Comintern resolutions on the tactic “class against class” as well as the untenable “thesis of social fascism” and apply them entirely without differentiation to worker sport.<sup>23</sup>

The Enlarged Executive, which consisted of the members of the Executive Committee and some chosen representatives of the national federations whose task it was, according to the statutes,<sup>24</sup> to control the work of the presidium, was convened somewhat more frequently (see table 3). However, the meetings primarily served to induce the representa-

**Table 3: Most-Important RSI Assemblies**

<b>RSI Congresses</b>		
1st	July 19-29, 1921	Moscow
2d	July 29-31, 1922	Berlin
3d	October 13-21, 1924	Moscow
4th	October 23-24, 1928	Moscow
<b>Meetings of the Enlarged Executive (“Plenary meetings”)</b>		
1st	February 7-13, 1923	Moscow
2d	January 28, 1925	Moscow
3d	May 17-22, 1926	Moscow
4th	November 10-16, 1927	Moscow
5th	May 31-June 3, 1929	Charkow
6th	July 14-17, 1931	Berlin
7th	September 2-3, 1933	Amsterdam
8th	March 7-8, 1936	Prague

The 7th and the 8th plenary meetings were called “RSI conferences” by the RSI.

tives of the communist worker sports movement to follow the official party line and to convince the outside world that a kind of democratic functioning persisted in the organization. In fact, the resolutions were formulated by the executive after consultation with the Comintern, submitted to the assemblies and, as a rule, passed unanimously.

This whole system functioned all the more easily since at the national level, the communist parties made sure that only reliable party comrades found their way to the top of the RSI sections.<sup>25</sup> Ideological deviations of individual members were regarded as nonobservance of party discipline, and punished accordingly. It is small wonder, then, that the participants of RSI assemblies were almost exclusively members of communist parties and that the fluctuation of the participants was extraordinarily high. Among the 107 participants at the congresses held in 1924 and 1928 and at the meeting of the Enlarged Executive in 1926 whose names could be identified, only a negligible proportion (7 persons) took part in more than one assembly, and only Secretary Fritz Reussner and President Nikolai Podwoiski were present at all three.<sup>26</sup> The two persons who indicated on their participant forms that they were not members of a communist party or youth organization were nonetheless closely associated with the communist movement.<sup>27</sup>

### Limits of One-Sided Party Politics: The Membership

Communist Party domination at the executive level of the federations was not replicated in the membership structure of the RSI sections. These cross-party organizations were made up of predominantly male members of communist, social democratic, anarchist, and syndicalist tendencies, as well as many who belonged to no party, as the RSI noted in 1931.<sup>28</sup> With regard to social structure, the majority was from the working-class but the RSI federations' membership also included white-collar workers, state employees, and students.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, no detailed statistics are available on the exact number of communist party members in the RSI sections. However, it is safe to assume that this group represented a minority of the whole membership of each section. In the French federation, the *Fédération Sportive du Travail* (FST), the number of Communist Party members did not exceed ten percent.<sup>30</sup> The corresponding figure for the German RSI section, the *Kampfgemeinschaft für rote Sporteinheit* (Combat Association for Red Sport Unity) was probably scarcely higher<sup>31</sup>—many members, incidentally, belonged to the SPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany<sup>32</sup>—while in the Czechoslovakian federation approximately 20-30% of the members were also Communist Party members, undoubtedly the highest ratio of all the RSI sections.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, it may be safely inferred that the exclusively communist content of the RSI's program failed to attract the interest of the worker athletes due to their differing values. The fact that people who were not communists nevertheless joined RSI federation clubs in order to pursue their sporting activities was probably due to the relatively small effect that RSI programs had in day-to-day club life. Practicing sport, entering competitions, and taking part in the club's social activities in a predominantly proletarian environment were the major factors which bound members together despite all the ideological divisions between the parties. Just as in other worker clubs, independent social mechanisms, which deviated more or less markedly from the parties' goals, were able to assert themselves.<sup>34</sup>

The affiliation of a worker sport club with a communist sport federation should by no means be equated with its adherence to the goals of the Communist Party. Purely sporting aspects were more often than not the decisive factors for individuals' decisions to join. After the early split in the French worker sports movement in 1923, for example, almost all the clubs in and around Paris joined the RSI section, whether or not their members were Socialist or Communist Party sympathizers, thus allowing competitions and league tables to continue as before.<sup>35</sup> In 1924 the democratic election of a socialist as chairman of the *Comité régional de la Seine*, the main regional federation of the communist FST, created an "intolerable situation" from the point of view of the French Communist Party.<sup>36</sup> The split within the federation led to only a small number of splits within clubs, which in itself indicates that political and ideological issues were less significant than the social life of the club.<sup>37</sup>

A similar development appears in Germany. After the split in the *Arbeiter-Turn-und Sportbund* (ATSB) in 1928-29, without exception the soccer clubs of the communist-dominated Berlin-Brandenburg regional federation joined the communist worker sport organization, while in other regions this organization was scarcely able to establish itself for reasons connected with sport: in search of the most attractive sports facilities, even clubs sympathetic to the communist movement rejoined the social-democratic ATSB. Just as in France, party-political leanings played a less significant role than the sporting identity of the club community. Despite the split in the German worker sports movement, no great distinction was made between social democrat and communist members at the club level.<sup>38</sup>

Because of their relatively loose ties with the respective communist parties, but also in part on account of their everyday attitudes, worker sportsmen by no means came up to the



Start of the 2x20m relay at a Berlin worker sport indoor festival, 1927. *From Proletariersport: Organ für proletarisch-physische Kultur, 1927 (2): 4*

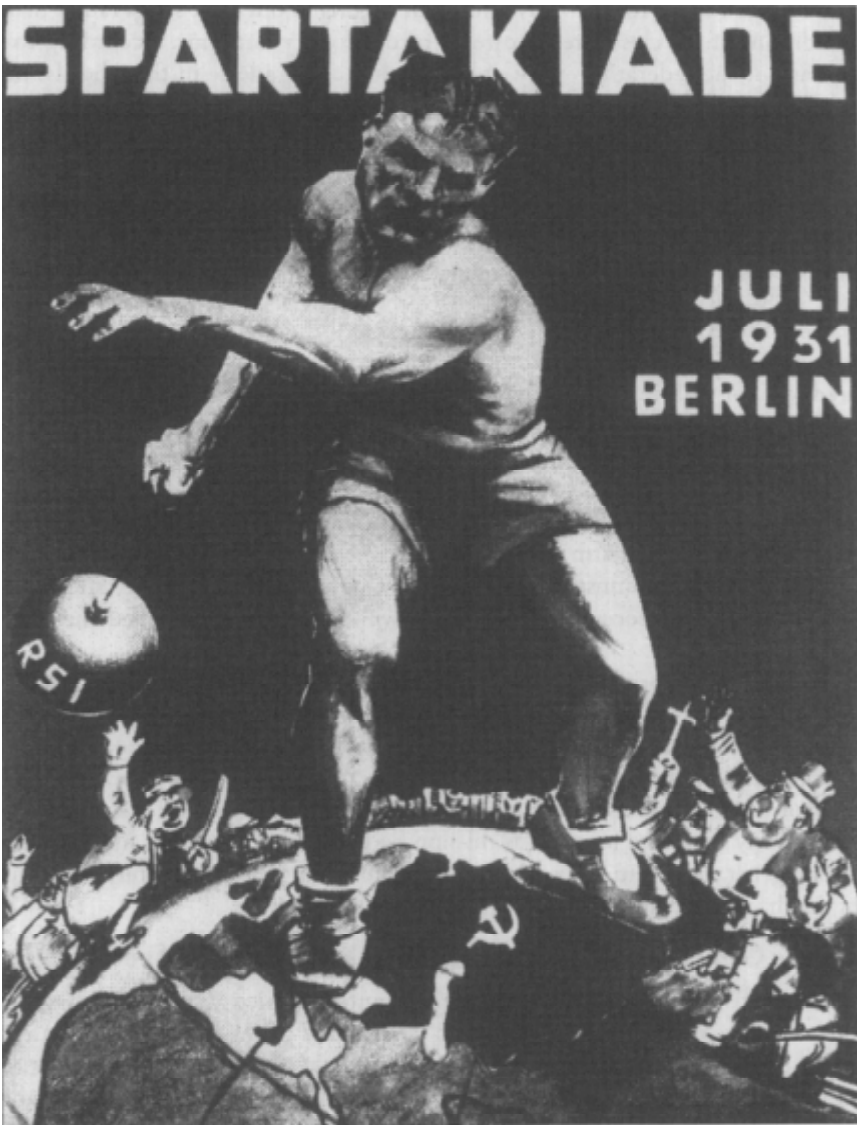
RSI's expectations of well-organized revolutionary combat groups. Parisian soccer players of the FST took advantage of their matches in the provinces to go on extensive drinking bouts and made a name for themselves for their singing of offensive songs rather than for their renditions of the classic repertoire of revolutionary anthems. According to one functionary of the federation, they only had club camaraderie in their heads; proletarian awareness was completely foreign to them.<sup>39</sup> Even many of the 28 FST athletes who traveled to Moscow for the first international *Spartakiad* in 1928 seemed to have misunderstood the real purpose of their "mission" and were intent on turning their visit—designed to further their political education—into a holiday trip for their own amusement.<sup>40</sup> And some French worker sportsmen fell hopelessly short of the functionaries' expectations at the *Spartakiad* held in Lyon in 1932,<sup>41</sup> dubbing fellow-athletes from other countries *sales étrangers* (dirty foreigners)<sup>42</sup>—which does not exactly reflect any hint of proletarian internationalism.

Although in 1931 the Communist Party of Germany attested to the laudable state of preparedness for political action which prevailed in the *Kampfgemeinschaft für rote Sporteinheit*, this was probably true for only a minority of worker-athletes. Top officials of the soccer section (which was the most important section of the *Kampfgemeinschaft*, with around 36% of the total membership<sup>43</sup>) continued to censure players and sometimes even functionaries for their lack of enthusiasm for political work and their fixation on sporting matters.<sup>44</sup> Ernst Grube, chairman of the *Kampfgemeinschaft* and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany, noted in 1932 that the different sport sections were mainly preoccupied with their own affairs and condemned their lack of political awareness.<sup>45</sup>

In France, the majority of Party members who were enrolled in FST clubs refrained from any attempts to indoctrinate non-party members, since they regarded their practices in the worker sport federation as a leisure activity outside the political sphere. There were virtually no cases of clubs forming "communist factions", as urged by the RSL.<sup>46</sup> Many members of the Communist Party of Germany reacted similarly, and "regarded worker clubs as scarcely the place for zealous missionary work and converting members but as places for regeneration, getting together or simply for taking the opportunity of furthering talents that had fallen into disuse."<sup>47</sup>

### Closing the Gap Between Leadership and Rank and File: The Sport Element

In the ultra-leftist phase (1928-34) of the Comintern, which was marked by a (self-)destructive fight with the social democratic "archenemy of the working-class," the RSI revealed itself to be even less capable than before of coherent analysis of the situation in worker sport. It issued, for example, the same general directives to both the German and French worker sports movements, even though they were operating within different social and political contexts, especially after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, and going through very different phases of development.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, it was merely following the instructions of the Comintern, however counterproductive these may have been. The RSI applied to perfection the same principle that drove the communist movement: the total disregard of political realities, or alternatively their reinterpretation consistent with Stalinist or Comintern analyses.



The RSI defends the Soviet Union: Poster of the 2d International Spartakiad of the Red Sport International (Berlin, 1931). Reprinted from Wolfgang Eichel, ed., *Illustrierte Geschichte der Körperkultur* (Berlin: Sportverlag 1984).

These findings, however, can only claim to be entirely valid as to the RSI's political program. Things were quite different as far as the RSI's conception of its sport work was concerned. Here, the priority given to winning over the masses proved to be a link between the RSI's leadership and worker sportsmen: the RSI was at pains to meet the wishes of worker sportsmen for an attractive and varied range of sport, independently from ideological considerations. This principle, which appeared most clearly after the increase in section membership at the end of the 1920s<sup>49</sup> (see Table 1, page 24, and Table 2, page 26), was reconcilable with the Comintern's political expectations of the RSI, even if, essentially, it meant bringing the sporting contents in line with the practice of sport in bourgeois clubs. Thus, the "Resolution on Methodical and Technical Work"<sup>50</sup> passed by the RSI Plenary Meeting in Berlin<sup>51</sup> in July 1931 emphasized the fact that no sport should be excluded which aroused the interest of the "broad masses." Moreover, national differences were also to be taken into account; in the United States, for example, football was to be introduced into the daily practice of the worker sports federation. The question of the effects on health of American football (which the RSI called "rugby") was not raised; it was only noted in this connection that "conservatism in methods and technical work [was] at the expense of influence over the masses."<sup>52</sup>

In this way the RSI, despite its original intentions, chose not to draw up a theory of "proletarian physical culture" with a special communist essence and put it into practice.<sup>53</sup> It attempted, rather, to appropriate the contents of the dominant bourgeois culture and endow it with new political meaning. Its discourses neatly severed competitive sport from its individualistic contents, relating it instead to the collective requirements of the class struggle.<sup>54</sup> There is no evidence, however, to prove that worker sport contests were in actual fact carried out in a "different spirit" from those organized by bourgeois sport clubs. The problem of not being able to enforce certain behavioral norms was one that affected the communist and social democratic worker sports movement alike. As early as 1920, for instance, the social democratic newspaper *Volksstimme* [The People's Voice] deplored "our youth's interest in sport which is solely concerned with contest and victory."<sup>55</sup>

The situation depicted above can be summarized in the following terms, borrowed from sociologist Joachim Raschke: the communist worker sport movement (like its social democratic counterpart) was not a cultural but a power-oriented movement.<sup>56</sup> It operated, it is true, in the field of everyday culture; but at the same time it subordinated its activities to the goals of the Communist Parties—increasing and exerting political power. Its aim was not so much to change existing cultural practices but rather—with a view to gaining political influence—to claim the dominant culture as its own and reinterpret it for its own purposes. Moreover, it was the bourgeois and the socialist youth movements, rather than the worker sport movement, that introduced stronger alternative elements of physical culture, since the former saw themselves more as culture-oriented movements.<sup>57</sup>

In the RSI, an incompatibility became apparent between political activism on behalf of the Comintern and any ambition to bring about cultural innovation—which at the same time, however, lead to a greater compatibility between program contents and members' needs and wishes. Despite the fact that the RSI regarded individuals as collective tools of the Party and constantly strove to harness worker sport to meet the goals of the communist movement, working-class sportsmen were able to assert their interests not

only at the level of everyday sports practice but also in the federation's theoretical sports conceptions. Nevertheless, the RSI leadership and the rank and file basically lived in two different social environments: one was the world of the Party functionaries, the other the world of worker sportsmen. The sources on communist worker sport do not confirm the distinction made by the French historian of communism Annie Kriegel between representatives of the party machinery, the "pure politicians" on the one hand, and party activists who carried on their work in the mass organizations on the other. In Kriegel's view, the functionaries of the mass organizations were distinguishable because they were often "more flexible, more attentive and more sensitive" towards their surroundings and less doctrinaire.<sup>58</sup> This may be true of the lower levels of the mass organizations—at the level of club officials—but not at the leadership level, where the functionaries adopted the language and the behavior of the party machinery down to the last detail.<sup>59</sup>

A considerable difference, if not to say a sharp contrast, is to be found, on the other hand, between the functionaries in charge of the RSI sections and ordinary members. Whereas the former belonged to a social group which defined itself politically, the latter were bound together chiefly by their interest in sport in general, or one type of sport in particular, as well as in most cases a working-class background. The federation officials,



Start of an unspecified cycling event at a Berlin worker sport festival, 1927. *From Proletariersport: Organ für proletarisch-physische Kultur, 1927 (2): 5*

Party members almost without exception, were obliged to observe the written and unwritten laws of the Party, which laid down strict rules for their behavior. Worker sportsmen, the great majority of whom were not Party members, had much greater freedom. They were able to decide themselves how far they were willing to follow the political program of the federation's leadership.

## Conclusions

When Ernst Grube declared, in the Party's typical fashion, that "worker sport has nothing in common with the petty bourgeoisie's craving for freedom; it is Marxist class war on all fronts of sport and physical exercise," he was perhaps conveying the wishful thinking of the Communist Party of Germany but not historical reality.<sup>60</sup> Even so, the fact that worker sportsmen usually joined a worker sport club in order to participate in sport, not for political motives—joining the Party itself would have been a much more suitable option if this was the case—was found difficult to accept by the RSI leadership.

If one returns to the essential characteristics of the RSI, one finds the special nature of this organization above all at the structural level. The RSI pursued, first of all, not only the clear political aims as did the LSI (*i.e.*, waging the class struggle); it also functioned as a constituent part of a political organization—the Comintern—and, above all, adopted its repressive structure. Secondly, it was in the service of a specific country (the Soviet Union) which was presented as the "fatherland of all proletarians," and thus, as a principle of its work, put the interests of a single section above those of all the other member federations. It was in this respect that the RSI differed from all other international sports organizations—not only from the International Olympic Committee (with which it shared the same lack of democratic structures) and the international federations of the bourgeois sports movement, but also from the Lucerne Sport International, which operated according to democratic principles and ensured that the largest sections, as measured by the size of the membership, did not dominate the smaller federations.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, in these respects the RSI did not differ from other communist mass organizations, which were equally affected by the Comintern's transformation into a tool of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in shaping its domestic and foreign policies. What distinguished the RSI from these related organizations was ultimately the scope of its mission, which was restricted to the sport movement. In the day-to-day running of the clubs, there was scarcely any difference between the RSI sections and the social democratic worker sports movement, from which, after all, the majority of the RSI federations developed.

The disparity between the Comintern's political program and the day-to-day running of the clubs, and between the leadership and rank and file was so great that the RSI can be described as a split organization, living in two universes. With regard to the political discourses and the bureaucratic centralism of its institutional structures, the RSI was a typical communist organization, shaped on the model of communist parties. At club level and from the point of view of the behavior of the majority of the club members the RSI displayed features of a proletarian sports movement with social-democratic traditions, in which politics certainly played a role—but not a decisive one.

1. This name was officially adopted by the 2nd RSI Congress in Berlin 1922. See "Originalstenogramm der Verhandlungen der 2ten Konferenz der Roten Sportinternationale, abgehalten am 29., 30. und 31. Juli 1922 in Berlin," in Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History, *Rossiiskii tstenr kbraneniia i izucheniiia dokumentov noveishei istorii* (hereinafter *Rossiiskii tstenr*), 537 I 3. For a detailed account of the history of the Red Sport International, see André Gounot, "Intentionen, Strukturen und Funktionen einer kommunistischen 'Massenorganisation': Die Rote Sportinternationale zwischen Komintern-Politik und den Ansprüchen des europäischen Arbeitersports" [Intentions, Structures and Functions of a Communist "Mass Organization": The Red Sport International between Comintern Politics and the Demands of European Working-Class Sports] (Ph.D. diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 1998).
2. "Provisorisches Statut des Internationalen Verbandes roter Sport- und Turnvereine," in State Archives of the Russian Federation, *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (GARF), 75 76/2/2.
3. On the foundation and the end of the RSI, see André Gounot, "Sport réformiste ou sport révolutionnaire? Les débuts des Internationales sportives ouvrières", in ed. Pierre Arnaud, *Les origines du sport ouvrier en Europe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), 219-46; André Gounot, "Between Revolutionary Demands and Diplomatic Necessity: The Uneasy Relationship between Soviet Sport and Worker and Bourgeois Sport in Europe from 1920 to 1937", in ed. James Riordan and Pierre Arnaud, *Sport and International Politics: Impact of Fascism and Communism* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1998), 184-209.
4. In 1926 there were no more than 127,000 members in the RSI sections outside the Soviet Union. The greatest membership was reached in 1931, around 280,000. By comparison, the LSI, renamed "Socialist Worker Sports International" (SWSI) in 1928, had almost 1.9 million members in 1931, although it must be added that 1.2 million of them were German (see Table 1, page 24). The relations between the RSI and the LSI were first examined by David Steinberg, "Sport Under Red Flags! The Relations Between the Red Sport International and the Socialist Workers' Sport International 1920-1939" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1979).
5. Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Sweden and the Netherlands. See the minutes of the sessions of the RSI founding conference, in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 1.
6. This assumption is made by James Riordan in his article "Arbeitersport in einem Arbeiterstaat: Die UdSSR", in ed. Arnd Krüger and James Riordan, *Der internationale Arbeitersport* (Köln: Pahl/Rugenstein, 1985), 54. In the English version of this article ("Worker Sport Within a Worker State: The Soviet Union"), in ed. Arnd Krüger and James Riordan, *The Story of Worker Sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1996), 61, Riordan states that the RSI was founded by representatives from worker sports organizations. This is not right, since only one of the founding members, the German Bruno Lieske, actually had a function in a worker sports organization. Unfortunately, the latter book reproduces almost exclusively the articles of the earlier German book, and thus does not take advantage of the opening of the most important archives in Eastern Europe after the fall of the communist systems.
7. "Resolution zur Frage der physischen Erziehung der Arbeiterklasse", in *Thesen und Resolutionen des fünften Weltkongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale, vom 17. Juni bis 8. Juli 1924* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1967), 154-55.
8. Primarily the "Sportintern (1921-1937)" collection contained in the Comintern Archives in Moscow (item No. 537), which are incorporated into the *Rossiiskii tstenr* collection. This documentation, which was viewed during two studies in Moscow in 1994 and 1997, comprises the written material produced and compiled by the RSI executive and is by far the world's most important source of information on the international communist worker sports movement. *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (GARF) [State Archives of the Russian Federation] is another rich source, especially for documentation on "Supreme Council of Physical Culture, Department of International Sports Relations" (item No. 75 76/2). Other sources include the *Bibliothèque marxiste* (Archives of the Communist Party of France) in Paris, which possesses various documents on worker sport; the *Archives nationales* (Paris) with the collection "Propagande communiste par sociétés

- sportives, 1925-1932" (AN, F7/13137); the "Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv" in Berlin, documentation on the Communist Party of Germany, Central Committee (item RY 1/I 2/710); and periodicals published by the RSI and of the German and French worker movements and worker sports movements.
9. On the Bolshevization process see Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 85-99; Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus. Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, 2 vol. (Frankfurt am Main, 1969); Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik. Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 65-68.
  10. For accounts of the history of the Communist International, see Kevin MacDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Pierre Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale communiste* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997); Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn, *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1996).
  11. See *Bericht vom 3. Weltkongress der Kommunistischen Jugendinternationale. Vom 4.-16 Dezember 1922 in Moskau* (Berlin, 1923), 207-19; *Im Zeichen der Arbeit. Resolutionen und Beschlüsse des 3. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Jugendinternationale* (Berlin, 1923), 47-48; "Unsere Sporttaktik," *Jugend-Internationale* 4/5: 4 (Jan. 1923).
  12. "Vertraulich. Nur für die Organe der K.J. und nicht für die Sportintern bestimmt. Bericht über die Exekutivsitung der Roten Sportinternationale" (confidential report from Jacques Doriot, member of the executive committees of YCI and RSI, on the Plenary meeting in February 1923), in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 75. See also the retirement declaration from Bruno Lieske, "Berlin, im August 1925", in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 104.
  13. "EK der KI an den Genossen Neurath, an die Sportintern, Exekutive der Jugendinternationale und an die Budgetkommission. Moskau, den 16.12.1922" [Letter Disclosing the Decisions of the Meeting of the Comintern Presidium, 15 Dec. 1922], in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 45.
  14. "Geheimresolution über die Beziehungen zwischen der Sportintern, der KI, der Jugendintern und der RGI" [Secret Resolution on the Relations between the RSI, the CI, the YCI and the Red Trade Union International], drafted at the 1923 plenary meeting, in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 82. The document is also available in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 46.
  15. Young Communist Leagues played a significant role in worker sports movements of various countries. On the Canadian case, see Bruce Kidd, "Worker Sport in the New World: The Canadian Story", in ed. Krüger and Riordan, *The Story of Worker Sport*, 143-56.
  16. "Unsere Sporttaktik", in *Jugend-Internationale* 4/5: 4 (Jan. 1923).
  17. On this congress, see Annie Kriegel, "La IIIe Internationale," in ed. Jacques Droz, *Histoire générale du socialisme*, Vol. 3 (Paris: PUF, 1977), 84-86.
  18. "Vertraulich. EKKI an Reussner, 8. Dez. 1924" [confidential letter from the Executive Committee of the Communist Internationale to RSI secretary Fritz Reussner], in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 84.
  19. "Über die inneren Fragen der RSI" [Internal Matters of the RSI], confidential report, undated [1926], in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 125; "Sekretariat der Roten Sportinternationale an das Sekretariat der Komintern. Moskau, den 12.II.26", in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 129; "Streng vertraulich: An das Sekretariat der Komintern, Moskau, den 8. März 1926" [Strictly Confidential: To the Comintern Secretariat], from the RSI secretariat, in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 129.
  20. "An die Mitglieder des Präsidiums des EK der RSI. Moskau, 10.4.25" [To the Members of the Presidium of the RSI], letter from RSI secretary Fritz Reussner, in *Rossiiskii tstenr*, 537 I 104.
  21. For details of the relationship between Soviet sport and the RSI, see Gounot, "Between Revolutionary Demands and Diplomatic Necessity"; André Gounot, "L'Internationale rouge sportive et son rôle d'institution de propagande soviétique à Pétranger," in ed. Thierry Terret and Jean-Philippe

- Saint-Martin, *Le sport français pendant l'entre-deux-guerres. Regards croisés sur les influences étrangères* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 199-242.
22. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, ed. J. Winckelmann (Tübingen, 1972), 70-81.
  23. "Resolution über die Kriegsgefahr und die Aufgaben der Arbeitersportverbände" [Resolution on the War Danger and the Tasks of the Worker Sports Federations], Fourth RSI Congress (1928), in *Rossiiskii tseentr*, 537 I 25. "Class against class" meant vigorously fighting the socialist/social-democratic movement, which the Comintern accused of serving the imperialistic aims of a bourgeoisie manifestly drifting towards fascism and thus defending a "social fascist" ideology.
  24. *Proletariersport Organ für proletarisch-physische Kultur* No. 6: 93 (1926). This RSI journal was published in Berlin.
  25. For a more detailed description see Gounot, "Intentionen, Strukturen und Funktionen," 158-80.
  26. Data on persons have been found in "Statistik der Delegierten der Sektionen und Fraktionen zum III. Kongreß der RSI, der im Oktober 1924 stattgefunden hat" [Statistics on the Delegates at the Third RSI Congress], in *Rossiiskii tseentr*, 537 I 17; "Enquette für die Delegierten der Erweiterten Exekutivsitzenng der RSI" [Data on the Participants of the RSI Plenary Meeting], 1926, in *Rossiiskii tseentr*, 537 I 55; "Enquette für die Delegierten der Erweiterten Exekutivsitzenng der RSI" [Data on the Participants of the RSI Congress], 1928), in *Rossiiskii tseentr*, 537 I 27.
  27. The Canadian Marriott was employed by the Young Communist League of Canada, see "Enquette," 1928, in *Rossiiskii tseentr*, 537 I 27), and the British representative Sinfield was well-known in England as a personage in the communist movement (see Steven Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), 79-81.
  28. *Internationaler Arbeitersport: Zeitschrift für Fragen der internationalen revolutionären Arbeitersportbewegung*, Aug. 1931, 303.
  29. Ibid. From the police files on the *Fédération sportive du Travail* (AN, F7/13137) which also contain information on place of birth and status of club members, one can infer that 80% of the *Fédération* members belonged to the working class.
  30. "Section sportive centrale du Parti Communiste aux directions des régions d'entente, de rayons du P.C. et J.C. et des fractions sportives", no date [1929], in AN, F7/13137.
  31. See Herbert Dierker, *Arbeitersport im Spannungsfeld der Zwanziger Jahre: Sportpolitik und Alltagserfahrungen auf internationaler, deutscher und Berliner Ebene* (Essen: Klartext, 1990), 170-173.
  32. Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 178-79.
  33. An overview in Kriegel, "La IIIe Internationale," 113, shows that of the 92,691 members of the Communist Party in 1927, 16,160 also belonged to the worker sport federation. In this period the worker sport federation had around 80,000 members.
  34. On the situation in Germany, see Viola Denecke, *Die Arbeitersportgemeinschaft. Eine kulturhistorische Studie über die Braunschweiger Arbeitersportbewegung in den zwanziger Jahren* (Duderstadt: Mecke, 1990), 83-93, 198-207; Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 166-81; Eike Stiller, *Jugend im Arbeitersport: Lebenswelten im Spannungsfeld von Verbandkultur und Sozialmilieu von 1893-1933* (Münster: Lit, 1995), 68-74, 231-39, 262-72.
  35. *L'Avant-Garde ouvrière et communiste: Organe officiel de la Fédération Nationale des Jeunesses Communistes* (Paris), No. 51, 8-23 Aug. 1923.
  36. "Compte-rendu de la seance du Bureau politique du PCF (26 décembre 1924)," in Bibliothèque marxiste.
  37. *L'Humanité* (Paris), 21 Aug.-20 Sep. 1923; *Sport Ouvrier: Organe bi-mensuel de la Fédération Sportive du Travail, Section française de l'Internationale Rouge Sportive* Nos. 3 (10 Sep. 1923) and 4 (20 Sep. 1923) (Paris).
  38. See Dierker, *Arbeitersport im Spannungsfeld*, 168-86. See also Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 179.

39. *Sport ouvrier* No. 3 (10 Sep. 1923).
40. "Secret. Rapport concernant la délégation sportive de la FST Française venue à la Spartakiade de Moscou" [Secret Report on the French Delegation], in *Rossiiskii tsestr*, 537 II 152.
41. In 1932, the RSI invited its sections to organize Spartakiads as counter-events to the Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. The Labor Sports Union of America, which had affiliated with the RSI in 1927, staged a Spartakiad in Chicago. See W.S. Baker, "Muscular Marxism and the Counter-Olympics of 1932," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 9: 397-410 (1992).
42. "Note de la Prefecture de Police du Rhône, Lyon, le 22 Juin 1932," in AN, F7/13137.
43. Hg. von der Reichsspartenleitung der Fußballsparte der KG für rote Sporteinheit [Leadership of the Football Section, Combat Association for Red Sport Unity], *40 Jahre Arbeitersport: Die aktuellen Aufgaben der roten Fußballer* [40 Years of Worker Sport. The Current Tasks of Red Footballers] (Berlin: undated (ca. 1933)), 2.
44. *Ibid.*, 2-4.
45. Ernst Grube, *Warum rote Sporteinheit?* (Berlin: undated (ca. 1932)), 6.
46. *Bulletin Sportif: Edité par la Commission centrale sportive du Parti et de la Jeunesse Communiste: Organe intérieur des fractions communistes dans la F.S.T.* No date (1929), in AN, F7/13137.
47. Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 175-76.
48. See Gounot, "Intentionen, Stukturen und Funktionen," 245-55.
49. Most of them were created as result of splits "from above," caused by the growing incompatibility of the communist and social democratic positions, especially after 1928 in the wake of the propagation of the "theory of social fascism" and implemented by the federations' leadership.
50. Printed in *Internationaler Arbeitersport* No. 8: 312-23 (1931).
51. The RSI office moved from Moscow to Berlin in 1930.
52. *Internationaler Arbeitersport*, No. 8: 321.
53. See *Die Rote Fahne: Zentralorgan der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands* [The Red Flag: Central Journal of the German Communist Party], 25 Aug. 1921.
54. This increased after 1928 under the effect of the "class against class" tactic. The prospectus signed by Ernst Grube and diffused by the Kampfgemeinschaft [People's Struggle] in *Warum rote Sporteinheit?* provides a remarkable example of this.
55. *Volksstimme*, 19 Apr. 1920, quoted in Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, 172.
56. On this distinction, see Joachim Raschke, "Zum Begriff der sozialen Bewegung," in ed. Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht, *Neue soziale Bewegungen in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1987), 19-29.
57. See Jörg Wetterich, *Bewegungskultur und Körpererziehung in der sozialistischen Jugendarbeit 1893 bis 1933: Lebensstile und Bewegungskonzepte im Schnittpunkt von Arbeitersportbewegung und Jugendbewegung* (Münster/Hamburg: Lit, 1973).
58. Annie Kriegel, *Les communistes français* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1985), 184.
59. This is perfectly illustrated by the official statement of the FST executive against dissidents in *L'Humanité*, 24 Nov. 1927.
60. Grube, *Warum rote Sporteinheit?*, 7.
61. See the minutes of the LSI congress in Paris 1925. Internationaler Sozialistischer Verband für Arbeitersport und Körperkultur, *Bericht über den III. Kongreß zu Paris-Pantin, 31. Oktober, 1. und 2. November 1925.*