



Jutta Braun, Hans Joachim Teichler. *Sportstadt Berlin im Kalten Krieg: Prestigekämpfe und Systemwettstreit.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2006. 400 S. ISBN 978-3-86153-399-3.



Reviewed by Erik Jensen (Department of History, Miami University)

Published on H-German (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

The Narrow World of Sports?

In this collection, Jutta Braun and Hans Joachim Teichler have compiled ten articles that explore the interactions between East and West German sports associations, teams, reporters, and fans between the end of the Second World War and the unification of the two German states in 1990, with specific attention to the city of Berlin. Braun opens the volume with a useful introduction to the individual articles and to the theme in general. She emphasizes that, through sports, Berlin managed to maintain a unified identity during its years as a divided city, even if at times a very tenuous one. The city did so, moreover, despite key East-West differences, especially in terms of their approaches to sports as a whole: West Germany wished to keep sports explicitly nonpartisan and autonomously organized, whereas East Germany organized sports centrally and with a clear emphasis on certain performance sports (especially medal-intensive individual Olympic sports).

The articles lean toward administrative and organizational history and to the sport of soccer in particular, although some authors do take a more social historical

approach by focusing on the behaviors and identities of fans and athletes. The editors have arranged the articles chronologically, beginning with "Sport unter Führung der Partei," in which Hans Joachim Teichler gives a detailed overview of the development of the East German sports administration in the first decade and a half after the war. In the following article, "Sportler an einem Tisch," Kristin Rybicki explores the efforts of East German sports officials to maintain connections to West German associations during the 1950s. Renée Wiese follows this with her case study of the (West) Berlin soccer team, Hertha BSC, from the end of the war to the construction of the Berlin Wall. In "Inselstadt im Abseits," Braun explores the athletic isolation of West Berlin during the broader postwar period, particularly with regard to the effort on the part of West Berlin officials to host some of the games of the 1988 European soccer championships, which collapsed in the face of a threatened Eastern European boycott. Erik Eggers offers an extensive examination of sports journalism in East and West Berlin during the entire Cold War period in his article,

“Die ‘Privilegierten’ und der ‘Annex.’” Wiese delivers her second contribution, “Wie der Fußball LÄ¶cher in die Mauer schoss,” which looks at how Berlin’s soccer-fan culture managed to span even the wall. Ronald Huster, in “Duell an der Spree,” focuses on the East-West rivalry in 1987 to stage a showcase cycling event to commemorate Berlin’s 750th anniversary, when West Berlin played host to the first two stages of the Tour de France and East Berlin provided the start for that year’s Friedensfahrt cycling race. Lorenz VÄ¶lker focuses his attention on handball, a sport that has long enjoyed especially wide popularity in Berlin, in his “Der Traum vom ‘Stadion der Vernunft.’” Braun then offers a second article, “Sport frei,” in which she looks at the unification of German sports after November 1989. In the last article, “Die Wende und Vereinigung im Fußball 1989/90,” Michael Barsuhn addresses the very same topic, this time as it played out in the German soccer associations immediately after the fall of the wall.

All of the articles in this volume demonstrate solid research and a close familiarity with the details of the various sports associations, personalities, and events during the Cold War era. As such, this collection would be of value to scholars working in the subfield of postwar German sports history. As with any collection that attempts to orient itself around a particular theme, some articles in this volume fit the bill better than others. The first two and last two contributions to this book, for example, take a much more state-centered approach to their research, and I missed the Berlin-specific connection in these cases. The volume also contains a certain amount of repetition. Several of the articles, for instance, explain and discuss Allied Directive #23, which dissolved all German sports organizations that had existed prior to surrender. In other areas, however, repetitiveness does help to foreground important themes, such as the conclusion that West Berlin remained a backwater in the world of West German sports, whereas East Berlin played an absolutely central role in its state’s athletic constellation, something that held true whether one looks at sports reporters or at organized handball.

I wished in general, however, that the authors had placed their arguments much more strongly in the foreground of the individual articles and that the articles themselves had contained much more expansive conclusions, or in some cases, conclusions at all. A number of the articles simply ended when the narrative itself seemed to have reached a natural stopping point, but without explaining or exploring exactly how and why that narrative helps us to better understand the German

and European past. At other points, potentially fruitful avenues remained only mentioned, rather than explored. Wiese makes the interesting point, for example, that the playing styles of West and East Berlin soccer players differed, with the West favoring a “Kurzpäss” and the East favoring a “Steilpass.” Noting this distinction raises, first of all, the question of why it occurred, and I would have liked to have read the answer. It also seems potentially rich and suggestive in a number of directions, and one could connect this athletic contrast to other ways in which the daily lives and habits of East and West Berliners diverged in small and subtle ways from one another, whether in language or sociability or eating habits. Sports, as this point illustrates, can divide as well as unify.

To give another example of the uncomfortable way that some essays in the volume handle the theme of significance, Erik Eggers mentions that a new generation of sports journalists emerged in Berlin after the war, partly because many in the older generation had died in the war or emigrated, and partly because Berlin itself had lost its status as the capital of sports journalism. Eggers makes the important point that West Berlin played a much more minor role in West German sports journalism than Berlin had in a united prewar Germany and than East Berlin did in East Germany. It would have been interesting, though, to look at this development as more than just an example of West Berlin’s increasing irrelevance, or—in fact—as just the opposite. Could West Berlin’s “backwater status” actually have made it a site of opportunity for the emergence of unconventional or new forms of sports journalism, in much the way that West Berlin’s backwater status nurtured an alternative scene in so many areas of life that had far-reaching implications for West German society as a whole? This “Insel” on the periphery of the *Bundesrepublik* still managed to exercise an enormous influence in many circles, in many cases thanks precisely to its being cut off geographically from the rest of the country.

This question leads me to a larger concern that I have not just with respect to this collection, but also with respect to sports history in general. The authors too frequently allow the details of their research, which—again—is impressive and well documented, to obscure the larger picture. Only a few articles venture a broader conclusion or draw explicit connections to the larger trajectory of postwar political, cultural, and social history in Germany and in Europe. Instead, they tend simply to present their findings in a narrative form that at times overwhelms and exhausts the reader.

The history of various sports associations and events in and of themselves may well interest a certain cadre of specialists, and in this regard the collection has a place in the literature of postwar German sports history. I fear, though, that collections like this miss an important opportunity to demonstrate the importance of sports and physical culture to our larger understanding of the human past, and this problem with the field of sports history has been acute for quite some time. Less can be more when it comes to details and examples from one's research. And more is almost always more when it comes to drawing expansive, suggestive connections to other events, trends, and developments. As sports historians, and indeed as historians in general, we need to keep our eyes squarely fixed on the all-important question: Why does it matter?

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Erik Jensen. Review of Braun, Jutta; Teichler, Hans Joachim, *Sportstadt Berlin im Kalten Krieg: Prestigekämpfe und Systemwettstreit*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23749>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.