

Abstract:

Spartakiads were mass synchronised gymnastic displays and had hundreds of thousands participants. In communist Czechoslovakia they took place every five years. In this paper I explore how they differ from and resemble to religious rituals. I based this study mainly on theories of British social anthropologists Edmund Leach and Victor Turner. The gymnasts exercising on the stadium were supposed to represent a united *people* and to articulate basic ideological values, most importantly joyful work and preparedness to fight for peace. The order was thus reminded to the participants of the ritual and according to this order the society was formed. Because the symbolism of the spartakiad was very general and ambiguous, it was able to unite social groups between which there was tension in everyday life. Thus it created the illusion that the society is unanimous. These characteristics allow the spartakiads to resemble religious rituals. At the same time they differ from them in an important trait. Except from expressing cultural values, religious rituals enable their questioning in a clearly defined situational context. Hence they can help the evolution of social structures. The spartakiad expresses the social order but it does not allow its critique. Therefore spartakiads conserve the status quo but have no ability to transform it.