

27th International Congress of the European
Committee for Sports History (CESH)
June 04, 05 and 06, 2024
Condorcet Campus Paris-Aubervilliers & University Paris Nanterre















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East German sports development aid to Africa and the Arab world: the example of the German College for Physical Education (DHfK) of Leipzig (1950's-1980's)

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Resume:

For the GDR, and for many other countries in Africa and the Arab world, competitive sports during the Cold War served a dual purpose: to launch the country on the para-diplomatic scene of international sports organizations and to help unite the population around a common national sentiment. Both the Eastern Bloc and the “Global South” sought, through their actions, a “multipolarization of the sporting world” (Dufraisse, 2023: 133).

For this reason, and thanks to the achievements of East German athletes, the SED continuously emphasized its commitment to “anti-imperialist sports solidarity”. It thus devoted important human and financial resources to the structuring of sport in developing countries, especially those in Africa and the Arab world that leaned toward communism or showed signs of friendship with the USSR and its allies, such as Nasser's Egypt, Iraq, and the former Portuguese colonies. The GDR sent numerous coaches and officials abroad to train local staff, organized training camps and student exchange programs for international athletes and sports students, and vocally supported the efforts of developing countries' representatives to reform international sports governance. Within this system, the German College for Physical Education (DHfK), the country's central faculty for sports science, played a key role, welcoming some 2.500 students from the aforementioned “developing countries” on its campus in Leipzig and organizing more than 100 consulting missions abroad. This program began in 1955, just five years after the founding of the DHfK, and continued until its closure in 1990, after the reunification of Germany (Beaufils, 2019).

The present contribution analyzes archival material from the DHfK (now in the archives of the University of Leipzig) and from central East German sports institutions (mainly from the SAPMO fonds of the German Federal Archives) using methodological tools from everyday history (Lüdtke, 1989). This contribution will show how local actors from the GDR, but also from African and Arab countries, tried to navigate through political and propagandistic constraints in order to stimulate real cooperation between East and South, to help structure the different national sports systems, and to create a global “epistemic community” (Meyer, 2011: 141). However, even if some real collaborations and personal friendships emerged through this program, these exchanges could not escape the logics of the Cold War and a paternalistic approach from the East German actors.

Keywords: *Cold War, East-South collaboration, GDR, sports sciences, glocalization*

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