Všesokolský slet in Prague in 1948: Shaping the Narrative

Sokol, founded in Prague in 1862, spread across Slavic lands as a movement combining physical training, patriotic education, moral discipline and nation-building. In the Yugoslav lands, it became an instrument of both **Slavic solidarity** and later of **Yugoslav state ideology**. After 1945 Sokol organizations were banned, but many former members, coaches and facilities entered the new socialist sports system. As a result, Yugoslavia could send one of the largest foreign delegations to the 1948 Rally, even though the organization no longer formally existed. This research examines the **XI All-Sokol Rally in Prague** as a political and symbolic event shaped by the rapid deterioration of relations between **Yugoslavia and the USSR**, the consolidation of communist rule in **Czechoslovakia**, and the long shared history of **Sokol organizations** in both countries. Using Yugoslav and Czechoslovak press, testimonies, films, and previous research, the study compares how both sides constructed narratives of the same event.

The analysis draws on **Murray Edelman's concept of political spectacle**, which sees large public rituals as emotional performances that create political meaning, and on **Foucault's discourse analysis**, which helps understand how language, repetition and silences shape what becomes accepted as political "truth." These frameworks show that the Rally was not simply a sports event, but a carefully staged **ideological performance** read differently in Prague and Belgrade. The XI Rally took place at a moment of severe political crisis. Only days before the arrival of the Yugoslav delegation, the **Cominform Resolution** publicly condemned the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. What had been planned as a celebration of unity became an event marked by tension, surveillance and competing interpretations. The Czechoslovak communist leadership hoped to use the Rally to legitimize its new power, while traditional Sokol structures still held their own ideals and could not easily be subordinated. The 1948 Rally was the last major Sokol manifestation before the movement was dissolved in 1956. Yugoslavia sent **3,000–4,000 participants**, selected through strict examinations and mass rehearsals. Training camps in Ljubljana emphasised discipline, ideological education and unity. The program combined gymnastics with representations of the **Partisan struggle**, post-war reconstruction and loyalty to **Tito**, including formations spelling his name and creating the five-pointed star. These choreographies communicated Yugoslavia's strength, independence and socialist identity at a moment of international isolation. The reception in Prague was complex. Yugoslav participants reported widespread popular enthusiasm, chants for Tito and Jugoslavia, and signs of dissatisfaction with the new regime, including slogans for Beneš and the appearance of Western flags. Czechoslovak authorities responded with police interventions, censorship and attempts to limit Yugoslav movement around the city. The press coverage reveals sharply divergent interpretations. **Yugoslav newspapers** (Borba, 20. oktobar, Slobodna Dalmacija, Narodni student) interpreted the Rally as a triumph: proof of Yugoslav unity, international recognition and broad public sympathy in Prague. **Czechoslovak newspapers**, especially Rudé právo, first emphasised Slavic friendship and cooperation, but after the Cominform Resolution rapidly shifted tone, depicting Yugoslavia as nationalist and anti-Soviet while suppressing reports of public support for the delegation. The study argues that the All-Sokol Rally of 1948 demonstrates how **mass sport functioned as political theatre** in the early Cold War. Through symbols, choreography and media discourse, the event became a site where ideological boundaries were drawn and contested. It

provides a unique lens into shifting power dynamics: the fragility of communist legitimacy in Czechoslovakia and the emergence of an independent socialist identity in Yugoslavia.