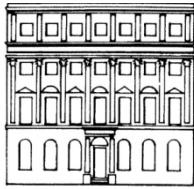


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Jutta Braun, René Wiese:
ZOV Tracksuit Traitors: East German Elite Athletes on the Run
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ZOV Tracksuit Traitors: East German Elite Athletes on the Run. Exhibition organized by the Zentrum deutsche Sportgeschichte, the exhibition agency exhibeo, and the Mexican artist Laura Soria, held at the German Historical Institute London, 10 July–12 Aug. 2012.

The exhibition 'ZOV Tracksuit Traitors: East German Elite Athletes on the Run' on sport in divided Germany was displayed at the German Historical Institute London during the Olympic Games. This multi-media installation in three languages (German, English, Spanish), a co-production between the Zentrum deutsche Sportgeschichte (Centre for the History of German Sport, ZdS), the exhibition agency exhibeo, and the artist Laura Soria, was held under the auspices of the Mayor of Berlin within the framework of a town twinning arrangement between Berlin and London. It was being shown here for the first time outside Germany. The exhibition is devoted to a largely unknown chapter of German-German sports history: the flight of East German athletes from the German Democratic Republic to the West, mostly to the Federal Republic of Germany. In the forty years of the GDR's existence, more than 3 million people left the country, many of them illegally and under dangerous circumstances. Elite sport in the GDR, a showcase for the state ruled by the Socialist Unity Party (SED), was strongly affected by this phenomenon. The Stasi, the official East German state security service, counted more than 600 sportsmen and women who fled the state. The exhibition's title refers to the *Zentrale Operative Vorgang (ZOV) Sportverräter* (Central Operational Proceedings Traitors in Sport) in which the Stasi collected material about those who fled and how they escaped, and continued to spy on and threaten them in the West.

At the opening of the exhibition at Bloomsbury Square, Andreas Gestrich, director of the GHIL, welcomed the large audience to an evening which promised to appeal equally to those interested in sport and in history. Stefano Weinberger, head of the cultural section of the German Embassy in London, pointed out that despite the political instrumentalization and appropriation of sport in the GDR and other systems, it is always individuals who achieve outstanding results in sport. They therefore deserve to be specially valued. Sabine Ross, representing the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur (Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship), which, with the Stiftung Klassenlotterie, financially

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supported the exhibition, reminded us that the exhibition went on show for the first time one year ago, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the building of the Berlin Wall. In her talk, she emphasized the traumatic significance of the Berlin Wall, which separated the Germans for decades and left lasting traces in the biographies of people in both East and West. The exhibition's peregrinations through Germany (Neubrandenburg, Leipzig, then Dresden, Erfurt, and Cottbus) and its detour to London were financed by the Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der DDR (Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former GDR, BStU). Representing the BStU, Ursula Bachmann emphasized how deeply the security service had penetrated all aspects of the lives of the East German people. Even in a seemingly innocuous area like sport, it had a highly visible presence.

The curators of the exhibition, Jutta Braun and René Wiese, then explained its concept and aim. The biographies of fifteen athletes are presented to show their motives for fleeing, to explain how they escaped, and to demonstrate the consequences of their flight. The curators selected biographies to reflect the experience of generations of sportsmen and women from all four decades of the GDR's existence, and to show that the 'traitors' came from almost all branches of sport, ranging from cycling to athletics, swimming, football, and ice-skating. In her address, finally, the artist Laura Soria, who produced lavish films of interviews with the athletes for the exhibition, pointed out that phenomena such as homelessness and social exclusion do not belong only to the past. She said that in her home country of Mexico, increasingly broad sections of the population feel alienated from the political system.

After the opening addresses, the audience had a chance to examine the biographies of the sportsmen and women who had fled the GDR for themselves by watching the interviews on video and reading the accompanying information boards. They discovered how highly the GDR valued sport during the Cold War as a prestige project, and especially what impact this had on the lives of athletes, who were taken up by special sports schools, systematically investigated by the Stasi to make sure that they were loyal to the Party, and, in a number of sports, involved in the system of coerced doping. The lives of the sportsmen and women and the world they lived in are illustrated by personal accounts from private archives, extracts from the

contemporary propaganda press, and Stasi documents. In the filmed interviews, the athletes describe the personal experiences which led them to take the decision to flee. Each athlete sought his or her own individual and mostly risky way to freedom, whether via a hotel's goods lift in Cologne, during a championship in the West, or by swimming across the Baltic Sea alone. By emphasizing these individual destinies, the exhibition hopes to draw attention to the biographical aspects which have long been neglected in the contemporary historiography of sport. It also wants to make clear how strongly individual athletes were coerced into participating in the ongoing competition between the political systems.

As part of the programme accompanying the exhibition, a panel discussion was held at the GHIL on 2 August 2012. Speaking to a capacity audience, one of the athletes featured in the exhibition, the swimmer and 1972 silver medal winner Renate Bauer reported on her experiences with the GDR's system of elite competitive sports, the circumstances surrounding her flight, and its consequences. An eye-witness account by Walther Tröger, honorary member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), supplemented her memories. As the Federal Republic of Germany's long-standing chef de mission, he shaped and experienced at first hand all the phases of the Cold War in sport as an official, and was president of Germany's National Olympic Committee (NOC) from 1992 to 2002. The session was chaired by Andreas Gestrich and Jutta Braun (ZdS).

The reasons that drove Renate Bauer to leave her country were similar to those of many of her compatriots: anger at the SED dictatorship's nannying, and dissatisfaction with the country's inadequate supply situation and the lack of personal space within GDR society. Yet in her case a further factor was decisive, one that was typical of the experiences of elite sportsmen and women in the GDR during the 1970s and 1980s. She lost confidence in the sports system and the state when she found out that she had been exposed to systematic doping with anabolic steroids without her knowledge and with no explanation of the possible health implications. In 1979 Bauer decided to flee and, using a false identity, got on a plane from Budapest to Munich. After her arrival in the West, the international press displayed great interest in her. Japanese, Canadian, and German sports journalists hoped at last to find out something about the well-guarded secrets of the GDR's sports system. Yet the GDR's leadership was

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not idle either. The SED attempted to stop Austrian state television, for example, from broadcasting an interview with Bauer by issuing diplomatic threats concerning the possible collapse of trade negotiations. But the SED dictatorship's most effective bargaining chip was Bauer's concern about members of her family who were still in the GDR. Fearing reprisals, she hesitated for a long time to reveal her knowledge of doping to the West. Yet without her knowledge, her relatives had long since been in the firing line of the East German leaders. Soon after her flight Bauer's husband was thrown into jail for alleged complicity and stayed there until the FRG ransomed him. Her parents lost their employment, and her mother was driven into social isolation by her former work colleagues making defamatory statements about her 'treacherous daughter'.

Walther Tröger (IOC) showed that he was moved by the human dimension of these stories of German-German flight. In a long period as secretary general of the FRG's NOC, he had been confronted, both personally and officially, with every single one of these cases of people changing sides. Yet he had to deal with this primarily as a sports diplomat, as every successful case of an athlete fleeing from the GDR inevitably precipitated sports policy intrigues by the East. The GDR sports leadership, for example, attempted to have the fugitive athletes banned from international competitions for as long as possible so that they could not immediately place themselves in the service of the 'class enemy'. The GDR's sporting bodies also accused the FRG of deliberately poaching sportsmen and women from across the border. Every time a sportsman or woman escaped from the GDR, the FRG's efforts to ease tensions in sporting relations between the two German states came under renewed threat. Tröger remembered that, in long personal conversations with the GDR's sports leaders, the FRG's NOC tried to calm things down and as far as possible to maintain and build on human relations in German-German contact.

During the discussion, we were reminded that Germany is commemorating two very special Olympic anniversaries in 2012. Forty years ago, in the summer of 1972, the FRG staged the Olympics in Munich, where it wanted to present itself to the world as a modern Germany. For the GDR, too, these Games were special: for the first time the East German team was able to appear independently at the Summer Games with a full Olympic protocol and status of their own.

Although the GDR was recognized as an independent state at the Mexico Olympics in 1968, its team had still participated with the FRG under a common Olympic flag. The Munich Olympics, however, are remembered mainly for the attack by Palestinian terrorists on the Israeli team, as a result of which eleven athletes died. As the mayor of the Olympic Village at the time, Tröger had the difficult task of negotiating with the Palestinian terrorists. During the London 2012 Games, the victims of 1972 were commemorated with a minute's silence in the Olympic Village.

The year 2012 also marks twenty years since a common German Olympic team was first able to represent a united Germany. In 1992, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, West and East German athletes participated in a common team for a united Germany at the Winter Games in Albertville in France and the Summer Games in Barcelona. Although there had been a common German Olympic team between 1956 and 1964, this had been a diplomatic solution found by the IOC and accepted reluctantly by the FRG and GDR. The year 1992, however, saw a promising start to an organic growing together of East and West German sport at Olympic level. The Germans had more to celebrate than reunification. There was also an outstanding sporting achievement to be proud of: in Albertville in 1992 the FRG topped the medal table the first time, a result that was largely attributed to the performance of the East German athletes. During these Winter Games, however, long-term problems afflicting the unification process became apparent, problems which still affect German sport to the present day. During the Games in Albertville, a bobsleigh pilot in the German team was exposed as a former Stasi informer (*Informeller Mitarbeiter*). Discussions about the burdens of the Stasi past still affect daily life for Germany's elite sportsmen and women today. But for Walther Tröger one thing above all is important, namely, that German sport has come together again. 'In many respects unification was easier and less complicated in sport than in other social areas, and we are proud of that.'

JUTTA BRAUN and RENÉ WIESE