

**OLYMPIC FLAME APPROPRIATION: THE NATIONAL TORCH RELAY IN
PORTO ALEGRE – BRAZIL (1938-1947)**

**APROPRIANDO-SE DA CHAMA OLÍMPICA: A CORRIDA DE REVEZAMENTO
DO FOGO SIMBÓLICO EM PORTO ALEGRE – BRASIL (1938-1947)**

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ABSTRACT

Since 1938 the Nation Torch Relay (NTR) has been a cultural practice together with all the other Nation's Week celebrations where the Brazil's Independence Day is celebrated. Our study is based on the Cultural History scope; it aims to comprehend how the establishment of the NTR occurred in Porto Alegre city and also how the NTR developed in the period from 1938 to 1947. Using printed and oral sources, we comprehended that the NTR can be considered an appropriation of the Olympic Torch Relay. The social and cultural context of Porto Alegre city and the Brazilian national political context contributed to this cultural practice's appearance and settlement; in those times the Brazilian national identity has been established. Thus, the NTR can be seen as one of the nationalization actions of the country that was produced in the sports and cultural fields.

Keywords: Sport. Olympic flame. History

INTRODUCTION

Since 1938, the Nation Torch Relay (NTR) has been a cultural practice along with all other Nations's Week celebrations dedicated to the Brazil's Independence Day (AMARO JUNIOR, 1944; LIGA DE DEFESA NACIONAL, 2006). This ceremony was institutionalized in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul state, by the National Defense League [NDL], a patriotic entity, with the support of sports clubs of the city. The officers of these clubs conceived the NTR, after seeing the unprecedented Olympic Torch Relay at the Berlin Olympics opening ceremony, in 1936 (BORGES, 1996; INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE, 2002).

For the first time, the Olympic Torch Relay started from the archaeological site of Olympia (Greece) and, after crossing Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria and Czechoslovakia, arrived in Berlin (Germany) on the Games opening ceremony date. After traveling 3,075 kilometers through a torch relay, the Olympic flame lit the Olympic cauldron at the Berlin's Olympic Stadium and, as it happens up to the present time, the Olympic Flame kept burning continuously in the cauldron up to those games closing date.

Two years later, in 1938, sports officers from Porto Alegre (Brazil) conquered the support of the NDL and the clubs to conduct a similar race in the city. In its first edition, the NTR started from the city of Viamão, the first capital of Rio Grande do Sul state, and arrived in Porto Alegre, its current capital. Carried throughout the course of about 26 km, by prominent athletes from Porto Alegre, the torch had as destination, at midnight of September 1, the Nation's Cauldron (A CORRIDA ..., 1938, p. 11).

After the Nation's Cauldron lighting, the Nation's Week celebrations started in Porto Alegre. The festivities lasted until September 7, the official date to celebrate Brazil's Independence Day and to extinguish the flame that burned uninterruptedly since

September 1, at the Nation's Cauldron.

The similarity between the Olympic Torch Relay and the Nation Torchy Relay has raised the following question: What is the sociocultural context that allowed the construction and consolidation of a tradition such as the Nation Torchy Relay (NTR) in Porto Alegre?

We observe that since 1938 the NTR was one of the main activities carried out by the NDL, in partnership with sports clubs, to celebrate the Nation's Week, in Porto Alegre, as suggested by the title of the report: "*A maior corrida do Brasil*" ["Brazil's longest race"] (FONSECA, 1961, p. 66-73). It was quickly realized that the NTR had a great prominence, not only locally, but also nationally; and at the end of the Brazilian period called *Estado Novo* [New State] (1937-1945), when Getúlio Vargas was the president of the country, the NTR crossed the boundaries of Brazil and began to be considered as the "biggest relay race in the world" (INICIADA. ..., 1944, p. 10).

Although the NTR is conducted up to the present time, in this article we aimed to approach the period from 1938 to 1947. This time delimitation comprises the year when the first race was conducted, in 1938, until its tenth edition, in 1947, when there are signs in the newspapers of the weakening of this practice and the creation of new traditions focused on the assertion of Rio Grande do Sul regional identity (BILHAR; OLIVEN, 2006; PAIXÃO CORTES, 1994). Because of the involvement of the Porto Alegre sports officers with the NTR organization and the fact that the city has always been the NTR final destination, that is, the place where the race culminates, this capital constitutes the spatial delimitation of the present study.

Based on such considerations, this article aims to understand how the invention and continuity of the Nation Torchy Relay in Porto Alegre occurred, from 1938 to 1947.

In this study we attempt to dialogue with different practice concepts and cultural representations (CHARTIER, 2000; BURKE, 2005; PASAVENTO, 2004), invented traditions (HOBSBAWM; RANGER, 1984; HOBSBAWM, 1988) and national identity (SMITH, 1997).

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The Nation Torchy Relay (NTR) had not been the subject of academic research yet. A few references to the race were found in publishings that approach the *Estado Novo* [New State] period. Therefore, in order to achieve the objective of this study, printed sources, besides oral sources produced by recording interviews, were sought. Historical sources collected at different locations, such as private collections, public files, libraries, clubs, sports federations, foundations, memorials and museums were organized primarily on a database (ROLIM, 2008) to facilitate the methodological treatment of the pieces of information.

The primary printed sources were the documents and works of the National Defense League NDL; while bringing primary references, the NDL documents present a rigid speech, related, predominantly, to the same authors. Thus, it was common to find the same quotes in different documents of the NDL. However, we used the NDL records as a primary source regarding the names of athletes, clubs, cities and numbers of editions of the NTR. The secondary sources of this study were the *Revista do Globo* magazine, the *Correio do Povo* newspaper, sports almanacs and specific publishings.

Revista do Globo (RG) was a prominent magazine published in the state of Rio Grande do Sul by the *Livraria Editora Globo*, a Brazilian publisher, from 1929 to 1967. According to Torres (1997), the *Revista do Globo* emerges to reinforce Porto Alegre press and fill a gap left

by failing periodicals of the same type. Three specific issues about the NTR and around 30 *Revista do Globo* issues were found, contributing to the understanding of the studied context.

In the *Correio do Povo* (CP) newspaper the issues of September between 1938 and 1947 were investigated, because the adopted criteria included the month when the NTR was conducted and also the years of the studied issues. We have to remember that the *Correio do Povo* was permanently an instrument of political propaganda for the regime of that time. Both in their editorial and in the thread of their News it was possible to verify the close connection between Getúlio Vargas and the NDL initiatives (Torres, 1997).

The consulted almanacs compiled pieces of information about sports and varieties of years prior to its publishing. Among the 14 sports almanacs gathered for the study, Mazzoni (1944) presented a note on the NTR, and Amaro Junior (1947) also referred directly to the event. All other numbers of these almanacs were used to approach the context of the study.

Aspectos Gerais de Porto Alegre (PIMENTEL, 1945) [Porto Alegre General Aspects], volume 1, and the book *Brasileiros de cabelos loiros e olhos azuis* [Blond-haired and blue-eyed Brazilians] (DAUDT, 1952) complete the secondary sources of this study. The first one, published at the end of the *Estado Novo* regime, brought eight pages about the Regional Core of the LDN and its main initiatives, including the NTR, while the second one brought some evidences on the relationship among sports officers who were present in Berlin in 1936 and started to conduct the NTR afterwards. Daudt's work (1952) attempts to demonstrate the influence of German immigrants and their descendants in the institutions and entities.

Two interviews, the oral sources of the study, were carried out. The oral testimony collection was made after approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, where the study is registered with the number 2007739. The criterion for selecting participants was their indirect involvement with the NTR and, mainly, their direct contact with the NTR creators.

Both interviewees will be called by their initials MV and HL throughout the study. MT is son of Tulio De Rose and accompanied him during his sports and journalistic career, including the NTR. HL was present among the audience in the NTR first edition, 1938, in Porto Alegre, watching his father carrying the Nation Torch. Furthermore, HL is connected to the Porto Alegre sports club *Grêmio Náutico União*, where he contacted Darci Vignoli and became friends with Túlio De Rose.

The interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis along with other documents (BARDIN, 2000; TRIVIÑOS, 1987). "Arranging, combining, composing, crossing, revealing the detail, giving relevance to what is secondary" (PESAVENTO, 2004, p 65) was the historiographical method adopted in this study. Thus, all sources used can be thought of as carrier-meaning traits constructed to investigate the objective proposed by the research. Next, we present the results obtained from the analysis of the NTR.

Before the interview, the interviewees read the Free Consent Term and Clarification (Interviewee's Statement), and the interviewer was at their disposal to clarify any doubts. Being in accordance with the interview procedures, the interviewees signed the Term, authorizing, thus, the use of their information for the research.

INVENTING A TRADITION: THE APPEARANCE AND SETTLEMENT OF THE BRAZILIAN NATION TORCHY RELAY

The Nation Torch Relay (NTR), as an invented tradition, started in 1938. This race appears as a tradition rooted in the Brazilian period called *Estado Novo* [New State] (1937-1945) that has been lasting up to the present time. The NTR was created during a Brazilian historical period when the political elites and the people in general were concerned with the building of the Nation.

During the Brazilian *Estado Novo* it was verified a support for the nationalization process of the country, and the National Defense League (NDL) – a civic-cultural entity conceived by Olavo Bilac in 1916, aiming to stimulate patriotism, seemed to gain strength, for it was aligned with the government ideals of that moment.

In this sense, we can observe the installation of regional directories and municipal centers, under the command of the General Directory of the NDL. Thus, the institution seemed to gain members and arms to reach the Brazilian society. One of those arms - and, we can say, a strong one - was installed in Rio Grande do Sul on October 12, 1937.

Rio Grande do Sul was chosen possibly because of a problem presented in the Foundation Instrument of the Institution: the lack of unity within the federation (LIGA DE DEFESA NACIONAL, 2006), as Rio Grande do Sul and, more specifically, its capital, Porto Alegre, were known as state and city culturally marked by the significant presence of German immigrants. In addition, Porto Alegre, in the 1920s, was known as the city of the Germans (PESAVENTO, 1994).

Because it has a significant population in numerical and, specially, cultural terms, of blond-haired and blue-eyed Brazilians (Daudt, 1952), Porto Alegre differed from the center of the country. Although Porto Alegre people had as reference the great metropolises of the country in search of its modernization, due to this ethnic identification the city was also attentive to the modern standards and the news coming from another country: Germany.

To have an idea of the Germany impact regarding our object of study, in 1936 the *Revista do Globo* magazine published eight issues with news about the Berlin Olympic Games. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the strengthening of relations with the country of origin of the Germans immigrants occurred since the second half of the nineteenth century, when Germans fitness and sports-related professionals came to work in sports clubs of Porto Alegre.

Some German immigrants and descendants, including gymnasts from Porto Alegre, also traveled to Germany not only to visit relatives, but also to see the gymnastics institutes (MAZO, 2003). In this manner, we can understand that Porto Alegre people did not attend the Olympics in Berlin by chance. This was an opportunity for them to see by themselves the modern concept of German society, in which bodily and sports practices had a prominent role.

In the issues of the *Revista do Globo* magazine there is a concern to justify the Games historically and, specially, the relay starting from Olympia, Greece, to get to the Berlin Games opening ceremony.

The report from the *Revista do Globo*, titled *Eu chamo a mocidade do mundo* [I Call the World's Youth], highlights the following:

For the Games opening, a relay race will be organized, starting from Olympia, the

ancient and sacred city of the Hellenes, and travelling to Berlin, by crossing the Balkan countries. It is a symbolic race intended to bring from Olympia the flame of a torch that will light the great flame of the Olympics, in Berlin [...] The Olympic flame that will be lit in Berlin, on August 1, will be the symbol of the sport chivalry and nobility, and the triumphant demonstration of an immortal idea. More than 3,000 athletes will transport the Olympic flame, from Greece to Berlin, under the eyes of millions of people of various nationalities who will witness the biggest race that history ever registered (EU CHAMO ..., n. 181, 1936, p. 22).

Another important report was published in the 188 issue, titled *A XI Olimpíada* [XI Olympics]. A historical record of the ancient Olympic Games is presented, ending with an approach on the myth of Prometheus, one of the Titans, a gigantic race that inhabited the earth before man. He and his brother Epimetheus were tasked to create man and provide him and all other animals with all the capacities necessary for their preservation. Man was given the gift of producing fire, which guaranteed their superiority over the other animals. This story illustrated to readers the symbolism of the Olympic Flame (DE BERLIN ..., n. 188, 1936, p. 27-30).

Through these reports, Porto Alegre people had contact with German modernity expressed, mainly, by the Olympic Games and the Olympic Torch Relay. In this sense, the identification with German modern standards, specifically when it came to the world of the sports, may have been one of the factors that made Porto Alegre sports officers to go to Berlin, in 1936.

The originality of the relay, culminating in the arrival of the Olympic Flame and the lit of the Olympic cauldron, had a strong impact on Porto Alegre sports clubs officers in Berlin. After returning to the Brazilian city, they decided to conduct a similar race there.

In the context of Porto Alegre, the Brazilian *Estado Novo* was a fertile period for the establishment of traditions in the country. The NTR was one of many traditions that emerged at that time, but it was formally institutionalized and settled quickly. For our part, however, following Hobsbawn theoretical orientation (1988) and based on the context previously presented, we analyze the NTR regarding its appearance and settlement, not in terms of its survival up to the present time.

THE ADVENT OF A TRADITION

The advent of the Nation Torch Relay (NTR) was institutionally linked to the regional core (Rio Grande do Sul state) of the National Defense League (NDL) and, socially, to the Porto Alegre sports clubs. The NTR social institution seems to be prior to its formal establishment carried out by the LDN. In this sense, the institution created by the clubs involves mainly sports officers from Porto Alegre who attended the opening ceremony of the Berlin Games: Tulio De Rose and Ernesto Capelli, both linked to the Italian Club *Canottieri Duca degli Abruzzi* - which, after the nationalization process, was called *Clube de Regata Duque de Caxias* [Duque de Caxias Regatta Club] – and to the *Federação Gaúcha de Remo* [Gaúcha Rowing Federation]; José Carlos Daudt, representative of both the *Liga Atlético RioGrandense* [RioGrandense Athletic League] and the *Turnerbund*, the last German sports club to nationalize, known, from 1942, as *Sociedade Ginástica Porto Alegre (SOGIPA)* [Gymnastic Society of Porto Alegre], and Darci Vignoli, of the *Turnershaft*, a German club that, after

nationalization in 1917, came to be called *Grêmio Náutico União* – and, later, became a member of the regional core (RS) of the National Defense League.

The connection between Darci Vignoli and Tulio De Rose appears to be relevant to claim that it was through Vignoli that Túlio found an ally that circulated among the LDN members to conduct the NTR. According to HL's testimony,

Túlio encouraged the officers of the National Defense League, specially the president and friend Captain Darcy Vignoli, to conduct major sporting, civic and cultural events [...] Thanks to Vignoli's prestige in the federal sporting organs and his solid friendship with the President Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, it was possible to consolidate the Nation Torch Relay in Brazil, always organized and directed by Tulio De Rose (HL, 2008, p. 14).

Nevertheless, the institution of the NTR carried out by the LDN emerges with Major Ignacio de Freitas Rolim. Major Rolim always seemed to be conducting sports events carried out by the government. Therefore, we say he was running the *Núcleo Regional* [Regional Core] (RS) of the NDL, in 1937 and 1938. It was him who officialized the first NTR edition, in 1938, as a ceremony that would open the Nation's Week celebrations, in Porto Alegre (PIMENTEL, 1945).

The reason for the NTR appearance in 1938 was close connected to a certain historical motivation attributed to it. The idea of the fire came because this is a natural element that "has accompanied man since the beginning of his evolution" and due to its presence in the Olympic Movement in the form of an Olympic Flame, which had as an objective the "union of the races" (LIGA DE DEFESA NACIONAL, 2006).

The consulted official works of the LDN (Safady, 1960; Safady, 1971) support this idea. Such works, by allowing the publishing of chronicles, poems and writings of the so called nationalists about the NTR, reinforce the reasons for the race emergence. An example of this can be seen in the reference to it made by General Benicio da Silva in the work of LDN, which approaches the NTR (SAFADY, 1960, p. 26):

Nation Torch: Your expansion has no limit. It runs from south to north, from east to west, throughout the immeasurable expanses of this immense Brazil.

And if anyone dares to try to grab you, you will explode like a torpedo, a grenade, a mine, you will fire like a machine-gun, and will defeat those who intend to blacken you in darkness, freeze your invincible heat. And if you feel dominated, deleted, extinct, you will do like the Phoenix and will be reborn from your own ashes and will be a flame, a blaze, a fire, will be burnt and will explode like a volcano. So is the soul of Brazil you describe, nation torch!

Moreover, the reason for conducting the NTR was fundamented on sacred and historical connections constructed mainly through the media of the studied period. One example is this excerpt from the *Correio do Povo* newspaper: "At 9 pm, the priest José Breidenbach lights the torch that would be carried by athletes of Porto Alegre, and would light the votive candle of the altar dedicated to *Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, patroness of Brazil, and that has been burning continuously since 1741 "(A CORRIDA ..., 1938, p. 11).

Having presented the reasons for the appearance of the NTR, we seek now to

understand the elements that made it to settle as a tradition throughout the studied period.

THE SETTLEMENT OF THE TRADITION

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1984) establish that invented traditions, in order to settle, should be a set of practices usually governed by unwritten or openly accepted rules, being such practices of ritual or symbolic nature. Thus, we should think whether there were formal rules for the NTR. We have not found any record, within the studied period, on formal and/or instituted rules related to the NTR. It seemed, rather, that there were tacit or openly accepted rules for its organization.

Based on the database constructed for the study (ROLIM, 2008) we can identify common elements and some others that were variable in the construction of the NTR within the limits of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. These elements seem to depend on the organization in the city where the NTR is held.

Thus, according to the information gathered, we can describe the common elements of the NTR: it starts with a torch lighting ceremony; subsequently, the torch is given to the athletes, who begin the relay crossing the cities until its arrival at the cauldron lighting ceremony.

The torch lighting ceremony is the starting point of the race. According to information from the printed sources, we can say that it is held in different places with historical and sacred connections. The torch is given to a local authority that passes it to the athletes for them to start the relay.

The moment of the torch passing among athletes depends on the location, which determines, thus, the time and kilometer measuring for each carrier. The carriers can be, besides local athletes, military figures (athletes or not) and/or students. At the boundary between the towns the mayors conduct the reception and, after receiving the torch, pass it to the athletes so they transport it to the cauldron and /or local church, usually located in the central squares of the cities.

The cauldron lighting ceremony is the final moment of the race, but it is also lit in the places where the NTR passes. Firstly, the cauldron lights the votive candle of the local church. In this case, the ceremony is performed by the local ecclesiastical authority. After this little ceremony, the local cauldron is lit by an athlete/military figure/local authority, followed by an official speech; right after that a new torch is lit and carried by athletes/military figures/ students to another location.

The lighting of the Nation's Cauldron of Porto Alegre (NTR destination) seems to follow the protocol below: the torch is possessed by a prominent athlete who awaits the exact moment (at midnight of September 1) for lighting the cauldron; when the cauldron is already lit, there are sounds of clarins and church bells, applause, military salutes, the Brazilian National Anthem and official speech and/or prayer. After the lighting of the Nation's Cauldron of Porto Alegre, the Nation's Week celebrations start in the capital.

Thus, the settlement of the NTR seems to have been established by unwritten rules where it passes, that is, the basis of the NTR of leaving a certain place to arrive to another one, remained unchanged, but in the places where it passed its format was constructed by the local authorities. That, somehow, kept the originality of the NTR and made the communities in the locations where it passed to identify with the race.

Thus, we can understand the NTR during the studied period as a tradition historically original and freely invented. The race can be considered as a ceremony that attempted to

forge in Porto Alegre people the awareness of their citizenship.

The NTR was inserted in the building process of a Brazilian national identity (SMITH, 1997), because such tradition reinforced the ties of solidarity among members of the society who shared common myths and memories. In this sense, the NTR, from 1938 to 1947, attempted to build a representation of national cohesion or unity inside the imaginary of Porto Alegre people. Such representation was created mainly by that format of touring the nation (Brazilian cities) bringing the Nation Torch to the capital of Rio Grande do Sul state - the city of Porto Alegre.

Observing Table 1, we can identify the relevance attributed to this tradition in the studied period. This table displays the years of the editions, the meaning attributed to the NTR and the total distance of the race, in kilometers, ending in Porto Alegre. It should be noted that there is a kilometer discrepancy in the editions of the NTR, as different sources were consulted. In the presente summary, the pieces of information provided by the institution that conducted the NTR, the National Defense League, were adopted as the primary ones.

Table 1 – NTR editions.

Year of	Departure city of the NTR	Meaning of the NTR	Kilometer measuring
1938	Viamão (RS – Brazil)	Rio Grande do Sul's first capital	26 km
1939	Rio Pardo (RS – Brazil)	A city full of traditions, in Rio Grande do Sul	411 km
1940	Florianópolis (SC – Brazil)	A capital city with historical relation	599km
1941	São Paulo (SP – Brazil)	Brazil's Independence place	2,123 km
1942	Tiradentes (MG – Brazil)	City whose name refers to Tiradentes, considered the Brazilian Independence's Martyr	3,974 km
1943	Salvador (BA – Brazil)	Brazil's first capital	4,639 km
1944	Recife (PE – Brazil)	City of the national heroes of the Brazilian <i>Guerra dos Guararapes</i> [Guararapes War]	6,367 km
1945	Monte Castello (Italy)	Referring to the Brazilian participation in the victory of the allies during the World War II	6,370 km
1946	Washington (United States of America)	Referring to the North-American president Franklin Roosevelt	5,459 km
1947	Pistoia (Italy)	Referring to the dead soldiers of the World War II	3,535 km

After observing Table 1, we can conclude that this study helps us to understand how the Olympic initiatives move and are reinvented in different contexts.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The NTR can be considered an appropriation of the Olympic Torch Relay presented in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Such appropriation can be defined by the similarity in both proposals: crossing places carrying a flame full of historically constructed symbolic elements. In this sense, the NTR helps us to understand how the Olympic initiatives move and are reinvented in different contexts.

What we can say is that the sociocultural context of the city of Porto Alegre and the

Brazilian political context favored the appearance and settlement of the NTR. It must be noted that in these contexts the objective was to assert a Brazilian national identity and, thus, the NTR can be seen as one of the country's nationalization actions taken in the sports and cultural fields.

The relevance attributed to the NTR in the studied period crossed the boundaries of the country and now such event is considered the biggest relay race in the world, at a symbolic level, because the Olympic Torch Relay was held again only in 1948. This highlight given to the NTR seems to be an attempt to put Brazil in evidence on the world scene, showing its political, social and cultural virtues, by conducting a practice with Olympic features.

This allows us to think that the Brazilian government sought to be aligned with the major world powers, through the Olympic events. This allusion reinforces the idea that the sport and its associated practices deserve special attention so that we have an understanding of the political relations that permeate the sports field.

The search for printed sources in cities outside of Brazil, particularly in the countries covered by the NTR, can contribute to broaden the analysis presented above. Additionally, consulting other documentary sources may create different perspectives for the study of the NTR, taking into consideration that the sources consulted for this study were subjected to the mechanisms of control created by the Brazilian government during the *Estado Novo*.

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