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SAMBO AS A FORM OF WRESTLING AND SELF-DEFENCE

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Sambo jako forma zapasów i samoobrony

Streszczenie

Rzecz dotyczy *sambo* – sztuki walki usytuowanej pomiędzy samoobroną a sportem. Czy jest to bardziej forma zapasów? Czy jest to sztuka walki, system walki, czy sport? Na ile *sambo* jest podobne do *jujutsu* lub *judo*? Jak należy tę sztukę walki dookreślić? Autor uwzględnienia wypowiedzi różnych specjalistów i szuka wyjaśnień w drodze dowodu logicznego. Metodą badań jest tu więc analiza treści literatury przedmiotu, wywiady bezpośrednie, oraz analiza dokumentów. Jako źródła potraktowano też starsze publikacje (podręczniki i inne książki). Następnie zaś przeprowadzono proces logicznej dedukcji.

Sambo nie jest jednorodne – *sambo* sportowe i *sambo* bojowe są jakby osobnymi sztukami walki. Sportowe *sambo* jest walką zapasniczą, bazującą głównie na japońskich wzorach techniczno-taktycznych. Jest to jakby połączenie zapasów w stylu wolnym i *judo*. Natomiast inne postaci *sambo* są formą samoobrony, systemem wojskowej walki wręcz lub eklektyczną mieszanką różnych technik walki. *Sambo* nie spełnia kryteriów dla kategorii sztuki walki i drogi walki. Jest zatem formą sztuki walki jako sport walki lub program treningowy dla MMA, eklektyczną samoobroną lub systemem walki.

Słowa kluczowe: *sambo*, samoobrona, system walki, zapasy, klasyfikacja.

Abstract

The thing is about *sambo* – a fighting art between self-defence and sport. Or is it more of a form of wrestling? Is it a martial art, a combat system, or a sport? How similar is *sambo* to *jujutsu* or *judo*? How should this fighting art be defined? The author takes into account the statements of

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various specialists and seeks explanations by logical proof. Therefore, the method of research here is the analysis of the content of the literature on the subject, direct interviews, and the analysis of documents. Older publications (textbooks and other books) were also treated as sources. Then the process of logical deduction was carried out.

Sambo is not homogeneous – sport *sambo* and combat *sambo* are like separate fighting arts. Sport *sambo* is a wrestling fight based mainly on Japanese technical and tactical patterns. It is like a combination of freestyle wrestling and *judo*. In contrast, other forms of *sambo* are a form of self-defence, a system of military hand-to-hand combat, or an eclectic mix of different fighting techniques. *Sambo* does not meet the criteria for martial art and martial way. It is therefore a form of fighting art, as a combat sport or training program for MMA, eclectic self-defence or combat system.

Keywords: *sambo*, self-defence, combat system, wrestling, classification

Introduction

On July 20, 2021, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) fully recognized the International Federation of Amateur Sambo (FIAS), thus accepting sambo into the family of Olympic sports. We know that *sambo* is both a self-defence/hand-to-hand combat system and a combat sport. *Sambo* – is an abbreviation of the words in Russian (*SAMozaszczita Biez Oruzia*) – Self-defence without weapon (Błach, W., Cynarski, & Błach, Ł., 2006). It is a genetically Soviet and now de facto Russian version of hand-to-hand combat in the area between self-defence and sport. Is it more of a form of wrestling or how should it be defined? Does it meet the definition of a martial art?: “Martial arts are a historic category of flawless methods of unarmed combat fighting and the use of weapons, combined with spiritual elements (both personal development and in the transcendental sphere)” (Cynarski & Skowron, 2014).

The reflection will be based on the General Theory of Fighting Arts (GTFA) (Cynarski, 2019) and a more specialized theory of self-defence (*cf.* Ambroży, 2001: 5–140, 2002–2003; Raczkowski, 2008; Cynarski, 2009, Cynarski, 2016), taking into account the statements of various specialists and by logical proof.

The research **method** here is content analysis of the subject literature, direct interviews, and document analysis. Older publications (textbooks and other books) were also treated as sources. Then, a process of logical deduction was carried out. It is like a monographic study, referring to various sources – existing and evoked.

A few words about the history of *sambo*

Establishment and institutionalization

The self-defence combat system was developed within the Soviet Union’s secret services in the 1920s. The concept of “self-defence without weapons” was introduced by Viktor A. Spiridonov in his book “Guide to self-defence with-

out weapons in the ju-jitsu system” in 1927. It was intended for NKVD employees. The following year, his second textbook, i.e. “Self-defense without weapons. Training and competition” was published and it was also marked “For internal use”. However, in 1938, the All-Union Committee for Physical Culture and Sports in Order No. 633: “On the development of freestyle wrestling (*sambo*)” used the name “freestyle wrestling sambo”. It was only in 1946 that the name was changed to “sambo” in the central sports institutions of the USSR (Cynarski, 2021a: 138–139).

The author of the above-mentioned books was a participant in the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria in 1905 and the First World War in 1914. During the war he was wounded and transferred to the reserve. In 1921, Spirydonov created the foundations of a new system consisting of the most effective (in his opinion) methods and tricks of various martial arts used at that time (Rudman, 2003), but essentially based on jujutsu and classical Greco-Roman wrestling. He emphasized the fact that the art of self-defense helps to achieve victory by all available means. Therefore, he recommended using a rich repertoire of techniques useful in real combat. Moreover, Spirydonov was the first to classify holds and give them names (Rudman, 2003). The introduction of a new combat system was caused by the need to train new personnel for the uniformed services of the Soviet Union.

After years of searching for optimal solutions to combat operations, Spirydonov came to the conclusion that *jujutsu* holds are a bit too complicated to use. He stated that due to specific climatic and cultural conditions, foreign self-defense systems are of little use in Russia. Therefore, in the book “Self-defense without weapons. Training and Competition” (1928), in which he presents the basic principles of his self-defense system, he no longer uses the name *jujutsu*. The main slogan of this book is “Everything is good that leads to victory”, which is quite commonly accepted in various self-defense schools. Spirydonov also emphasized the principle that the best results should be achieved with the least possible energy loss. But this is the principle of *Seiryoku zen'yo* known in *jujutsu*.

In February 1929, Spirydonov organized the first self-defense championship of the Moscow “Dynamo” (Rudman, 2003). Then, in 1933, he published his third book on *sambo*, also For Internal Use. In it, he described, among other things, the principles of organizing self-defence competitions. In his book, the author is considering naming his new combat system. Here he also introduced the justification for the name *sambo* as the most accurate.

His work was continued by his students, including Viktor Volkov. He also wrote a book titled “Unarmed self-defense course: Sambo. Manual for NKVD schools” (1940). This manual describes the basic combat techniques necessary in operational work. The techniques were classified into seven groups: immobilization and incapacitation, locks, twists, off-balance and throws, compressions

and choking, strikes and combinations. In addition, the training system, special-purpose holds were described: fighting with knives, defense against an opponent armed with firearms, holds and counter-attacks, as well as the teaching methodology and organization of competitions (Błach, W., Cynarski, & Błach, Ł., 2006). This and previous manuals were not available outside the USSR's power ministries.

The second great co-creator of *sambo* was Vasiliy Oshchepkov. He came to Moscow in 1930. He already had 2nd dan *judo*, for which he passed the examination at the *Kodokan* Institute in 1917. In the years 1918-1926, he was a resident of the main intelligence directorate in Japan. In Moscow, Oshchepkov worked at the Institute of Physical Culture as a *judo* teacher. He supplemented his judo with technical elements taken from various wrestling styles of the nations that were part of the Soviet state, especially Central Asia and the Caucasus (cf. Tumanian, 1997). However, despite his merits, in 1937 the NKVD arrested Oshchepkov on charges of alleged cooperation with the Japanese and in 1938 he was murdered.

Anatolij Kharlampiyev was Oshchepkov's student, who significantly promoted *sambo*. In order to gain the support of the communist authorities, he spread the highly dubious thesis that it was an original Russian sport enriched with the techniques of traditional wrestling of the peoples of the USSR. However, for his contribution to the development of a sport similar to *judo*, Kharlampiyev received an honorary 8th dan *judo* from Japan (Dawidowicz, 2019: 64).

Only after the end of World War II was "unarmed self-defense" divided into two types: combat *sambo* and sports *sambo*. The former remained a secret system until the collapse of the USSR, while sports *sambo* became a massively practised and quite popular sport. Further institutional development was facilitated by its entry into sports. The next steps were:

1938 – the first friendly competition in "free style fighting" with the participation of teams from five cities;

1939 – the first championship of the Soviet Union in this new sport;

1946 – the competition was resumed, but under a new name, as the sambo championship;

1966 – at the congress of the International Amateur Wrestling Federation (FILA) in the United States, the topic of "*sambo*" was discussed, and then a commission was established within FILA to deal with the development of sambo in the world (Enigmas, 1997);

1967 – the first international *sambo* competition organized in Riga (today's Latvia);

1968 – FILA (International Federation of Amateur Wrestling) recognized *sambo* as a wrestling sport;

1972 – the 1st European Championships were held;

1980 – *sambo* was presented during the Olympic Games in Moscow;

1985 – the International Federation of Amateur Sambo (FIAS) was established;
2000 – the “sambo combat” competition was introduced.

Sports sambo

Kharlampiyev introduced a new cut of sweatshirt (*samboyka*), additional shoes (*bortsovki*) for fighting players, and also modified the rules of duels. This is how a new type of sport was created, which was then called “freestyle fighting”. It was a type of fighting that supplemented the rich heritage of judo with elements of moves from other types of self-defence. These include, for example, levers on the leg joints, which are not allowed in sports *judo*.

The pioneers of this sport, in addition to those previously mentioned, included: Nikolai Galkovskiy, Ivan Vasiliev, Roman Shkolnikov, Lev Turin and Evgeniy Chumakov. However, among the most important figures in the history of sambo, four names should be mentioned. These are: Viktor Spiridonov (1882–1944) and Alexey A. Kadochnikov (Systema), who continued his thought, and Vasili S. Oshchepkov (1893–1938) and his student Anatoly Kharlampiev (1906–1979). Spiridonov, a pioneer of Soviet *sambo*, is considered the creator of Systema (*sistema*), an undefined Russian style of self-defence (Cynarski, 2021a: 154). However, the sport of *sambo* was a global success, given its international reach.

The World Cup has been held cyclically since 1969, and the World Championships since 1973. In 1985, the International Federation of Amateur Sambo (FIAS) was founded in Bilbao (Spain). The first president of the FIAS was elected; it was a Spaniard, Fernando Comte. In the same year, the FIAS was admitted as a member of the World Association of Non-Olympic Sports (GAISF), and sambo was included as a sport in the program of the World Games for Non-Olympic Sports.

Sport *sambo* is a hand-to-hand fight in which fighting takes place in a standing position (vertical position) and on the ground (horizontal position), which is typical of a wrestling fight. Only throws and catches are allowed. Throws are divided (as in *judo*) into foot throws, hand throws, hip throws and the so-called “sacrifice” throws, i.e. with one’s own fall. The grips are: holds and levers – used on the upper and lower limbs. The variety of ways to defeat an opponent places great demands on the trainees’ psychomotor preparation. *Sambo* players face high demands in terms of psychophysical fitness. A sports fight in sambo lasts 5 minutes of real, effective fighting time, which does not include breaks in the fight. This applies to both men and women. In younger age categories (from junior to junior), the duration of the duel is correspondingly shorter (junior – 4 minutes, junior – 3 minutes). *Sambo* fighting is an effort of variable intensity and different durations of its individual sequences (Błach, W. *et al.*, 2005).

The Russian film *Combat Sambo* (1993) presents a bit of history, a bit of a fictionalized legend of the origins of sambo, and, above all, technical and tac-

tical solutions. According to Lothar Sieber (2023), the techniques of this combat sambo look almost identical to those in *jujutsu*. The author thinks similarly.

The multi-form nature of *sambo*

The classification of this form of fighting art causes some difficulties. Originally it was possible to distinguish:

- military *sambo* – the Soviet equivalent of *jujutsu* (according to Spiridonov's teaching);
- sports *sambo* – the Soviet equivalent of *judo* (according to Oshchepkov's teaching).

Its other characteristics are also highlighted. For example, Zeziulin (2005) states that the entire self-defense system is divided into: combat *sambo*, sports *sambo*, and self-defence outside sports. In turn, the Polish Sambo Association / *Polski Związek Sambo* (PZ Sambo) distinguishes three types:

- Sports *sambo*;
- Combat *sambo* (combat, Russian: *Bojevoye Sambo*);
- Military *sambo* (*systema*) (Polish Sambo Association, 2022).

Sports competition was also introduced in combat *sambo*. Here, fighting forms such as throws, holds, hand strikes and kicks are allowed. One of the most famous graduates of the martial *sambo* school was Fyodor Emelianenko, a multiple world champion in MMA, in the years 2003-2010, considered one of the strongest players in this sport. Oleg Taktarov, Alexander Emelianenko and several other fighters also joined the world's MMA leaders.

The *sambo* self-defence system was popularized especially in the armed forces and police until the mid-20th century (Błach, W., Cynarski, & Błach, Ł., 2006). This was probably due to the political situation in the world and Europe at that time. With the "political thaw" in international relations, a more visible commercial trend appeared – self-defence courses with an emphasis on the utilitarian value of this system. At the same time, sports were becoming more and more important. The element of sports competition in *sambo* ceased to be marginal and became one of the main goals of training.

The author asked for a statement from the coach and activist of the International Sambo Federation (FIAS) and the European Sambo Federation, Prof. Dr Patrik Drid from Serbia.

You are an activist of the International Sambo Federation. I would like to write an essay on *sambo*. I would like you to answer my 3 questions:

1. How did you get into *sambo*?
2. What is *sambo* for you?
3. Do you think *sambo* is closer to wrestling, *judo*, *jujutsu* or something else (compared to similar martial arts, combat sports, self-defence systems and hand-to-hand combat)?

I performed as a competitor for the first time in 1993 at the World Championship in Kstovo (Russia). I was lucky that my coach (Svetozar Mihailovic) was one of the founders of the World Sambo Federation (FIAS), and he introduced me to this sport.

After the first competition, two top *sambo* competitors (Nikolaj Igrushkin and Aleksandar Dunavev), multiple world champions, with their coach Kuljkov, came to Novi Sad. The competitors trained with us for three months while the coach stayed for a year.

After my competitive career, I continued working as a coach and referee on the international level. I managed the organization of two European and four world *sambo* championships. I want to emphasize the World Championship in 2020, which we organized in a sanitary “bubble” during Covid-19, which is my most outstanding achievement. I am currently the vice president of the European Sambo Federation.

For me, *sambo* represents the most complex combat sport. The movements are simple yet very demanding and effective. I especially emphasize the beauty of combat *sambo*, which cannot be said to resemble any other combat sport. Sports *sambo* contains the best elements from many combat sports. It is much more physically demanding than judo and more attractive than wrestling (Drid, 2023).

Sambo in Poland

In Poland, the sport of *sambo* is not very popular and unknown to a wider group of people. However, Polish judokas and wrestlers have successfully participated in *sambo* competitions several times. This fact is exemplified by the success of Joanna Majdan (gold medal) and Radosław Laskowski (silver) in the European Championships in Kaliningrad in 1993. In turn, in 2005, the first *sambo* championships of European Union countries were held in Milovice (Czech Republic), in which the Polish women’s national team and men took the second place in the team classification. The coach of the Polish national team was Wiesław Błach (7th dan *judo*), and the manager of the national team was Jarosław Bojarski.

The Polish Sambo Association (*Polski Związek Sambo / PZ Sambo*) has been operating since 2011, the first president of which was Marek Porycki. Since 2014, this function has been held by Oleksandr Gorbatiuk (born 1961, *sambo* trainer from Ukraine). He is a well-known person in the Polish *jujutsu* community because he has been mixing and operating in Kraków for many years. Gorbatiuk is a trainer of sports *sambo* and a new type of sports and combat *sambo: unifight*. He also holds an honorary 8th dan in *jujutsu*. Its players have been taking part in sports *sambo*, combat and *unifight* competitions since 2007. The leader of Polish *sambo* also deals with manual therapy (chiropractic), which is quite common among teachers of *jujutsu* and various, especially Asian, martial arts.

Sports competitions are organized regularly. There are 14 sports clubs/associations registered in PZ Sambo. Polish representatives also participate in international competitions. The author tried to interview Oleksandr Gorbatiuk, president of PZ Sambo. However, the president did not respond to the invitation. Unfortunately, the new president of this Association, Iwo Czerniawski, who was elected to this function on February 3, 2024, behaved similarly.

Discussion

According to Dawidowicz (2019: 57), *sambo* was created on the basis of *jujutsu* and *judo*. This thesis in terms of genesis is true, taking into account the previously mentioned figures of co-creators and pioneers: Spirydonov (*jujutsu* and wrestling) and Oshchepkov (*judo*). However, it applies only to the technical and tactical sphere. Moreover, sports *sambo* resembles fighting in sports *jujutsu* and is described as a specific form of sports *jujutsu* (cf. Kisiel *et al.*, 2022: 47-52).

Judo, broadly understood (as “ways of flexibility”), as in the teaching of the *Idokan Yoshin-ryu* school (Swider, 2018), includes various derivative and similar varieties. Such *judo* includes the *Kodokan* and *Idokan* methods (Cynarski, 2021b), *Butokukai* (*Dai Nippon Butokukai*) and Miconosuke Kawaishi’s method, but also *judo-do* (Klinger von Klingerstorff, 1951), some varieties of self-defence (cf. van Haesendonck, 1961; Glucker, 1963; Skut, 1967a, b, c; Ambroży, 2001; Cynarski, 2008), but also, for example, *Nihon jujutsu*, where the ideas of master Jigoro Kano were supplemented by classic *jujutsu* techniques (Sato, 1998), which, incidentally, J. Kano himself had previously rejected. When *judokas* teach *jujutsu* or *goshinjutsu* (the art of self-defence), it is relatively easy to draw parallels in the selection and execution of techniques with Master Kano’s “gentle way” (*judo*). Sports *sambo* fits in here as well. But is *sambo* an educational system and a martial art?

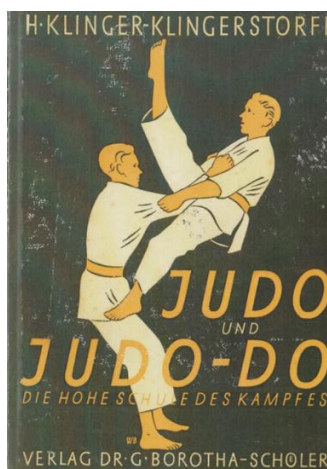


Fig. 1. Hubert Klinger von Klingerstorff (1951), *Judo und Judo-Do* – book cover. *Hängegarten* throw (Cynarski 2021a: 80)

Judo-do is a development of *judo* towards new throws (Fig. 1) and counter-techniques. It also develops the sphere of philosophical, humanistic justifications (“widening of the road”) (Klinger von Klingerstorff, 1951: 5-9, 87-92). Meanwhile, *sambo* is developing *judo*, adding interesting counterattacks, throw

variants and new joint levers (cf. Gulevich & Zviaginцев, 1968, fig. 2; Andreyev & Tschumakov, 1976; Zeziulin, 2005). However, it cuts itself off from the spheres of spirit, ethics and values. Therefore, it is only (*tai*)*jutsu* – a fighting technique (hand-to-hand, without weapons). In terms of fighting tactics, it is similar to *judo* and *jujutsu*, but without a religious or philosophical foundation it becomes just a fighting technique and a combat sport. According to the definition adopted in the GTFA, **sambo is not a martial art** in the traditional sense. There are no “spiritual elements” here because there cannot be any; the doctrine of communism rejects everything that is incompatible with Marxist-Leninist materialism.

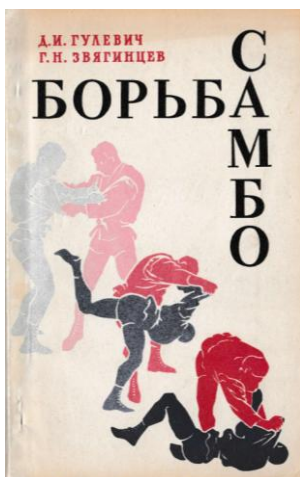


Fig. 2. A.I. Gulevich and G.N. Zviaginцев (1968), *Bor'ba Sambo* – book cover: wrestling takedown technique

Spirydonov studied “European” *jujutsu*, taught in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and popularized in numerous books – manuals, instructions, tutorials. There was a kind of fashion for learning this way of fighting, where the appropriate technique allows you to defeat a physically stronger opponent. It was learning new tricks for their situational use. According to the author, the random knowledge and skills in *jujutsu* need to be supplemented in some way by adding elements of wrestling or other fighting techniques. From a *jujutsu* perspective, some technical or techno-tactical elements are interesting, while others are wrong.

Since historically (according to its origins) the co-creator of *sambo*, Spiridonov, also based his technique on wrestling, and patterns were sought and references were made to the traditional wrestling of nations from the USSR (Caucasus and Central Asia), techniques borrowed directly from wrestling fights are present here. Moreover, *jujutsu* and *judo* are also wrestling fighting systems. In Dulin’s study (2008), both Spiridonov and Oshchepkov are shown next to famous wrestlers of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. So **sambo (sport) is clearly a wrestling sport**, which was also confirmed by the FILA. However, it is

not a sport based on any Russian tradition, but mainly on using Japanese patterns. Although wrestling was probably practised by the Slavs in ancient times, the original technique has not been preserved (Cynarski, 2020).

In this competitive combat sport practised today, there is a pathology that plagues many types of extremely commercialized sport. This is, in particular, prohibited doping (Cynarski, 2017; Mytskan *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, sports *sambo* finds a loyal audience, fans and supporters, also outside Russia (*cf.* Matic *et al.*, 2020). Events are organized to promote this sport internationally (Kubala, 2017; Cynarski, 2018; Kubala, Cynarski, & Swider, 2019).

In contrast, combat or military variants of *sambo* are more similar to eclectic self-defence and combat systems. According to GM V. Pilat (2022), Kadochnikov reached for the traditions of Cossack/Ukrainian martial arts when creating his style of *sistema*. However, his style is today promoted as “Kadochnikov System Russian Martial Art”. The competitive combat variant of *sambo* is similar to the competition in *unifight* and MMA. In these varieties, it is difficult to determine what is the original invention of *sambo* masters, because there is neither a long tradition nor a single established canon of teaching. Training specialists in uniformed services are constantly looking for better ways of teaching and more effective techniques of fighting or intervening and incapacitating or neutralizing the enemy (*cf.* Secours, Jacques, & Anderson, 2016; Renden, Savelsbergh, & Oudejans, 2017; Maczuga & Cynarski, 2021).

Summary

Sports *sambo* is a wrestling match based mainly on Japanese technical and tactical patterns. It is like a combination of freestyle wrestling and *judo*, and the players fight in shorts and sweatshirts.

In contrast, other forms of *sambo* are a form of self-defence, a system of military hand-to-hand combat, or an eclectic mix of different fighting techniques. It does not meet the criteria for martial art and martial way. It is therefore a form of fighting art, as a combat sport or a training program for MMA, eclectic self-defence or combat system.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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