

The Body as a Political Space: Comparing Physical Education under Nazism and Stalinism*

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The body is a political space
(*Der Leib ist ein Politicum*)

Nazi sport theorist Alfred Baeumler¹

Shaping a new subject was a central goal of both the Nazi and the Stalinist projects. Reformed, revitalized, and remade, the ‘new man’ (or woman) was to be an active, willing and worthy participant of the new society. To effect the desired transformation, both regimes tried to saturate the environment with political messages designed to instill discipline, loyalty and a new understanding of the self and its relationship to the social and political world. The Nazi and Soviet regimes engaged in mass indoctrination by exercising control over the content of the literature citizens read, what children were taught in schools, and what was printed in newspapers. They also employed more subtle methods, shaping the ideological content of architecture, sculpture, film, music, political posters, and other forms of visual art. These forms of persuasion and propaganda aimed at inculcating new ways of thinking by directly appealing to the mind, both at its conscious and subconscious levels.²

Both regimes also attempted to master another form of indoctrination: strategies of persuasion aimed at the body. The Nazi and Soviet dictatorships used physical education as a means of reshaping the subject in a quite literal sense, but the promotion of stronger, healthier bodies was only the more obvious aim of physical exercise and sport programmes. These regimes also targeted the body as a means of reaching the mind, attempting to use physical education to enforce patterns of thinking and to inculcate psychological characteristics that promoted the state’s agenda. As one US physical education textbook put it in 1957, Hitler’s purpose in popularizing recreation programmes ‘was to develop ... Nazis whose minds he could control as he saw fit’.³ In this view, the physical training programmes instituted in schools, workplaces and

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¹ Alfred Baeumler, ‘Politische Leibeserziehung’, in P.G. Hoffmann and Arno Breitmeyer (eds), *Sport und Staat* (Berlin, 1937), reprinted in Winfried Joch, *Politische Leibeserziehung und ihre Theorie im Nationalsozialistischen Deutschland: Voraussetzungen, Begründungszusammenhang, Dokumentation* (Berlin, 1977), p. 215.

² For a useful entry point into the vast literature on these topics, see David D. Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics* (New York, 2006). On ‘totalitarian’ efforts to usurp leisure, see Aryeh L. Unger, *The Totalitarian Party: Party and People in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 167–203.

³ Granville Johnson et al., *Your Career in Physical Education* (New York, 1957), p. 12.

organizations such as the Hitler Youth and the Komsomol constituted a mechanism of social control that was centrally important in blunting opposition and garnering popular support. More than merely ‘bread and circuses’ forms of diversion, these programmes aimed to create subjects actively dedicated to advancing regime goals.⁴

By comparing the uses of physical education under Hitler and Stalin, this article aims to contribute to what Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick recently called ‘a new scholarship of integration’. As they note, comparing the two dictatorships has long exerted a powerful fascination—not least because what is at stake is ‘an effort to make historical sense of the twentieth century’ by understanding, side by side, two regimes whose mutual antagonism and mutual dependency did so much to shape it. Understanding the two together opens ‘a critical vista into twentieth century history’ that neither national history on its own can provide.⁵ Because it was commonly accepted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that physical education and sport could be used as a potent form of social control, it is worth asking whether Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union—regimes that in important respects developed similar approaches to social control—sought to harness this realm in congruent ways as well.

Although mainstream scholarship on Nazism and Stalinism has placed little emphasis on the ‘somatization’ of social control, the issue has potentially important implications for our understanding of the roles of consent and coercion (and of the meanings of those terms) in empowering these dictatorships. A prominent strand of current historical thinking sees the two dictatorships as a variant—‘the ultimate expression’—of a wider authoritarian politics in interwar Europe that aspired to unprecedented levels of social engineering.⁶ An emphasis on physical education as a means of strengthening the body politic and inculcating values was a nearly universal obsession in interwar Europe, and many aspects of the physical education regimes imposed by the dictatorships had direct parallels in liberal democracies. Thus, the issue provides a useful marker not only for exploring differences and commonalities in the body politics of the two regimes but also for explaining the differences between these repressive dictatorships and their democratic contemporaries.⁷

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York, 1965), pp. 383–4.

⁵ Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Introduction’, in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 1–40. Other notable comparative efforts include Paul R. Josephson, *Totalitarian Science and Ideology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1996); Eric Weitz, ‘Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Re-evaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges’, *Slavic Review*, 61 (2002), pp. 1–29; Peter Holquist, ‘State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism’, in Amir Weiner (ed.), *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Stanford, 2003), pp. 19–45. One collection of essays belies its title by deliberately eschewing real comparison, calling such an effort premature: Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds), *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge, 1997). Most of the essays in the book focus exclusively on one regime or the other. In contrast, the essays in the Geyer and Fitzpatrick volume were jointly written by specialists on Nazi and Soviet history.

⁶ Amir Weiner, ‘Introduction: Landscaping the Human Garden’, in Weiner, *Landscaping the Human Garden*, p. 4.

⁷ As the Soviet regime attempted to build up its capabilities, it gathered considerable information on global sport and physical education practices, and Nazi Germany was an important focus of attention. More generally, ideas and practices in sport and physical education circulated widely, suggesting largely overlooked ways in which the two regimes engaged in processes of mimesis and transfer. On transfer in general see Geyer and Fitzpatrick, ‘Introduction’, p. 23. As Arnd Krüger has pointed out to me, there are important areas of continuity and exchange not explored in this essay, including the circulation of ideas and practices among German gymnasts (Turner), the European workers’ sport movement, and Soviet and Nazi sport.

There are both striking similarities and striking differences in the ways the two regimes approached physical education.⁸ Stark differences in material circumstances meant that the Soviet regime's efforts fell far short of those instituted by the Nazis, whose institutionalization of physical education and sport is widely regarded as one of the regime's key successes, touching the lives of many millions of Germans. The Soviets aspired to establish physical education and recreation programmes on a mass scale, but it was a goal that remained elusive in the 1930s as the country was convulsed by the traumas of collectivization, famine, industrialization and purges. Differing conceptions of race meant that there existed no Soviet equivalent to the racism and antisemitism that pervaded Nazi thinking about the body.⁹ The Soviets approached the body from a fundamentally different standpoint from the Nazis: whereas National Socialist ideology glorified the physical, Communist ideology privileged the rational faculties of the mind.¹⁰ Although Soviet theorists spoke of 'hardening' (*zakalivanie*) and of strengthening muscles, the Soviet emphasis on these terms never approached the ubiquitous celebration of the term 'strength' (*Kraft*) in Nazi propaganda.¹¹

This article argues that despite substantial differences, physical education in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union shared important characteristics: high levels of state control over physical education and sport; the extensive use of displays of massed bodies moving in unison; and the conceptualization of physical education as a public duty in which service to the state subsumed individual needs, which produced an extraordinarily tight connection between physical education and militarism. Individually, none of these elements was unique to these countries; in combination, these characteristics gave physical education under Hitler and Stalin a reach, style and content that was distinct from what prevailed in other countries, where state control, mass displays and militarism played more modest roles and coexisted with a much stronger emphasis on entertainment and individual fulfillment.

The presumption that their physical education and sport programmes produced more pliant subjects was an important part of the self-perception of the regimes. But did perception reflect reality? Both regimes strenuously attempted to imbue physical exercises and sport with political content, and physical education and recreation programmes became a site—used with success in both countries—for the visual and oral conveyance of political messages. On the critical question of whether efforts to manipulate bodies directly affected mentalities in ways that supported regime goals, however, the evidence is weak. Scholars who see physical education as a form of psychological indoctrination have focused on regime intent, not on outcomes, not least because it is virtually impossible to measure the psychological effectiveness of Nazi or

⁸ Fascist Italy has often been included in totalitarian models, but falls outside the scope of this essay. On the Italian case, see Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, 1981).

⁹ Gregory Paul Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling in the Third Reich* (New York, 2002), pp. 177–9; Peter Holquist, 'State Violence as Technique', pp. 38–44; Francine Hirsch, 'Race without the Practice of Racial Politics', *Slavic Review*, 61, 1 (Spring 2002), p. 35.

¹⁰ On differences in conceptions of the body, see John M. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin, 1984), pp. 19, 70–96.

¹¹ For Soviet uses of 'strength' and 'hardening', see V. Starikov, *Chto takoe fizicheskaja kul'tura* (Moscow, 1930), pp. 67–9.

Soviet physical education.¹² While it seems reasonable to assume that programmes that successfully increase physical fitness (in purely physiological terms) result in improvements in health, and scientific research since the 1970s has also shown that physical exercise has measurable effects on mental states, reducing stress, improving mood, and staving off depression and anxiety, claims that Nazi and Soviet physical education promoted specific character traits or mental dispositions such as willingness to obey are purely speculative. As was true of the biopolitics of reproduction, where strongly pro-natalist policies in both countries failed to produce sustained increases in birthrates, the sheer complexity of the undertaking may well have militated against success.¹³

That Nazi and Soviet physical education and sport were uniquely coercive is ingrained in popular belief, but no scholar has systematically compared Nazi and Soviet physical education.¹⁴ Studies of body politics have been far more common in the highly developed field of German history than in the considerably smaller field of Soviet history. The depth and breadth of historical knowledge about the Nazis, whose surviving documents have been available—and intensively studied—since the end of World War II, substantially exceeds what we know about the Stalinist period, whose archives have only been open, fitfully and partially, since 1991. This general pattern is even more pronounced in the field of sport history, which developed into a major subfield in German historiography but received scant attention from either Soviet or Western historians of Stalinism.¹⁵ A mere handful of scholars of Soviet era have shown an interest in Soviet *fizicheskaia kul'tura* (physical culture).¹⁶ Stefan Plaggenborg, for example, has argued that early Soviet forms of physical training such as production gymnastics were aimed at making the body the target of Bolshevik indoctrination.¹⁷ Plaggenborg, writing on the pre-Stalinist 1920s, has little to say about physical education and sport as means of reshaping minds. In contrast, a large body of scholarship has examined what the Nazis called *politische Leibeserziehung* (political physical education), detailing the great emphasis

¹² One attempt to do so is the innovative study by Klaus Cachay, Steffen Bahlke and Helmut Mehl, 'Echte Sportler', 'Gute Soldaten': Die Sportsocialisation des Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel von Feldpostbriefen (Weinheim, 2000). See below for discussion of this work.

¹³ David L. Hoffmann and Annette F. Timm, 'Utopian Biopolitics: Reproductive Policies, Gender Roles, and Sexuality in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union', in Geyer and Fitzpatrick, *Beyond Totalitarianism*, pp. 123, 125, 129.

¹⁴ See, for example, the book by US journalist John R. Tunis, *Democracy and Sport* (New York, 1941), pp. 15–7. Scattered comparisons exist; see John Hoberman's *Sport and Political Ideology*, p. 169; James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 151–2.

¹⁵ Histories of Soviet physical culture and sport produced in the Soviet era were highly ideological, and the post-1991 period has seen little interest in Stalin-era physical culture apart from sport biographies and team histories. See F.I. Samoukov, V.V. Stolbov and N.I. Toropov (eds), *Fizicheskaia kul'tura i sport v SSSR* (Moscow, 1967); Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*; and Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York, 1993).

¹⁶ See Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb, 2007); Alison Rowley, 'Sport in the Service of the State: Images of Physical Culture and Soviet Women, 1917–1941', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23 (2006), pp. 1314–40; and David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, pp. 31–7. See also Irina Makoveeva, 'Soviet Sports as a Cultural Phenomenon: Body and/or Intellect', *Studies in Slavic Culture*, 3 (2002), pp. 1–32, which treats the Stalin years briefly. (Makoveeva overlooks the shift to competitive sport and international competition in the 1930s).

¹⁷ Stefan Plaggenborg, *Revolutionskultur: Menschenbilder und Kulturelle Praxis in Sowjetrußland zwischen Oktoberrevolution und Stalinismus* (Cologne, 1996), pp. 62–108.

that National Socialist ideology placed on training the body through physical education and sport.¹⁸

Thomas Alkemeyer has been the most eloquent and prolific of those who see Nazi physical education as a means of ‘gaining control of the body and the “character” of the subject’.¹⁹ Alkemeyer has described Nazi aims as follows: ‘By ... providing physical exercises, rituals, and processions, by assembling, grading, aligning, and moving the body in prescribed spatial and temporal “arrangements”, the individual was to be formed from the outside inwards’.²⁰ He also suggests that the regime deployed images of ideal male bodies in order to elicit mimetic behaviour: viewers would unconsciously imitate the body language, carriage and gesture of normative images, thus ‘internal[izing] the ruling order’.²¹ In Alkemeyer’s view, this kind of body politics offered an advantage over more coercive methods of social control in that norms and values could be inscribed without conscious awareness on the part of the subject. The state’s agenda was not forced on the subject but instead became embodied, so that it was experienced as inner nature rather than external compulsion.²²

Other scholars, usually painting with a very broad brush, have argued that the totalitarian model applies to physical education and sport.²³ According to philosopher Jacques Ellul, sport was an ‘indispensable constituent element of totalitarian regimes’ because of the powerful way it bred conformity.²⁴ Other observers have suggested that mass athletic displays were a constituent element of totalitarianism. Although they were common throughout Europe, Germany and the USSR used them on a scale and to an extent not seen elsewhere; indeed, this genre of performance became so linked to totalitarianism that it was discredited in Western countries after the Second World War.²⁵ In her influential essay ‘Fascinating Fascism’, Susan Sontag suggested that all totalitarian nations used these mass choreographed displays of bodies because ‘such choreography

¹⁸ For a recent bibliographic review of the large literature on Nazi sport, see Lorenz Peiffer, *Sport im Nationalsozialismus: Zum aktuellen Stand der sporthistorischen Forschung; eine kommentierte Bibliografie* (Göttingen, 2004).

¹⁹ Thomas Alkemeyer, ‘Images and Politics of the Body in the National Socialist Era’, *Sport Science Review*, 4 (1995), p. 63. See also Alkemeyer’s important study, *Körper, Kult und Politik: Von der ‘Muskelreligion’ Pierre de Coubertins zur Inszenierung von Macht in den Olympischen Spielen von 1936* (Frankfurt, 1996); Rudolf Müllner, ‘Mobile Körper—Zur Faschisierung des Körpers im Nationalsozialismus’, *Spektrum der Sportwissenschaft: Zeitschrift der österreichischen sportwissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft*, 2 (1992), pp. 54–76. Arnd Krüger has speculated on the long-term effects of Nazi physical education on German society: Arnd Krüger, ‘Breeding, Rearing and Preparing the Aryan Body: Creating Supermen the Nazi Way’, in J.A. Mangan, *Shaping the Superman: Fascist Body as Political Icon; Aryan Fascism* (London, 1999), p. 61.

²⁰ Alkemeyer, ‘Images and Politics of the Body’, p. 64.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²³ The utility of the totalitarian model has been sharply contested in the decades since it emerged. By the end of the Cold War, it had fallen into disfavour, regarded as moralizing, simplistic, and speculative. It has enjoyed a revival in some circles since 1991. For a useful brief overview of the shifting fortunes of the model, see Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment*, pp. 1–12. Geyer and Fitzpatrick are divided over the concept’s usefulness and note that though most historians are tired of its ‘shackles’, we should not ignore the concept’s recent revival. ‘Introduction’, pp. 9–11.

²⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, pp. 383–4.

²⁵ Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic* (Chicago, 1995), p. 314.

rehearses the very unity of the polity'.²⁶ Historian William McNeill has argued that mass athletic displays, through the rhythmic movement of muscles, consolidate 'group solidarity by altering human feelings'. He calls this phenomenon 'muscular bonding', which he defines as 'the euphoric fellow feeling that prolonged and rhythmic muscular movement arouses among nearly all participants in such exercises'.²⁷ Scientific evidence shows that rhythmic activity releases endorphins, opioid compounds that create a sense of wellbeing.²⁸ According to McNeill, Hitler consciously and deliberately exploited this kind of emotional response 'in order to create national solidarity on a thoroughly subrational level'. McNeill goes so far as to attribute much of the Nazis' success to the emotional residues created by muscular synchronization: 'Hitler's words and ideas were little more than a scum riding on top of the visceral bonding that Nazi political techniques created, very largely by means of movement in unison and other muscular manifestations of shared "blood"'.²⁹

The importance of this kind of mass choreographed display has also been noted by Bourdieu. Elaborating on the fact that it has long been known that placing the body in certain positions or postures induces or reinforces the feelings they express, Bourdieu argues:

The attention paid to staging in great collective ceremonies derives not only from the concern to give a solemn representation of the group ... but also ... from the less visible intention of ordering thoughts and suggesting feelings through the rigorous marshalling of practices and the orderly disposition of bodies ... Symbolic power works partly through the control of other people's bodies ... that is given by the collectively recognized capacity to act in various ways on deep-rooted linguistic and muscular patterns of behaviour, either by neutralizing them or by reactivating them to function mimetically.³⁰

What, then, of the specific similarities and differences between the two regimes? Both Hitler and Stalin saw 'physical culture' as a tool for building a new subject and a new, harmonious society, but the physical was for Hitler a far more salient axis of revolutionary transformation than it was for Stalin.³¹ In sharp contrast to Mussolini, whose athletic prowess was a crucial part of his image and who often appeared barechested in public, neither Hitler nor Stalin was a sportsman (though Stalin did bowl).³² While Hitler

²⁶ Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York, 1980), pp. 91–2. Noting the similarities between Nazi and Soviet mass symbolism, Christel Lane claims that only the Nazis attempted to manipulate the emotions of the massed groups 'through the use of rousing music, speeches, singing and flag waving': *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 276. It is incorrect, however, to say that feelings of exaltation were absent in the Soviet case. See Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington, 2000).

²⁷ William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 2–3.

²⁸ Such rhythmic activity need not be in unison; an individual runner generates endorphins. Physical activity causes a rise in levels of beta-endorphins, which allow a person to cope with stress, and rhythmic physical activities such as running generate even higher endorphin levels. Arnd Krüger and Johannes Wildmann, 'Die Bedeutung der körpereigenen Opiate für den Leistungssport', *Leistungssport*, 15 (1985), pp. 49–52; Peter Thoren et al., 'Endorphins and Exercise: Physiological Mechanisms and Clinical Implications', *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 22, 4 (1990), pp. 417–28.

²⁹ McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time*, p. 149.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, 1990), p. 69.

³¹ John Hoberman states that for Marxists the body is not a political space but a Hegelian instrument of history: Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology*, p. 67.

³² Ulrich Popplow, 'Adolf Hitler—der Nichtsportler und der Sport: Zur Anatomie des Diktators', in Heinz Nattkämper (ed.), *Sportwissenschaft im Aufriß* (Saarbrücken, 1974), p. 38.

spurned physical activities in practice, however, in principle he not only embraced but glorified the physical. His intense anti-intellectualism, his belief that the essential quality of life was struggle, and his profound racism were elements of a *Weltanschauung* that placed extraordinary emphasis on human bodies. He saw physical exercise as a key element in building up the strength of the German nation. In *Mein Kampf* he described the 'training of mental abilities' as secondary to the educational work involved in breeding healthy bodies. In his view, 'a man of little scientific education but physically healthy ... is more valuable for the national community than a clever weakling'. He argued that physical training must be made a state matter, not 'an affair of the individual'. Scoffing at the practice of devoting most of the school day to intellectual matters, he argued instead for two hours a day of physical training for boys, 'covering every type of sport and gymnastics'.³³

Communist theorists had far less to say about physical education than their Nazi counterparts. As sport scholar John Hoberman has noted, 'communism implies—on the level of doctrine—a renunciation of the body'.³⁴ Marx, Lenin and Stalin offered no programmatic statements on physical education. Marx, who abhorred physical exercise, mentioned physical education only peripherally except for the recommendation that education should combine 'mental' and 'bodily' training, including gymnastics and military exercises. Lenin was an ardent sportsman, but he placed no particular value on physical fitness or recreation as tools for building a Communist society.³⁵ Stalin appears never to have spoken directly on the topic of physical education or sport in the 1930s, judging from the absence of quotations from the *vozhd'* in books and articles. In the 1930s it became standard practice for authors, regardless of their subject matter, to engage in ritualistic displays of adherence to the party line through the inclusion of legitimizing quotations from party leaders. In the realm of physical education, authors improvised with vaguely relevant remarks from Stalin about the need to raise a new generation of healthy and strong workers or with bland and uninspiring utterances by Defence Commissar Kliment Voroshilov or Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Mikhail Kalinin, the two highest-ranking members of the Politburo to take a significant interest in sport and physical education.³⁶

Historical and material differences also help explain the differing levels of importance Hitler and Stalin placed on physical education. In terms of levels of industrialization, per capita income, public health, leisure time, and standards of living, conditions were significantly better in Germany. Germany also had a long history of physical education in the form of *Turnen* (German gymnastics), an intensely nationalistic system of formalized gymnastics created by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn in 1811 as a means of instilling patriotism, increasing military readiness, and curbing ills such as masturbation. *Turnen* was formalized, institutionalized and professionalized in the German states, especially

³³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, 1971), pp. 408–9.

³⁴ Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology*, p. 86.

³⁵ James Riordan, 'Marx, Lenin and Physical Culture', *Journal of Sport History*, 3 (1976), pp. 152–61.

³⁶ See, for example, *Fizkul'tura i sport v SSSR: Materialy k vsesouznomy dnu fizkul'turnika 1939 goda* (Moscow, 1939); and G.A. Evssev and I.M. Lokshin (eds), *Fizkul'turnoe dvizhenie v SSSR: Sbornik statei i dr. materialov* (Khar'kov, 1940), which lack statements by Stalin on sport or physical culture. On 'nomadic quotations' in science, see Nikolai Kremontsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 49–50.

Prussia, in the nineteenth century. Specialized journals were devoted to the theory and practice of *Turnen*, and teachers of *Turnen* received formal training and attended meetings.³⁷ Continuities also existed between Weimar and Nazi sport and physical education. *Leibesübungen* formed an important part of efforts to reconstruct Germany in biological terms after the First World War, and Weimar-era scientists and physical educators created programmes intended to boost fitness, increase work productivity and ‘transform the human psyche’, making Germans more disciplined and performance-oriented.³⁸

The development of nationwide physical education took longer in Russia. Modern Russian physical education was founded in the 1870s by physiologist Petr Lesgaft, who attempted to put physical education on a scientific basis and who saw character training as a key element of games and exercises. He opposed German gymnastics because, he claimed, ‘exercises employing equipment involve sharp sensations; they therefore blunt the emotions of young people’; whereas exercise should develop the ability to subordinate desire to will.³⁹ Lesgaft’s efforts to introduce physical education in schools other than military academies were unsuccessful, and it was not until the 1890s that Russian society developed a broad-based interest in physical recreation, manifested in the growth of amateur athletic societies, a boom in bicycling and bodybuilding, and the creation of soccer clubs in the cities.⁴⁰ Still, Russia had no nationwide system of physical education or sport training, and it was not until 1912 that the tsarist government opened an office to promote physical fitness.⁴¹

These underlying differences in ideology, material circumstances and tradition had dramatic effects on the scope and quality of physical education the Nazi and Soviet regimes pursued. Its greater economic prosperity meant that Germany could afford to pour resources into sports facilities and equipment, constructing, for example, a *Reichsakademie* for physical training with the largest specialist library in the world. In the Soviet Union, which embarked on enormously disruptive programmes of agricultural collectivization and industrialization (not to mention purges that claimed millions of victims), resources for physical education were sharply limited until the 1950s. Soviet reports on physical education were filled with complaints about persistent shortcomings, ranging from chronic malnutrition among the population to shoddy equipment and lack of facilities. The Nazis put on an extravagant show for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, spending millions of *Reichsmarks* on a new 100,000-seat stadium, state-of-the-art facilities, and lavish housing for the athletes. The Soviets, too weak in sport to risk participation in the Olympics, continually postponed and eventually cancelled the Workers’ Spartakiad

³⁷ Michael Krüger, *Körperkultur und Nationsbildung: Die Geschichte des Turnens in der Reichsgründungsära: Eine Detailstudie über die Deutschen* (Schorndorf, 1996).

³⁸ Michael Hau, ‘Sports in the Human Economy: “Leibesübungen”, Medicine, Psychology, and Performance Enhancement during the Weimar Republic’, *Central European History*, 41 (2008), pp. 381–2, 411–2.

³⁹ Quoted in Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, pp. 49–51.

⁴⁰ Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 76–112.

⁴¹ Kantseliarii Glavnonabliudaiushchago za fizicheskim razvitiem narodonaseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii, *Spisok [Obshchestv] po fizicheskomu razvitiu i sportu, imeiushchikhsia v Rossiiskoi Imperii na 1 ianvaria 1915 g.* (Petrograd, 1915). My thanks to Don Wright for pointing me to this source.

that had originally been scheduled to be held in Moscow in 1933, in large part because of lack of funds.⁴²

State control of physical education and sport was, not surprisingly, one of the most obvious features Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had in common. The extent of the insertion of the state into areas of life once deemed private is typically regarded as one of the distinguishing characteristics of totalitarianism, but across Europe all spheres of life, whether public or private, came under the scrutiny and management aspirations of European polities bent on transforming societies.⁴³ Government oversight of physical education and sport was common throughout Europe after the First World War, the devastating effects of which quickened desires to ensure the health and fitness of populations. In its aftermath, government ministries of education, the interior and health often assumed oversight of physical education in schools and of other sports-related programmes.⁴⁴ Sport and militarism were tightly connected in these years, and political leaders from left and right saw sport and physical education as tools for moral education designed to strengthen race or nation.⁴⁵ Even so, however, some realms of physical exercise, sport and recreation remained independent, and non-governmental sport and recreational associations continued to flourish.⁴⁶

In Germany and the Soviet Union, in contrast, both regimes asserted centralized state control over all organizations involved in physical education and sport, attempting to make all forms of organized physical exercise serve state-directed aims. Within three months of assuming power, Hitler extended *Gleichschaltung* (essentially, Nazification) to sport, appointing a *Reichsportführer* (National Sport Leader) to take control of all sport organizations.⁴⁷ Pre-Nazi sports federations and clubs were either disbanded, as in the case of workers' associations and Jewish clubs, or subsumed under the umbrella of the newly formed *Deutsche Reichsbund für Leibesübungen* (German National Physical

⁴² In 1928 they had staged a relatively small Spartakiad in Moscow. On Nazi expenditures, see Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York, 1971). On the question of Soviet participation in Western international sport in the 1930s, see Barbara Keys, 'Soviet Sport and Transnational Mass Culture in the 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38 (2003), pp. 413–34. On the Spartakiad, see D.A. Steinberg, 'Sport under Red Flags' (PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1979), p. 184. For complaints about malnutrition among the Soviet population and other problems, see the pamphlet by a Soviet physical educator who defected to Germany in the 1940s: F. Legostaev, *Fizicheskoe vospitanie i sport v SSSR* (Munich, 1952). On Soviet standards of living, where some workers 'endured a half-starved existence', see Elena Osokhina, *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927–1941*, trans. Kate Transchel and Greta Bucher (Armonk, NY, 2001), p. 89, *passim*.

⁴³ Amir Weiner, 'Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 114–7.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Deobold B. Van Dalen *et al.*, *A World History of Physical Education: Cultural, Philosophical, Comparative* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971), pp. 326, 330, 336–40.

⁴⁵ Keys, *Globalizing Sport*, Ch. 2; on France, see Anne Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and Its Legacies, 1940 to 1970* (New York, 2005), pp. 33–34.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France, 1920–1938* (London, 1981), pp. 188, 203.

⁴⁷ As Arnd Krüger has shown, the Nazis adopted the Italian model: Krüger, 'Der Einfluss des faschistischen Sportmodells Italiens auf den nationalsozialistischen Sport', in A. Morgan Olsen (ed.), *Sport und Politik, 1918–1939/40* (Oslo, 1986), pp. 226–32. On the extended process of *Gleichschaltung* in Göttingen sport clubs, see David Imhoof's contribution to this issue: 'The Game of Political Change: Sports in Göttingen during the Weimar and Nazi Eras'.

Education Union).⁴⁸ Physical education in schools was overseen by Carl Krümmel, head of the 'Amt K' (Office of Physical Education) in the Ministry of Education.

The establishment of central control in the Soviet Union followed a more tortuous path. In 1918 Vsevobuch, a new universal military training body, attempted to take control of all sports groups in the country. In 1923 it was dissolved and a newly created Physical Culture Council (*Vyshii sovet fizicheskoi kul'tury*) took charge of this area. The Council's powers were increased in the 1930s as it became an executive body charged with overseeing all sports clubs, facilities, educational institutes, festivals and competitions. It remained, however, a weak and poorly funded body in frequent conflict with other bodies that had roles in physical education and sport, including the Trade Union Council, the Komsomol (Communist Youth League), and the Commissariats of Health, Education and Defence.⁴⁹ Despite the lack of a single overarching authority, sport under these various bodies grew quickly in popularity in the interwar years.

The Soviet regime placed broad emphasis on establishing mass physical culture programmes. In the 1920s theorists developed a conception of Soviet *fizicheskaiia kul'tura*, or *fizkul'tura*, as a wide-ranging programme of physical training involving hygiene and political education, in addition to exercise. It encompassed sports, production gymnastics, calisthenics and playful games.⁵⁰ Theorists described *fizkul'tura* not merely as a matter of exercising for an hour a day, but of 'all of everyday life at home and in society permeated by *fizicheskaiia kul'tura*', involving proper forms of rest, clothing, food, and habits.⁵¹ Prolonged debates in the 1920s over the best forms and combinations of exercise to promote—production gymnastics, artistic and corrective gymnastics, calisthenics or sport—gave way in the 1930s to an emphasis on sport, with gymnastics in a secondary role. Soccer and boxing, once condemned by specialists as harmful, were promoted alongside running, swimming and paramilitary exercises.⁵²

Fizkul'tura organizations established clubs and promoted physical culture in popular and scientific journals and newspapers and in a broad array of pageants, parades, plays, films and posters.⁵³ The Ministry of Health's State Central Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow and the Lesgaft Institute of Physical Education in Petrograd engaged in scientific study of sport and exercise physiology and designed physical education

⁴⁸ On the organizational structure of Nazi sport and physical education, see Hajo Bernett, *Der Weg des Sports in die nationalsozialistische Diktatur: Die Entstehung des Deutschen (Nationalsozialistischen) Reichsbundes für Leibesübungen* (Schorndorf, 1983).

⁴⁹ I. G. Chudinov (ed.), *Osnovnye postanovleniia, prikazy i instruksii po voprosam sovetskoi fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta, 1917–1957 gg.* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 17–18; Legostaev, *Fizicheskoe vospitanie*, pp. 9–12; Henry W. Morton, *Soviet Sport: Mirror of Soviet Society* (New York, 1963), pp. 172–4. Similar, though less debilitating, conflicts occurred among Nazi organizations. On conflicts between Reichssportführer Hans von Tschammer und Osten and the Hitler Youth, see Guido von Mengden, 'Vom Deutschen Reichsausschuß zum NS-Reichsbund für Leibesübungen', in *DSB Jahrbuch des Sports 1955/56*, pp. 54–78.

⁵⁰ Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, pp. 2–3.

⁵¹ V. Starikov, *Chto takoe fizicheskaiia kul'tura* (Moscow, 1930), pp. 78–9.

⁵² Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, pp. 95–104; Hart Cantelon, 'Leninist/Proletkul'tist Cultural Debates: Implications for Sport among the Soviet Working-Class', in Hart Cantelon and Robert Hollands (eds), *Leisure, Sport and Working-Class Cultures* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 80–83.

⁵³ Rowley, 'Sport in the Service of the State'; Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*.

curricula.⁵⁴ The Komsomol provided sport facilities and activities to millions of young people. Trade unions organized sport societies for their workers; these became large bodies that eventually employed professional athletes to compete for their teams, in addition to providing mass sport facilities for workers.⁵⁵ Osoaviakhim, the Society for Promotion of Defence, Aviation and Chemical Development, offered shooting galleries, airfields and parachuting facilities for young people; it claimed to have 11 million members by 1931.⁵⁶ Although recognized as important as early as 1918, compulsory physical education in Soviet schools was mandated only in 1929, with the requirement set at two hours per week.⁵⁷ The curriculum before 1937 was framed not in terms of particular sports and exercises but in terms of motor skills to be developed (walking, running, throwing); in 1937, the curriculum shifted to specify the teaching of particular sports and gymnastics, including running, swimming and team sports, but the number of hours of physical education per week was reduced to one.⁵⁸

In Germany physical education programmes at various levels of schooling were centrally mandated, and a physical fitness test was a requirement for higher education.⁵⁹ Whereas under the Weimar Republic physical education teachers were often the first to be made redundant when the economic crisis hit in 1929, under the Nazis they were given new status and respect, often being appointed deputy head teacher of the school. By 1935 a student had to receive a passing grade in physical education in order to move up to the next grade. In 1937 a new physical education curriculum for boys mandated five hours per week with an emphasis on soccer, boxing, and premilitary exercises. In schools for the Nazi elite such as the Adolf Hitler Schools, physical education was accorded even greater priority. Even at university physical education was a compulsory subject, and university teachers had to attend war-game camps.⁶⁰ Sports such as boxing, swimming and running and activities such as hiking and camping were required of all participants in the Hitler Youth and formed a major part of its appeal.⁶¹ The government-run

⁵⁴ Related movements had an impact on *fizkul'tura*, notably the efforts of scientist Aleksei Gastev to rationalize labour movements, a programme that included far-reaching aspirations to reshape workers' lives and thinking; and Vsevolod Meierhold's biomechanics theory, according to which the objective study of dramatic communication would derive from analysis of the relationships between states of mind and physical postures and gestures. Toby Clark, 'The "New Man's" Body: A Motif in Early Soviet Culture', in Hart Cantelon and Robert Hollands (eds), *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 36–9; Plaggenborg, *Revolutionskultur*, pp. 82–5.

⁵⁵ Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, pp. 124–6.

⁵⁶ Anna Krylova, 'Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender: Rearing a Generation of Professionally Violent Women-Fighters in 1930s Stalinist Russia', in Shani D'Cruze and Anupama Rao (eds), *Violence, Vulnerability and Embodiment* (New York, 2005), pp. 137–8.

⁵⁷ Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, pp. 76–86, 114–5. The implementation of this decree, as with so many others, was almost certainly highly uneven.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.

⁵⁹ Lorenz Peiffer, *Turnunterricht im Dritten Reich—Erziehung für den Krieg? Der schulische Alltag des Turnunterrichts an den höheren Jungenschulen der Provinz Westfalen vor dem Hintergrund seiner politisch-ideologischen und administrativen Funktionalisierung* (Cologne, 1987), pp. 51, 130; and Hajo Bernett, *Sportunterricht an der national-sozialistischen Schule: Der Schulsport an den höheren Schulen Preußens 1933–1940* (Sankt Augustin, 1985).

⁶⁰ Krüger, 'Breeding, Rearing and Preparing the Aryan Body', pp. 48, 57, 67 n 107.

⁶¹ Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 27–33.

leisure-time organization *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) also ran large sports programmes, offering free courses to workers in everything from boxing to tennis and horse riding.⁶² In contrast to the Soviet Union, where physical education, sport and premilitary training were not highly differentiated according to gender, in Germany physical education for girls was given less priority and was framed as a way to ensure that girls could best fulfill their future duties as mothers.⁶³

Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union pursued physical education not as an end in itself but as a means of shaping loyal and capable subjects. For the Bolsheviks, the primary purpose of physical culture was posed in the utilitarian terms of preparing workers for labour and defence, but its goals encompassed far more. The Soviet Communist Party's first resolution on physical culture, in 1925, declared that sports should be regarded not simply as a means of physical education but also as a method of training the masses by developing 'willpower, teamwork, endurance, resourcefulness and other valuable qualities ... [and of drawing] the masses into social and political activity'.⁶⁴ Nikolai Semashko, who served jointly as Commissar of Health and Chairman of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture, argued in 1926 that competitive sports not only strengthened the body but developed mental qualities such as 'attentiveness, punctuality, precision and grace of movement ... the sort of willpower, strength and skill that should distinguish the Soviet people'.⁶⁵ Other party decrees and pronouncements routinely stressed that physical exercise must serve revolutionary purposes and suggested a wide range of benefits that would accrue from the promotion of physical culture. *Fizkul'tura* was supposed to sublimate sexual energy, improve memory and deter 'hypocritical vanity'.⁶⁶ The practice of *fizkul'tura* was supposed to aid in the eradication of religion—indeed, to function as a substitute for it. A 1926 Ukrainian Party resolution lauded the promotion of sports as a means of reducing drunkenness and uncivilized behaviour, while other party documents stated that physical culture should act as 'a guide to a new way of life [*byt'*].'⁶⁷

National Socialist physical education was similarly directed towards the inculcation of useful traits. It was not, as a programmatic statement from 1937 put it, 'merely for the purpose of training the body. Rather, it is a training on the basis of the body, or through the body, that is to say, it reaches out to young people where they are most easily educable: in gymnastics, in play, in sport, in movement'. Physical education (*Leibeserziehung*) was to further the same aims as education in general: the development of a sense of *Völksgemeinschaft* through obedience and comradeship; readiness to bear arms and to use leisure time in a healthy way; race-consciousness, including healthy views of physical

⁶² Shelley Baranowski, *Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 96–7.

⁶³ Krylova, 'Stalinist Identity', p. 139; Michaela Czech, *Frauen und Sport im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Berlin, 1994).

⁶⁴ I.G. Chudinov (ed.), *Osnovnye postanovleniia*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ N.A. Semashko, *Puti sovetskoi fizkul'tury* (Moscow, 1926), p. 14, quoted in Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, p. 96.

⁶⁶ Frances L. Bernstein, "'What Everyone Should Know About Sex": Gender, Sexual Enlightenment, and the Politics of Health in Revolutionary Russia, 1918–1931' (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1998), pp. 292–3.

⁶⁷ Rowley, 'Sport in the Service of the State', p. 1333; A.M. Landar, 'Fizicheskaia kul'tura—sostavnaia chast' kul'turnoi revoliutsii na Ukraine', *Teoriia i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury*, 12 (1972), p. 13.

beauty and efficiency and the worth of one's own race; and leadership qualities of courage and self-discipline.⁶⁸ Nazi educational literature stressed the inculcation of nationalist and racial feeling, strength and team feeling (*Mannschaft*), defined as unifying a group under a common goal.⁶⁹

Physical training in both countries became an increasingly central part of everyday life, with exercises occurring in schools, at the workplace, and in groups such as the Hitler Youth and the Komsomol. Both regimes embraced mass sport and urged people of all ages to participate. Merit badges were awarded to those who passed a series of required tests in various sports. In Germany the major ones, awarded in gold, silver and bronze, were the Storm Troopers (SA) *Sportabzeichen* (Sports Badge), the *Deutsches Reichsabzeichen für Leibesübungen* (German Reich Badge), awarded for maintaining high levels of physical fitness for twelve months, and the *Leistungsabzeichen* of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls. In the USSR the primary sport badge was the *Gotov k trudu i oborone* (Ready for Labour and Defence, or GTO). The badges were popular in both countries, and millions sought to win the prized reward; three million Germans, for example, were awarded the SA sport badge.⁷⁰ Achievement of the GTO badge meant passing a test in fifteen areas, including running, swimming, gymnastics, skiing, shooting, grenade-throwing and knowledge of history.⁷¹ Soviet figures—almost certainly considerably inflated, as local organizations had reasons to fake the achievement of targets set by the centre—claimed that 7.3 million Soviet citizens had achieved one of the three GTO levels by mid-1939.⁷²

The two dictatorships frequently mocked the liberal democracies' conception that sport should remain apolitical and could be a means of personal fulfillment and entertainment. In Western European democracies and the United States, the state promoted physical education and sport partly to instill valued character traits, socialization and military preparation, but also as a way for individuals to achieve personal satisfaction.⁷³ The popular US journal *Physical Culture*, for example, was subtitled 'The Personal Problem Magazine', and was filled with self-help schemes that promised improved fitness as an avenue to business success and increased sexual prowess.

⁶⁸ *Richtlinien für die Leibeserziehung in Jungenschulen* (Berlin, 1937), pp. 7–8, reprinted in Hajo Bernett, *Nationalsozialistische Leibeserziehung. Eine Dokumentation ihrer Theorie und Organisation* (Schorndorf bei Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 110–1; translated in George L. Mosse (ed.), *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York, 1966), pp. 281–2.

⁶⁹ Bernett, *Nationalsozialistische Leibeserziehung*, pp. 54, 70.

⁷⁰ Hau, 'Sports in the Human Economy', p. 409.

⁷¹ *Fizkul'tura i sport v SSSR*, p. 33; Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, p. 129.

⁷² *Fizkul'tura i sport v SSSR*, p. 18. Sheila Fitzpatrick cites sport as one of the fixtures in the 'Potemkin world' that Soviet authorities constructed around rural life, with fictitious statistics about the number of sport circles and *fizkul'turniks* on collective farms. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (New York, 1996), pp. 265–6.

⁷³ Donald Mrozek has argued that physical education in the United States in the nineteenth century had relied on sport's social utility for legitimation, but the emphasis on self-discipline and social obligation yielded in the 1920s and 1930s to a new ethic of personal gratification. Under the influence of the consumer society, the body became a vehicle for pleasure and self-fulfillment. 'From National Health to Personal Fulfillment, 1890–1940', in Kathryn Grover (ed.), *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and the Body, 1830–1940* (Amherst, 1989), pp. 18–46.

'It lies with you', its publisher wrote, 'whether you shall be a strong virile animal ... or a miserable little crawling worm'.⁷⁴

For the Nazi and Soviet regimes, the utility of physical exercise to the state made its practice a duty for its citizens. In Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, the nation required its citizens to become fit. Sport and physical education were to be pursued not for individual self-improvement, but as the *sine qua non* of national power. 'As a member of your *Volk*, you must be healthy and strong', one Nazi pedagogue declared in 1928. 'This is your highest responsibility—not just your personal affair, but something that you owe your people'.⁷⁵ After Hitler came to power, *Reichssportführer* Hans von Tschammer und Osten announced, 'the age of individualism in sport is over'. The health and physical ability of the individual were important only insofar as they contributed to the total strength of the *Volk*. Physical education, he said, no longer existed 'to promote the welfare of the individual', but rather was a 'part of the life of the *Volk*'.⁷⁶ In a similar vein, the Nazi sport theorist Bruno Malitz wrote, 'National Socialism regards sport as a duty of the people, just as military service was a duty of the people'.⁷⁷ The Soviet sports council chairman, I.I. Kharchenko, declared that 'physical culture here serves general state interests'.⁷⁸ In 1940 *Pravda* claimed that 'Soviet people ... regard physical exercise not as an amusement but as a patriotic duty'.⁷⁹

For Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, physical culture's utility to the state was tied to its role in military preparation. Connecting physical education with premilitary training was not unique to the dictatorships; it was, on the contrary, a major reason for the rise in physical education and sport programmes around the world after the First World War.⁸⁰ The connection between physical education and military preparation in Germany and the Soviet Union, however, grew so close that distinctions between the two were effectively elided. As one Soviet slogan declared, 'the *fizkul'turnik* is a future soldier'.⁸¹ The centrepiece of the Soviet physical education programme, the Ready for Labour and Defence badge, initially placed labour ahead of defence, but by 1940, a new, more

⁷⁴ See Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society* (New York, 1986), pp. 249–50. The 'personal problem' subtitle was added in December 1933; the statement about worms is from 1914.

⁷⁵ E. Spranger, 'Die Persönlichkeit des Turnlehrers', *Leibeserziehung und Sport in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Weinheim, 1963), pp. 96–101, cited in Winfried Joch, 'Sport und Leibesübungen im Dritten Reich', in Horst Ueberhorst (ed.), *Geschichte der Leibesübungen*, vol. 3.2 (Berlin, 1981), p. 710.

⁷⁶ Hans von Tschammer und Osten, 'Leibeserziehung bedeutet Erziehung des gesamtten Menschen von Leibe aus', *Leibesübungen und körperliche Erziehung*, 10/11 (1933), p. 218.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Joch, 'Sport und Leibeserziehung', p. 706. For an extended discussion of Nazi theories of 'political physical education', see Winfried Joch, *Politische Leibeserziehung. Voraussetzungen—Begründungszusammenhang—Dokumentation* (Bern, 1976).

⁷⁸ Speech to meeting of Moscow physical culture *aktiv*, 26 June 1936, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, f. 7576, op. 1, d. 246, l. 2.

⁷⁹ 'Zimnii sportivnyi sezon', *Pravda*, 4 Dec. 1940, p. 1.

⁸⁰ See Barbara Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), p. 71. On militarization in general, see Michael Geyer, 'The Militarization of Europe, 1914–1945', in John R. Gillis (ed.), *The Militarization of the Western World* (New Brunswick, 1989), pp. 65–102.

⁸¹ 1930–32 teapot by N. Pashinskaia, in *Agitatsia za schast'e: Sovetskoe iskusstvo stalinskoi epokhi* (Dusseldorf and Bremen, 1994), p. 190.

militarized GTO system was introduced in which defence assumed the leading role. Describing students from the Stalin Institute of Physical Culture in 1938, *Izvestiia* remarked: 'If tomorrow there should be war ... the students will throw off their sporting outfits ... There will no longer be gymnasts, soccer players, hockey players. In their place will be tank crews, pilots, snipers and sailors'.⁸² The emphasis on sport and physical education as premilitary training pervades Nazi writing on the topic. While the Nazis celebrated offensive war as man's noblest pursuit, however, Soviet rhetoric portrayed militarization as a defensive measure to protect the country against external aggression.⁸³

The two regimes focused attention on individual bodies primarily as constituent elements of what the Nazis called the *Völkskörper*—the collective body of the nation. This 'collective body' was an image of central importance for both Nazis and Soviets. Already in the nineteenth century it had become common in Europe to represent nations as organic, physical bodies, susceptible to degeneration from within and battling each other for survival on the outside.⁸⁴ The Nazi and Soviet regimes took this emphasis to extremes. To protect the healthy body of the *Völk*, 'incurables' had to be separated from the rest of the population. Both regimes undertook increasingly radical measures against what the Nazis called *Gemeinschaftsfremde* (community aliens) and the Soviets referred to as 'anti-Soviet elements', who were targeted for mass repression, including imprisonment and death.⁸⁵

Physical culture represented the flip side of mass repression: it was a means of strengthening and unifying the healthy elements of the *Völk* or *narod*. Mass athletic demonstrations became the predominant means of visually representing the *Völkskörper*. In Germany the biggest such event was the physical culture celebration that took up one day during the annual Nuremberg party rallies.⁸⁶ The annual physical culture parades inaugurated in Moscow in 1931 involved thousands of participants exercising in unison and included such extravagant displays as

squads [moving] down the street, boxing in pairs as they parade; squads [carrying] a high trapeze upon which performers are doing tricks; trucks [pulling] a huge swimming-tank, in which swimmers race; ... even a bike-race on an oval track mounted on a couple of trucks.⁸⁷

These kinds of mass demonstrations were repeated on smaller scales at local levels many times throughout the year.

⁸² *Izvestiia*, 26 July 1938, quoted in Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York, 1993), p. 44.

⁸³ See, for example, the description of the purpose of the GTO badge as creating 'patriots ... prepared ... to defend their country from attack by enemies'. *Fizkul'tura i sport v SSSR*, p. 18.

⁸⁴ David Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton, 1994); Weiner, 'Introduction'.

⁸⁵ See Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1989), pp. 102–21; translated into English as 'The Genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science' in *Nazism and German Society, 1933–1945*, ed. David F. Crew (London, 1994), pp. 274–99; Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941* (Washington, D.C., Baltimore, 2009).

⁸⁶ On Nazi sport demonstrations, see Hartmut E. Lissinna, *Nationale Sportfeste im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Mannheim, 1997).

⁸⁷ 'The Candid Cameraman', *Esquire* (June 1937), p. 129.

Is there any evidence that these mass displays, and Nazi and Soviet physical education programmes in general, affected participants in the ways their proponents claimed and hoped? In attempting to use physical education to reshape minds as well as bodies, the two regimes were part of a long tradition. All societies practise forms of bodily discipline that derive from varying perceptions and interpretations of the human body. The way people 'learn' their bodies is critically important because it shapes the way people regard both the self and the outside world. The way we experience our bodies, in the words of sociologist Mark Johnson, 'directly influences what and how things can be meaningful for us, the ways in which these meanings can be developed and articulated, the ways we are able to comprehend and reason about our experience, and the actions we take'.⁸⁸ Bodily discipline therefore forms a key element of all socialization processes.⁸⁹

At least since the nineteenth century Europeans and North Americans had advocated physical education and sport in part for moral and character-building effects. Advocates of 'modern' physical recreation promised that it would promote a wide range of values, including courage, self-discipline, willpower, manliness and sociability. One recent textbook describes the aims of sport in mid-Victorian England in terms that could just as easily apply to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union: sport 'was often viewed as character-building in that the individual would subsume self-interest under that of the team, obey the orders of the captain without question, and develop the virtues of courage, manliness and *esprit de corps*'.⁹⁰ Nineteenth-century British adherents of 'muscular Christianity' believed that the physical exercise could produce Christian morality. A nineteenth-century US reformer argued that gymnastics could increase the intelligence of 'naturally stupid' people.⁹¹ Non-Western proponents of modernizing physical education programmes also routinely cited connections between physical education and moral uplift in their societies. Early twentieth century *tiyu* ('body cultivation') in China was about the development of 'a set of lived and played moral teachings designed to shape a new self-conscious, self-disciplining citizen'.⁹² But from London to New York to Beijing, proponents assumed rather than demonstrated specific mental and moral effects.

⁸⁸ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago, 1987). See also Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (eds), *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1987), p. vii.

⁸⁹ As Pierre Bourdieu argues, cultural and social values are 'given body, *made* body', by what he calls 'the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy'. According to Bourdieu, injunctions about apparently innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners, such as 'sit up straight' and 'don't hold your knife in your left hand', instill into the body an entire cosmology of ideas about social and political order. Each 'technique of the body' acts to recall an entire system of social and political commands. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 69. See also Pierre Bourdieu, 'Program for a Sociology of Sport', in Sin-pyo Kang et al. (eds), *The Olympics and East/West and South/North Cultural Exchange: The Papers of the First International Conference on the Olympics and East/West and South/North Cultural Exchange in the World System* ([Seoul]: Institute for Ethnological Studies, Hanyang University, [1987]), pp. 69–83. Bourdieu is the most prominent sociologist to have devoted considerable attention to the sociology of sport. The bulk of his contribution to this field centres on the role of sport in the formation of class *habitus* (see, for example, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, pp. 208–23). This work is most relevant to contemporary capitalist societies and cannot easily be applied to Communist and fascist societies that aimed (at least in principle) to eradicate class differences.

⁹⁰ 'Character Building', in Timothy Chandler, Mike Cronin and Wray Vramplew, *Sport and Physical Education: The Key Concepts* (2d edn, London, 2002), p. 36.

⁹¹ Green, *Fit for America*, p. 183.

⁹² Andrew Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley, 2004), p. 16.

Both the Nazi and the Soviet dictatorships pursued the science of sport and physical education, setting up scientific institutes to monitor and measure the responses of the body to physical training. Soviet physiologists knew, for example, that rhythmic exercise had specific effects on breathing and heartrate.⁹³ German sport scientists developed measures to help choose talented young athletes for elite training.⁹⁴ There was, however, no comparably rigorous or scientific effort to study the repercussions of physical training on lasting character development or individual perceptions of social values. As historian Michael Hau has shown for Weimar Germany, what sport psychologists could measure—reaction times, dexterity, visual abilities, memory—were far removed from the more grandiose and sweeping claims that scientists and physical educationists were making about willpower, discipline and other characteristics.⁹⁵ In the 1930s the proliferating handbooks and journals on *Teoriia i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury* (Theory and Practice of Physical Culture) or *Politische Leibeserziehung* (Political Physical Education) published long descriptions of sports, gymnastics and exercises that should be promoted, alongside long lists of the character traits such activities would inculcate, but there was never any evidence that the two lists had any relationship to each other except in the wishful thinking of their authors.

Neither Nazi nor Soviet physical educators had the tools to determine the specific psychological effects any given activity or configuration of activities would produce.⁹⁶ In the 1930s, the scientific study of sport psychology was just beginning; it consisted of little more than anecdotal reports that, in the words of one US psychologist, told ‘interesting stories about psychological problems’.⁹⁷ Writing in 1930, US physical educator C.H. McCloy lamented that ‘physical educators have for years claimed to be builders of character’ without evidence to support the claim.⁹⁸ McCloy began the first rigorous efforts to measure behaviour changes due to physical exercise, but such efforts remained rudimentary until the 1990s, when researchers developed robust techniques to demonstrate changes in moral attitudes and behaviours. Connections between physical recreation and socialization were similarly unverifiable, as one 1975 study concluded.⁹⁹

Different forms of physical exercise can have very different psychological effects on participants.¹⁰⁰ Even today, however, detailed knowledge of precisely how physical

⁹³ V.V. Gorinevskii, *Kul'tura tela* (Moscow, 1927), pp. 220–1.

⁹⁴ Arnd Krüger, ‘The Role of Sport in German International Politics, 1918–1945’, in Pierre Arnaud and Jim Riordan (eds), *Sport and International Politics: The Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport* (New York, 1998), p. 83.

⁹⁵ Hau, ‘Sports in the Human Economy’, pp. 400–6.

⁹⁶ Hajo Bernett offered similar objections to arguments about control of the mind through the body in his critique of Müllner: ‘“Faschisierung des Körpers”—eine Fiktion’, *Spektrum der Sportwissenschaften: Zeitschrift der österreichischen sportwissenschaftlichen gesellschaft*, 5, 1 (1993), pp. 68–75.

⁹⁷ Coleman R. Griffith, quoted in Diane L. Gill and Lavon Williams (eds), *Psychological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise* (3d edn, Champaign, Ill., 2008), p. 14.

⁹⁸ C. H. McCloy, ‘Character Building Through Physical Education’, *Research Quarterly*, 1, 3 (1930), p. 41.

⁹⁹ C. L. Stevenson, ‘Socialization Effects of Participation in Sport: A Critical Review of the Research’, *Research Quarterly*, 46 (1975), p. 299, quoted in Maureen R. Weiss and Diane L. Gill, ‘What Goes Around Comes Around: Re-emerging Themes in Sport and Exercise Psychology’, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 76, 2 Supplement (2005), S-75.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Bonnie Berger and David R. Owen, ‘Stress Reduction and Mood Enhancement in Four Exercise Modes: Swimming, Body Conditioning, Hatha Yoga, and Fencing’, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 59, 2 (1988), pp. 148–59; David Shapiro et al., ‘Yoga as a Complementary Treatment of Depression: Effects of Traits and Moods on Treatment Outcome’, *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 4 (2007), pp. 493–502.

exercise affects psychological states is lacking, and the study of such issues was in its infancy in the 1930s. Nazi and Soviet physical educators, then, did not choose exercise regimes based on evidence that particular exercises produced particular mental outcomes, such as greater discipline. Indeed, they often chose the same sports and exercises: despite sharp ideological contrasts, in content, Nazi and Soviet physical education and sport were more alike than not.

In physical education as in other realms of political, cultural, and economic life, 'totalitarian' aims ran into opposition.¹⁰¹ In the Soviet case in particular, aspirations considerably outran reality. Physical education in schools and *fizkul'tura* programmes in general were dogged by shortages of facilities, resources and personnel. Internal correspondence reveals persistent frustration with slow and shoddy construction of facilities, lack of equipment, internal dissension, problems such as malnutrition, and failures to carry out directives.¹⁰² The head of the Physical Culture Committee in 1938 privately lamented that 80% of central directives regarding promotion of the GTO badge were ignored. Figures for the numbers of participants in physical training programmes were routinely inflated.¹⁰³ Soviet *fizkul'tura* failed to stamp out 'bourgeois' vices such as drinking and gambling. Unapproved forms of recreation such as the foxtrot gained a foothold among urban youth.¹⁰⁴ By the late 1930s Soviet authorities were routinely criticizing athletes—soccer players in particular—for 'hooliganism' and 'anti-Soviet behaviour'.¹⁰⁵ One secret police report in 1940 noted that workers were describing sport as an acronym for '*sovetskoe pravitel'stvo okruzheno rabochikh tiur'mami*' ('Soviet government is surrounded by workers' prisons').¹⁰⁶ The inherently unpredictable outcome of sports events made them a particularly problematic medium for the dictatorships. Historian Robert Edelman concludes that 'sport was one of the relatively free places in Soviet life', a sphere in which the choice of teams and heroes offered a means of resistance.¹⁰⁷

Nazi *politische Leibeserziehung* met similar resistance. One Hitler Youth member recalled that military drills were unpopular and accounted for the loss of many members 'who

¹⁰¹ On the question of the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda, see Ian Kershaw, 'How Effective Was Nazi Propaganda?' in David Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations* (London, 1983), pp. 180–204. In Soviet history an early emphasis on the effectiveness of Soviet propaganda (see, for example, Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*, New York, 1985) has given way to more scepticism (see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941*, Cambridge, 1997).

¹⁰² See, for example, the report of E. Knopova to Kosarev, September 1937, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), Moscow, f 1-m, op. 23, d. 1268, ll. 17–20. Published reports also frequently alluded to shortcomings. See, for example, *Fizkul'tura i sport v SSSR*, p. 6. On deficiencies in Soviet schools, see 'Na temu dni', *Pravda* (20 March 1940), p. 2; and 'Protiv teplichnosti, za nastoiashchuiu sovetskuiu fizkul'turu', *Pravda* (9 July 1940), p. 6. See also Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, p. 115.

¹⁰³ Stenogram of meeting of *kollegii* of All-Union Physical Culture Committee, 9 August 1938, GARF f. 7576 op. 1 d. 367 l. 18. On Potemkinism in Soviet auto clubs, described as 'fragile entities, functioning with a good deal of smoke and mirrors, not to mention internal backbiting and mutual denunciation', see Lewis Siegelbaum, 'Soviet Car Rallies of the 1920s and 1930s and the Road to Socialism', *Slavic Review*, 64 (2005), p. 269.

¹⁰⁴ Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁵ Keys, *Globalizing Sport*, pp. 175–6.

¹⁰⁶ Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, p. 47. Some Soviet workers also felt that the Hitler Youth was superior to the Komsomol because the latter focused too much on intellectual rather than physical education (p. 97).

¹⁰⁷ Robert Edelman, 'A Small Way of Saying "No": Moscow Working Men, Spartak Soccer, and the Communist Party, 1900–1945', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 1441–74.

did not like being bossed around'.¹⁰⁸ Far from cultivating unthinking obedience, incessant military drills in the Hitler Youth made some participants long to 'be free and to go where one wants, with whom one wants, and to wear what one wants'. Exercises, they found, were no longer fun.¹⁰⁹ An innovative recent study of socialization in sports clubs argues, on the basis of close examination of 294 letters written by soldiers at the front to their former gymnastics teacher, that sports clubs succeeded in socializing their members to a specifically Nazi idea of sport, one tied to militarist values.¹¹⁰ While intriguing, the connections between the ideas expressed in the letters and earlier physical training are not convincingly established. In particular, the evidence cannot adequately isolate the socialization received in sport clubs, and in particular in sport clubs through the practice of sport, from the socialization received in the broader society.¹¹¹

In drawing conclusions about the functions of Nazi and Soviet physical education and sport, it is clear that these regimes aspired to reach into their subjects' innermost beings through physical exercises for the purpose of subordinating the individual to the collective, and in particular to the militaristic aims of the state. Their achievements, however, are uncertain. As John Toews has phrased it, 'meanings are never simply inscribed on the minds and bodies of those to whom they are directed or on whom they are 'imposed' but are always reinscribed in the act of reception'.¹¹² Physical education and sport were important elements of these regimes' efforts to reshape their societies and played a role in gaining and maintaining popular support. But claims that physical exercise could be used with precision to reshape not only the human body but human nature as well should be treated with scepticism.

Abstract

Strategies of persuasion used by the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships to shape new subjects were not limited to those well-known forms—film, literature, architecture, political posters—that aimed directly at the mind. These regimes also targeted the body as a means of reaching the mind, attempting to use physical education to enforce patterns of thinking and to inculcate psychological characteristics that promoted the state's agenda. This was an aim the two regimes shared with modern states more generally, in an era when physical education came to be seen in much of the world as essential to the health and strength of the nation and as an important means of 'character-building'. This article argues that key similarities, notably the combination of mass displays, tight state control, and dedication to state goals at the expense of the individual, gave Nazi and Soviet physical education programmes a unique character, despite important differences between the two. As was true in liberal democracies, though, the regimes' claims to be inculcating specific psychological traits through physical education and sport programmes vastly outstripped the evidence.

Keywords: physical education, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union, comparative history, social control

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¹⁰⁸ Gerhard Both, *Without Hindsight: Reminiscences of a German Naval Ensign* (Janus Publishing, 1999), p. 27. Both recalls that physical training was emphasized over political indoctrination in a ratio of about 20 to 1 (p. 26).

¹⁰⁹ *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1938* (Frankfurt/Main, 1980), p. 1391.

¹¹⁰ Cachay et al., 'Echte Sportler', pp. 20, 361.

¹¹¹ For a thoughtful critique of the book's conclusions, see Michael Krüger's review in *Sportwissenschaft*, 32 (2002), pp. 339–44.

¹¹² John E. Toews, 'Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience', *American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), p. 884.