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BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Physical Culture and the New Soviet Person

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Executive summary

Early Soviet leaders saw physical culture as an essential element in the construction of socialism and the creation of the New Soviet Person. Between 1917 and 1941 they instituted widespread programs to promote bodily health and fitness. A healthy and fit population represented an important resource in an age of large-scale industrial manufacturing and mass warfare. In addition, Soviet officials saw physical culture as something that would create harmonious individuals upon which a collective, socialist society could be built.

Once the Soviet government included physical culture as part of its revolutionary project to remake individuals and society, it launched a myriad of studies and programs focused on bodily health. It first compiled statistics on the population's level of physical fitness. The categories in which this statistical knowledge was assembled in turn influenced Soviet officials' perceptions of their tasks and the programs they initiated. Another influence on Soviet programs were physical culture initiatives in other countries. The physical culture movement was by no means limited to the Soviet Union, and by the 1930s the Soviet government closely monitored and often imitated physical fitness efforts in other countries. It was with the rising international tensions of the late 1930s that Soviet physical culture assumed its extreme militaristic character. This paper explores the motivations behind the physical culture movement, and also examines the forms the movement took.

In October 1920, the Soviet government issued a decree entitled “On the physical upbringing of the juvenile population,” which stated, “it is essential for the laboring population to have physical and mental strengths in order to move forward on the path of socialist construction.” The decree called for physical culture activities in all schools, for extra-curricular athletic programs (including those for preschool children), and for the overall expansion of physical culture in everyday life.¹ Soviet leaders saw physical culture as an essential element in the construction of socialism and the creation of the New Soviet Person. Between 1917 and 1941 they instituted widespread programs to promote bodily health and fitness. A healthy and fit population represented an important resource in an age of large-scale industrial manufacturing and mass warfare. Physical exercise ensured the labor capacity and military preparedness of Soviet citizens.

Physical culture also served the Soviet government’s larger aspiration to restore social harmony and remake humankind. Consider a 1920 Commissariat of Health report entitled, “The Tasks of Physical Culture.” The report stressed the necessity of physical culture both “to make the population healthy” and “to create the harmonious and complete individual (*garmonichnaia i tselostnaia lichnost’*), from which one can expect qualities of the most benefit for the common good.”² Soviet officials saw physical culture as something that would create harmonious individuals upon which a collective, socialist society could be built.

State concern with the population’s health and physical capacity dated from the seventeenth century, and it grew in both urgency and ambition with the rise of modern medicine in the nineteenth century. From this perspective, Soviet physical culture may be considered part of what Foucault termed “anatomy-politics” – government and expert intervention to improve people’s bodily health for the sake of economic and political power. Indeed, as the above quotations indicate, Soviet leaders saw physical culture as a means to ensure the health and maximize the labor potential of the population. These instrumentalist state concerns seemed to contradict the more idealistic goal of creating harmonious and complete individuals. But according to Soviet ideology, individuals achieved personal fulfillment only

by contributing to the collective task of building socialism. Physical culture offered a means both to prepare Soviet citizens physically for this contribution and to fashion them into the New Soviet Persons who would actuate socialist society.

In addition to discussing the motivations behind the physical culture movement, I will also examine the forms the movement took. Once the Soviet government included physical culture as part of its revolutionary project to remake individuals and society, it launched a myriad of studies and programs focused on bodily health. It first compiled statistics on the population's level of physical fitness – a process that entailed government access to measure and categorize people's bodies. The categories in which this statistical knowledge was assembled in turn influenced Soviet officials' perceptions of their tasks and the programs they initiated. Another influence on Soviet programs were physical culture initiatives in other countries. The physical culture movement was by no means limited to the Soviet Union, and by the 1930s the Soviet government closely monitored and often imitated physical fitness efforts in other countries. It was with the rising international tensions of the late 1930s that Soviet physical culture assumed its extreme militaristic character.

Anatomo-politics and social harmony

According to Foucault, a new form of power over life emerged in the seventeenth century, one “centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces.”³ This “anatomo-politics of the human body” stemmed in part from cameralist thought and the realization that economic power depended upon the size and labor capabilities of the population. By the nineteenth century, developments in social science and modern medicine had magnified the ambitions of state officials, social reformers, and medical personnel alike in their quest to solve social problems and ensure the health and productive capacity of the population. Advancements in physiology and epidemiology, in particular, fueled a sense that state health programs could radically reduce disease and disability and hence guarantee the population's ability to work.

Much of nineteenth-century European social thought focused on questions surrounding labor, and Marxism was no exception. Marxist ideology glorified labor as an activity that, when not alienated and exploited as under capitalism, afforded pleasure and fulfillment. Soviet Marxism likewise placed special emphasis on labor not only as a social obligation but also as a means to personal fulfillment, and Soviet officials saw physical culture as a way to prepare people for labor. The commissar of Health, Nikolai Semashko, called physical culture “one of the principal links to labor and to work ability.”⁴ Official reports touted physical culture as a means to teach peasants to work rationally and effectively.⁵ One physical culture expert, K. Mechonoshin, argued that exercise would instill in youth an appreciation of labor’s importance and would increase work efficiency.⁶ Studies on labor productivity showed that workers who did physical exercises at the start of the workday and during breaks were more productive than workers who did not.⁷ Labor hero Aleksei Stakhanov endorsed physical culture as something that “disciplines people, and instills in them new strengths and enthusiasm (*bodrost*’).”⁸

Beyond the practical aim of increasing the population’s labor capacity, physical culture offered a means to transform people’s attitude toward work. New fields of labor gymnastics and labor sports were developed by Soviet physical culture specialists in the 1920s.⁹ Soviet physical culture pageants sometimes combined labor and sports images in an allusion to Marx’s prophesy that work would become pleasurable.¹⁰ Of course Marx’s vision of unalienated labor was based primarily upon the fact that workers would reap the benefits of their own work. But it also relied upon a notion of labor as voluntary, recreational and fulfilling. By portraying physical labor as akin to recreational exercise, Soviet authorities sought to instill a new attitude toward work.¹¹

The renowned Soviet theater director Vsevolod Meierhold applied these ideas about labor in his techniques to train actors. In a 1922 lecture entitled “The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics,” Meierhold argued that the actor “will be working in a society where labor is no longer regarded as a curse but as a joyful, vital necessity.” Under socialism, workers would no longer avoid labor, as long as they could be revitalized to overcome fatigue. “Under ideal conditions,” according to Meierhold, “a rest

of as little as ten minutes is capable of completely restoring a man's energy. Work should be made easy, congenial and uninterrupted." Meierhold extolled skilled workers for their rhythm, stability, and absence of superfluous movements, and declared that "the spectacle of a man working efficiently affords positive pleasure."¹²

In order to prepare workers and actors alike for continuous, efficient, and aesthetic labor, Meierhold prescribed the physical perfection of the body. He stated that "the actor must train his material (the body), so that it is capable of executing instantaneously those tasks which are dictated externally." In response to his own question, "How do we set about molding the new actor?" Meierhold replied, "If we place him in an environment in which gymnastics and all forms of sport are both available and compulsory, we shall achieve the new person who is capable of any form of labor."¹³

Ideas about bodily perfection were also expressed in Soviet poster art. For aesthetic as well as utilitarian reasons, Soviet authorities produced posters that projected images of well-proportioned, vigorous, muscular bodies.¹⁴ The Soviet ideal of the perfect body closely resembled fascist aesthetics of a hard, sculpted body, which was desexualized and pure. In Soviet sculpture and posters the body was generally clothed, while Nazi sculpture, following a neoclassical model, presented the body nude.¹⁵ Soviet and Nazi representations of the body also differed in their portrayal of motion. In contrast to Nazi statues of taut and rigidly controlled bodies, Soviet statues and posters presented bodies in motion -- especially the bodies of workers building socialism.¹⁶ Despite these differences, Soviet and Nazi representations of the body shared an emphasis on youth, fitness, and purity.

The role of physical fitness in the tasks of bodily perfection and labor efficiency was also apparent in the image of the human-machine hybrid. The machine was perhaps the most salient symbol of progress and perfectibility, and for some it became a model for human transformation as well.¹⁷ A number of nineteenth-century European thinkers argued that the body, like the machine, was a motor that converted energy into mechanical work. They believed that society should conserve, deploy, and expand the energies of the laboring human body, and harmonize the movements of the body with those of the

machine. By the 1890s “the science of work” had emerged as a field, and in the twentieth century this scientific approach to the laboring body pervaded parliamentary debates, sociological treatises, liberal reform programs, and socialist tracts.¹⁸

Several Soviet leaders adopted the ideal of human beings as machines, whose labor would be deployed rationally in order to maximize the productivity of society as a whole. In 1923, Bukharin urged the creation of “qualified, especially disciplined, living labor machines.”¹⁹ Aleksei Gastev, the leading Soviet Taylorist, developed even more extensive ideas on human automation. His Central Institute of Labor in Moscow studied the physiological aspects of labor and trained workers to perform more efficiently. Gastev’s ultimate goal was the symbiosis of man and machine, in which workers would adopt the rhythm and efficiency of factory equipment and become robot-like producers with perfectly disciplined minds and bodies.²⁰

Physical fitness and bodily perfection were also linked to the transformation of consciousness, and had been since before the Revolution. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the social critic Vissarion Belinsky had written that “the development of mental capacity corresponds to that of the health and strength of the body,” and he advocated gymnastics and Russian folk games to develop “will power, initiative and creativity,” as well as “a harmonious personality.”²¹ Nikolai Chernyshevsky, an admirer of Belinsky, emphasized physical fitness in characterizing Rakhmetov, the prototypical new man of his novel, *What is to be Done?* Rakhmetov prepares himself for the revolution with daily gymnastics, heavy physical labor, a diet of raw beef, and complete celibacy and sobriety.²² Rakhmetov served as the archetype for an entire generation of Russian revolutionaries, and embodied the ideal of physical conditioning to develop the mental strength and willpower to create a new world.

Following the Revolution, Soviet leaders continued to stress the transformation of both the body and the mind in the creation of the new person. In 1924 Trotsky looked forward to a time in the near future when “the human species... will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-

physical training.... Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical."²³ Semashko, in less visionary terms, also stressed physical culture's capacity to strengthen the bodily organism, prevent disease, and develop well-rounded citizens.²⁴ And fundamental to Meierhold's biomechanical method of training actors was his belief that "all psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes."²⁵

The creation of the new person, with a healthy body and pure mind, was intimately connected with the creation of the perfect society, one made up of harmonious individuals. And Soviet officials saw physical culture as a means to promote not only mental and physical fitness, but social harmony as well. A 1919 report on children's well-being explained that a healthy body also meant a "healthy spirit (*dukh*)," and it went on to link a proper physical upbringing with "the harmonious development of the individual (*lichnost'*)."²⁶ In 1920 the Commissariat of Health admitted that "medicine, with all its scientific discoveries, is not in a position to create the new individual." It went on to argue that of all means available ("new social conditions, cultural enlightenment work, a new upbringing, sanitary-hygiene measures"), that physical culture "has nearly the most important place" in creating "an individual with the harmonious development of mental and bodily strengths."²⁷

The concern for shaping a harmonious society had many antecedents in European thought. A variety of nineteenth and twentieth century intellectuals, including Marx, Wagner, and Nietzsche, abhorred the alienation of the modern world and sought to overcome its fragmentation.²⁸ To them, industrialization and urbanization had destroyed the organic unity and natural rhythms of (premodern) society. In place of traditional life, rural purity, and social cooperation, they saw urban upheaval, filthy slums, and class antagonisms. Some theorists and policymakers prescribed a return to the (mythical) past; through rural imagery, invented traditions, and folklore, they sought to recreate the organic unity of the premodern era.

But others sought new, distinctly modern and rational ways to surmount the alienation of the modern world. The ambition to restore social harmony was behind the work of a range of philosophers, artists, architects, city planners, and social reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These people conceived of techniques to transform and integrate a modern world that seemed fragmented and out of sync. In Russia, both before and after the Revolution, a number of thinkers sought ways to overcome social fragmentation and alienation. Prerevolutionary theater activists, Constructivist architects, and Soviet efficiency experts alike emphasized rhythm as a way to restore harmony to people's lives and to society.²⁹ Synchronization of movement, whether in the theater, apartment complex, or factory, offered a means to end social friction, and to recreate the unity and harmony lost by the modern world.

State-sponsored physical culture and sports programs in particular emphasized rhythm and group activities for the same reason. Team sports promoted cooperation and solidarity; group gymnastics in particular synchronized the movements of participants and seemed to unify people in body and spirit. Gymnastics programs in many countries had national unity as their explicit goal. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn founded the German gymnastics movement in order to promote German unification.³⁰ The gymnastics movement in nineteenth-century Germany also combined group exercises with walks in the countryside to recapture the wholeness and purity of rural life and to overcome the alienation and decadence of the city.³¹

Like the German *Turnen* societies, the Czech *Sokol*, and the Scandinavian gymnastics movements of the nineteenth century, Russian gymnastics were introduced to enhance national solidarity. The first Russian gymnastics club was founded following defeat in the Crimean War, and in 1874 Petr Lesgaft, the "father" of Russian gymnastics, instituted a Prussian model of gymnastics training into the Russian military. Also in the 1870s official school gymnastics manuals were published; these prescribed marching in formation and other exercises to teach unity and discipline.³²

In a similar way, Soviet physical culture emphasized rhythm, discipline, and unity. Rhythmic gymnastics, performed in large groups with synchronized movements, received special attention in Soviet schools and physical culture parades. Team sports also promoted not only healthy individuals but collective activity, cooperation, and unity. Soviet leaders were explicit about the goals of unity and political mobilization to be accomplished through physical culture. A Communist Party resolution in 1925 stated:

Physical culture must be considered not simply from the standpoint of public health and physical education... It should also be seen as a method of educating the masses (inasmuch as it develops will power and builds up team work, endurance, resourcefulness and other valuable qualities). It must be regarded, moreover, as a means of rallying the bulk of the workers and peasants to the various Party, Soviet and trade union organizations, through which they can be drawn into social and political activity.³³

Physical culture, then, was seen as a means to accomplish social unity and political mobilization.

Physical culture was also presented as a bulwark against the decadence of modern life. A 1926 Komsomol resolution stressed physical culture as a means to divert young people from the evil influences of alcohol and prostitution.³⁴ Soviet officials throughout the 1920s expressed enormous concern that the energy of youth was being dissipated in sexual libertinism.³⁵ Sports and exercise seemed to be a more healthy outlet for youthful energy. One Soviet commentator, after observing sporting exercises, contrasted their "freshness, vibrancy, and healthy strength," to the decadence of "Americanized dances."³⁶ Soviet officials sought to channel the sexual energy of youth toward the tasks of socialist construction. In this discourse, physical culture was presented as pure, healthy, and collective, while sex was described as impure, decadent, and selfish.

Physical culture, then, served multiple functions. It offered a means to ensure the health and labor capability of the population. It also promoted labor efficiency and, according to some, could transform work into a recreational, fulfilling, and joyous enterprise. Physical culture also satisfied the aestheticizing impulse inherent in the ambition to create the New Soviet Person. Exercise would result in pure, muscular, healthy bodies, and would instill a sense of rhythm and harmony. Many believed that

physical exercise would develop mental as well as physical strength, and would cultivate harmonious individuals that would contribute to the building of a harmonious society. Group gymnastics received particular attention as a sport that synchronized the movements of individuals and instilled collective spirit and social unity.

Statistical knowledge and physical culture programs

It is impossible to comprehend either the concerns about physical fitness or the programs implemented to improve it without considering the bodies of knowledge generated by social scientists and governmental officials. Once physical development became part of the project of creating the new person and new society, Soviet officials amassed data on the current physical state of the population and developed techniques to improve it. The same had been true of tsarist officials prior to the Revolution who, with the much more limited goal of military preparedness, gathered statistics on the physical condition of potential recruits. New goals of government spawned new bodies of knowledge, which in turn influenced both the goals and policies pursued by government officials and medical experts. The ambition to fashion ideal bodies and the knowledge about those bodies, then, developed in tandem, and to understand this process one must examine the production of statistical and biomechanical knowledge. Knowledge about the body, while purportedly scientific, was certainly not objective. The categories used in the production of this knowledge and the ways in which data were compiled and manipulated were highly normative, and had important ramifications for the policies and programs that resulted.

Seventeenth-century cameralist thought had speculated on the need for a quantitative understanding of the population, but it was only the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century that sparked projects, such as those by Condorcet, that statistically represented and analyzed the population. By the nineteenth century there occurred an enormous expansion of population statistics, which included the professionalization and regularization of collection and usage.³⁷ In addition to large amounts of census data and statistics on fertility and mortality, governments compiled military statistics on the physical

characteristics of young men. The tsarist government, for example, already in the first half of the nineteenth century, began to gather data and categorize the population.³⁸

Following the Revolution, the Soviet government made explicit the importance of statistics to its project of knowing and shaping the population. In an article entitled, “The Tasks of State Statistics,” one Soviet official described statistics as “a necessary technical apparatus, which will help the new state build the new society.”³⁹ In addition to national censuses, the Red Army conducted its own censuses that extended beyond recruits to count the entire population. The 1923 Census of the Red Army and Navy, for example, gave the number of people in each province, broken down by age cohort, sex, nationality, family position, social origin, Party membership, literacy, and previous military service.⁴⁰ The Soviet military also compiled statistics on the height and weight of all recruits, and cross-tabulated these by province of origin, urban versus rural residence, and nationality.⁴¹ By the 1930s, the Soviet army had developed elaborate procedures to examine recruits. These medical examinations included laboratory testing for diseases, vision and hearing checks, and psychological and neurological observation.⁴² The data from these examinations were used to accept or reject recruits, and were also carefully compiled and analyzed. Soviet statisticians tracked the “physical development of youth” and correlated physical characteristics with specific regions and nationalities.⁴³

Soviet statisticians’ findings, in turn, influenced how health officials and physical culture specialists conceptualized and acted upon the population’s physical condition. Statistical categories structured the thinking of officials, who came to see the young men of some provinces as undernourished, the residents of some cities as unhealthy, and the members of some nationalities as physically inferior. Statistics also gave Soviet officials a means to measure the physical improvement of the population and the results of physical culture programs. The head of the Komsomol, Aleksandr Kosarev, cited statistics showing that the average height and weight of eighteen-year-old males had increased and that the number of illnesses had dropped, and he concluded that “our youth is growing up stronger and physically more robust.”⁴⁴

Statistical study of the population involved a process of normalization. In the 1830s and 1840s, Adolphe Quetelet had developed the concept of the average man, based upon his discovery that population statistics had a regular distribution around the mean. This step took something abstract – there was no real-life “average man” – and made it seem real, a postulated reality against which people would be measured.⁴⁵ People who fell below this norm were then labelled substandard, or even deviant (a deviation from the norm). Soviet statisticians used similar techniques to plot the distribution of height and weight data and to identify potential recruits who fell below the mean.⁴⁶ The establishment of norms for people’s physical development also set a mark for improvement. The founder of eugenics, Francis Galton, classified people in quartiles around a statistical median, and advocated interference in reproduction to make statistical gains in the qualities of a race or population.⁴⁷ While Soviet authorities ultimately condemned eugenics as a fascist science, they too paid enormous attention to reproduction and childraising in an attempt to improve the median physical characteristics of the population.⁴⁸

A leading Soviet practitioner of anthropometry, Professor V. V. Bunak, extolled the value of measuring physical characteristics and strengths of the population. Drawing upon western European anthropometric theories, he postulated that the structure and functions of the human organism varied by race, body type, ecological surroundings, and social class. He stressed “the enormous social importance of an accounting of the population’s physical development,” and claimed that through anthropometrical research it was possible to classify people in three categories – “strong, average, weak.” Such classification would not only measure the population’s overall physical capacity, but would also guide physical culture efforts to improve it.⁴⁹

In addition to statistical knowledge about the population’s physical development, Soviet physical culture experts produced knowledge about the most effective means of physical conditioning. The Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow conducted studies and trained instructors on exercise and fitness throughout the 1920s.⁵⁰ During the 1930s, laboratory research by physiologists established norms for exercise and leisure. One such study determined that “active leisure” in the form of rhythmic exercises

was the most efficient way to restore the body's energy and labor ability.⁵¹ Research focused particularly on the health and fitness of children. Medical checkups in schools and statistics on children's health were complemented by studies on the importance of diet and physical exercise to children's physical condition.⁵²

As physiological studies and health statistics were compiled, this scientific knowledge, in turn, prompted the expansion of programs to raise the overall level of physical fitness. Already during the Civil War compulsory physical education had been instituted in schools, and the Central Board of Universal Military Training had taken over and expanded existing gymnastic societies and sport clubs.⁵³ The October 1920 government decree, "On the physical upbringing of the juvenile population," called for the creation of commissions to oversee programs in schools and for the institution of preschool physical culture programs.⁵⁴ Soviet authorities also founded "Houses of Physical Culture" – centers that were to promote physical exercise in a "scientifically instructive" manner, including medically supervised activities, lectures, and exhibits.⁵⁵ In July 1925 the Central Committee refuted earlier ideas about the development of non-competitive physical culture activities (proposed as a socialist alternative to bourgeois sports) and mandated a more competitive approach to sports and physical culture.⁵⁶

The Soviet government devoted even greater attention and resources to physical culture in the 1930s. In April 1930 the All-Union Physical Culture Council was founded and given executive powers to oversee physical fitness programs throughout the country.⁵⁷ The establishment of this central body at least partially resolved the struggle for control of physical culture that had embroiled the military, education, health, Komsomol, and trade union bureaucracies.⁵⁸ The Council continued to give gymnastics a central place in Soviet physical culture programs. In 1933 a national conference on gymnastics resolved that it should be the basic component of primary and secondary physical education, and a 1936 national gymnastics competition received extensive coverage in the press.⁵⁹

In June 1936 the Politbiuro approved the formation of the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport under the Council of People's Commissars, and further increased expenditures for physical

culture.⁶⁰ This new executive body's establishment signaled increased attention to competitive sports and sport heroes (in parallel with Stakhanovism in labor). Soccer, basketball, and ice hockey, as well as combat sports such as boxing, wrestling, and fencing all received heightened priority. The Soviet press also publicized records and record-holders in track meets and riflery competitions.⁶¹ All of these measures had military preparedness as a primary objective. As one speaker at a 1936 conference of Moscow physical education teachers stated: "The preparation of the colossal mass of Moscow students for labor and defense of our motherland depends upon the results of our work."⁶² And as a report on a physical culture parade in 1938 indicated, "if war breaks out tomorrow," athletes will quickly become "tankists, pilots, snipers, and sailors."⁶³

Foreign influences and militarization

The physical culture movement in the Soviet Union paralleled developments throughout Europe and around the world. To account for the similarities in physical fitness programs, one should note that the Soviet Union and other countries had common forms of knowledge (statistics on the population's physical development) and common concerns (military preparedness) that informed their policies. But in addition to these shared perceptions and considerations, there were also concrete ways in which information on foreign physical culture influenced Soviet policies. In fact, Soviet officials made a conscious effort to monitor and emulate the physical education initiatives of other countries, especially Germany, and this emulation was one reason for the increasing militarization of Soviet physical culture in the late 1930s.

Already prior to the Revolution, Russian officials borrowed foreign techniques to instill fitness and discipline in young people. One of these techniques was the Boy Scouts, founded by Colonel Robert Baden-Powell to provide physical training and paramilitary skills to British boys. Russian military officers who had trained abroad observed the Boy Scouts in Britain and formed the first scout troop in Russia in 1909. By 1917 there were 50,000 boys and girls in scout troops that existed in 143 Russian

towns.⁶⁴ After the Revolution, scout organizations were labeled bourgeois and disbanded, but in a sense they were reconstituted with the formation of the Young Pioneers – an organization for Soviet children that taught physical fitness, discipline, patriotism, and outdoor survival skills.

Under the Soviet government, the accumulation of data on other countries' physical culture programs became much more extensive and systematic. The Committee on Physical Culture and Sport had an international relations division which researched and wrote regular reports on physical training taking place in Europe, North America, and Japan. A report on sports in fascist countries stated that in Nazi Germany "the entire nation must do physical exercises. The physical perfection of men and women is extremely important to the state, and no one has the right to refuse the obligation to develop their body and fortify their health."⁶⁵ Government reports and articles in the press covered topics such as the administration of athletic clubs in France, training techniques of Japanese swimmers, international cross-country ski races, foreign soccer tournaments, and the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.⁶⁶ These reports kept Soviet officials apprised of the physical and military preparedness of other countries, and also provided ideas and techniques that could be applied in the Soviet Union.

To take one important example, Soviet officials observed and emulated foreign initiatives that promoted physical culture among women. They translated articles from American journals on how to incorporate athletic events into women's higher education.⁶⁷ The All-Union Physical Culture Council in 1934 lauded the benefits of physical fitness among German women, and argued that female athletics created "well-developed young women, who also produce healthy and robust children." In language that echoed Nazi ideology, it concluded that "this rapid transformation of the [German] race, without a doubt, must be attributed to physical education.... The German government is occupied by a concern to create a robust people. They have understood that only physical culture may sustain and increase the capital of the health of the nation."⁶⁸ Within two years the Soviet government convened a conference that launched new programs to promote physical culture among women.⁶⁹

It is also noteworthy, however, that the aims of Soviet programs differed from Nazi programs. Unlike the essentialist Nazi gender order which assigned women the single role as mothers of the next generation, the Soviet gender order stressed women's roles as both mothers and workers, and cultivated their physical fitness to enhance their performance in both roles.⁷⁰

In addition to highlighting the physical benefits of athletic programs, Soviet reports on physical culture abroad stressed its disciplinary and patriotic aspects. One report on Germany stated that "only physical education can bestow the following qualities proclaimed by National Socialism: a sense of discipline, order, and subordination; a sense of solidarity, courage, decisiveness, and the ability to make quick decisions when circumstances demand it; endurance, and readiness for self-sacrifice." The same report noted that the German government focused on young people, and oriented them toward self-discipline and "the spirit of Adolf Hitler."⁷¹

Soviet officials were also very aware that other countries used physical culture as military preparation. In 1934 they cited a German article on how gymnastics "galvanizes patriotic energy," and concluded that German physical culture programs had created a new spirit of militarism.⁷² A 1938 report of the Committee on Physical Culture and Sport stated that under the Nazi dictatorship "sport has become an integral part of preparation for war."⁷³ An article in the Soviet press noted that the development of alpinism in Germany had allowed the rapid formation of mountain troops during the First World War, and concluded that "alpinism has for us [the Soviet Union] enormous military significance."⁷⁴

Soviet commentators' attention to the military aspects of physical culture abroad focused on the training of youth. The head of the Komsomol warned in 1936 that fascist governments in Germany, Poland, Italy, and Japan had conducted "an intensified militarization of youth." He described military instruction in schools and the military agenda of the Hitler Youth organization. Based on these assessments, he called on the Komsomol to prepare young people to defend their country.⁷⁵ In a 1937 speech to the Komsomol *aktiv* of the Dinamo Sports Club, an official of the Committee on Physical

Culture and Sport criticized the lack of attention to military aspects of sport. Taking the example of automobile and motorcycle racing, he said that "it is no secret that motor sports are a means of mass preparation of reserves for motorized divisions of the Red Army." He went on to point out that Germany had over a million motorcycles while the Soviet Union had only eight thousand. He also called for gymnastics that were less like ballet and more like military training.⁷⁶

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Soviet physical culture indeed took on an increasingly militaristic character. Already in 1935 a civil defense pamphlet stated that "to be prepared for defense means to be physically healthy," and it emphasized the importance of shooting contests, gymnastics, swimming, and cycling, as well as training in the use of gas masks and bayonets.⁷⁷ A Politbiuro resolution in November 1939 created a new organization, "Prepared for Labor and Defense of the USSR." The organization was to develop additional physical education programs in schools, physical culture centers and prizes, instructional manuals and films, and medical supervision to maximize the health benefit of exercise and activities.⁷⁸ Articles in the Soviet press continued to promote sports and stressed "military-physical education" and the importance of physical culture to master military skills.⁷⁹

The Soviet government placed special emphasis on militaristic physical culture parades. Soviet journals heralded these parades as indicators of the importance of physical education and "the discipline of physical culture participants."⁸⁰ In the summer of 1937, the Politbiuro ordered that a physical culture parade be held on Red Square with over 40,000 participants, including delegations from each republic and record holders in a number of sports.³¹ An article about this event, entitled "The Parade of the Powerful Stalin Breed (*plemia*)," included photographs of gymnastic teams and stressed the unity of all the nationalities of the Soviet Union.

The living poem created on Red Square by Russian, Ukrainian...[lists the nationalities of all fifteen republics] physical culture participants proclaims in a loud, sonorous voice, which echoes around the entire world, the blood brotherhood and indissoluble friendship of the peoples which populate the broad expanse of the country of Soviets; ...and [declares] that the brave, strong Soviet youth are an inexhaustible reserve for our powerful Red Army.⁸²

This quotation demonstrates that physical culture parades were more than just a display of discipline and potential military strength. Parades symbolized the unity of Soviet society. In them, all nationalities and social groups were symbolically united as they marched and performed synchronized exercises in perfect unison.

Physical culture parades were a type of theater or spectacle, and such mass spectacles and participatory theater were characteristic of the mass politics of the modern era. In an age of popular sovereignty and mass warfare, the participation of thousands of citizens in theatricalized rituals of unity and strength were important mobilizational mechanisms. Meierhold in 1929 had predicted that the “theater of the future” would have “theatricalized sporting games” staged on a mass scale.⁸³ In a similar vein, Wagner and Nietzsche had both seen theatrical space as a remedy to the alienation of modern society. As Katerina Clark has pointed out, these thinkers had championed theater as a means to unite previously unsynchronized individuals and social groups.⁸⁴ In this sense, participation in mass theatrical spectacles was intended not only to symbolize unity but to transform and integrate the participants.

While participatory, physical culture parades were not democratic. As was true of fascist spectacles and marches, parades on Red Square were conducted under the paternal gaze of leaders, who stood atop Lenin’s mausoleum. Physical culture parades symbolized not simply unity, but unity behind Stalin and other Communist Party leaders. Their character was quite different from the early Soviet mass spectacles, which, while also choreographed, celebrated the spontaneity of the masses and incorporated revolutionary iconoclasm and the carnivalesque.⁸⁵ Throughout the 1920s, spectacles and parades had become more ritualized and patriotic, and by the 1930s they were rigid and militarized.⁸⁶ Physical culture parades in particular emerged as rituals of discipline, controlled movements, and homage to Party leaders.⁸⁷

Conclusion

For Soviet authorities, physical culture represented an important component in their attempts to create the New Soviet Person. They sought to shape the body as well as the mind, and in fact believed that physical exercise was essential to mental health and the transformation of consciousness. Physical culture, according to Soviet experts, was a means to perfect the body and ensure the harmonious development of the personality. Harmonious individuals would contribute to a collective society, one in which the alienation and antagonisms of the past might be overcome in favor of an organically whole, unified community. Gymnastics emerged as a favored form of physical culture precisely because it taught not only discipline and control, but also synchronization, through group exercises believed capable of integrating and uniting individuals.

The population's physical well-being also served state interests in cultivating a healthy and productive labor force. This type of anatomo-political thinking both prompted and was reinforced by biomechanical studies designed to optimize the body's productive potential. Added to these studies was social scientific and medical research that shaped the perceptions and programs of Soviet authorities. When masses of statistics were gathered and processed on the physical state of the population, Soviet experts perceived a need to improve people's physical characteristics, particularly of those nationalities and social groups that fell below newly created averages and norms.

Concerns about the physical capacity of the population and programs designed to improve it were in no way unique to the Soviet Union. Indeed, Soviet authorities obtained many of their ideas about the importance of physical culture from reports on fitness initiatives throughout Europe and around the world. In the late 1930s, physical culture in Nazi Germany came under particular scrutiny, and Soviet athletic programs replicated its militarism. Physical culture was seen as having an enormous role in preparing the population for war. Athletic programs were believed not only to strengthen the body and prepare it for combat, but to teach discipline, patriotism, and unity. Physical culture parades became a symbol of this unity and received enormous attention in the years leading up to the war.

While Soviet physical culture resembled foreign programs, it had important differences as well. Soviet efforts sought to unite all nationalities, in stark contrast to the racially exclusionary and ultimately genocidal policies of the Nazis. In comparison with the democratic countries of Europe, which also had social thinkers who advocated physical fitness and social harmony, the Soviet Union possessed a revolutionary ideology that greatly heightened the sense that the world and human beings could be entirely remade. This sense both induced and justified the extreme forms of state intervention in an entire range of areas, including physical culture and the body. Also significant was the lack of any legal protections to prevent this type of government intrusion. The Soviet system was born at a moment of total war when the mobilizational and defense priorities of the state took precedence over everything else. It is therefore not surprising that physical culture programs, which were seen as playing a crucial part in social unification and preparation for war, were rigorously imposed upon schools, factories, communities, and individuals throughout the country.

Endnotes

1. GARF f. A-482, op. 11, d. 58, l. 19.
2. GARF f. A-482, op. 11, d. 58, l. 8.
3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* vol 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 139.
4. N. A. Semashko, *Novyi byt i polovoi vopros* (Moscow/Leningrad: Gos. izd., 1926), p. 15.
5. GARF f. A-482, op. 11, d. 58, l. 9.
6. K. Mechonoshin, "Fizicheskoe vospitanie trudiashchikhsia," *Fizicheskaiia kul'tura* 1923 #3/4, pp. 2-3, as cited in Stefan Plaggenborg, *Revolutionskultur: Menschenbilder und kulturelle Praxis in Sowjetrussland zwischen Oktoberrevolution und Stalinismus* (Koln: Bohlau, 1996), p. 81.
7. *Gigiena i sotsialisticheskoe zdravookhranenie* 1932 #4/5, pp. 27-30.
8. *Gimnastika na predpriatiakh i proizvoditel'nost' truda* (Moscow: OGIZ-Fizkul'tura i turizm, 1936), p. 5.
9. Plaggenborg, p. 80.
10. Toby Clark, "The 'New Man's' Body: A Motif in Early Soviet Culture," *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State*, ed. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 40.
11. Soviet musical films of the 1930s portrayed smiling peasants who sang while working in the fields and factory workers who swung their hammer in time to music; see the documentary, "East Side Story," dir. Dana Ranga (Germany, 1997).
12. Vsevolod Meierhold, "The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics," in Edward Brown, ed., *Meierhold on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), pp. 197-8.
13. Meierhold, p. 200.
14. Victoria Bonnell, *The Iconography of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 41.
15. Analyzing the work of Nazi sculptor Arno Breker, George Mosse writes that "the nude body is not merely symbolic of true beauty and nature, but also points backward to Paradise as the paradigm of a healthy world before the onset of modernity." George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 172-3.
16. Bonnell, p. 41; Barbara Keys, "Totalitarian Corporealities: Educating the Body under Nazism and Stalinism," Paper presented at the AAASS conference (September, 1998), p. 24.
17. Toby Clark, p. 36.
18. Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), pp. 2-8.
19. As quoted in Toby Clark, p. 36.
20. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 152-4; David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 78-9. See also Kendall E. Bailes, "Alexei Gastev and the Controversy over Taylorism in the Soviet Union, 1920-1924" *Soviet Studies* vol. 24 (1977) #3; and Plaggenborg, pp. 82-5.

- 21.V. G. Belinsky, *Izbrannye pedagogicheskie sochineniia*, vol. II (Moscow/Leningrad, 1948), p. 76, as quoted in James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 43. In nineteenth-century England the field of psychophysiology also stressed the link between the physical and mental condition. See Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 23.
- 22.Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?* trans. Michael R. Katz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 278-83.
- 23.Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 254-6.
- 24.N. A. Semashko, "Fizicheskaia kul'tura i zdavookhranenie v SSSR," (1927) *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Gos. izd. meditsinskoi literatury, 1954), pp. 263-5. See also Plaggenborg.
- 25.Meierhold, p. 199.
- 26.GARF f. A-482. op. 11, d. 19, l. 77.
- 27.GARF f. A-482. op. 11, d. 58, l. 8. ...
- 28.Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 80-1.
- 29.Katerina Clark, p. 260.
- 30.Mosse, p. 78.
- 31.Mosse, p. 50.
- 32.Riordan, pp. 19-20. The Russian *Sokol* gymnastics movement that arose in the 1880s was modelled on the Czech movement and had an explicit pan-Slavist ideology; see Riordan, p. 35.
- 33.*Izvestiia tsentral'nogo komiteta RKP(b)* 20 July 1925, as quoted in Riordan, p. 106.
- 34.Riordan, p. 107.
- 35.See Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 36.A. Gvozdev, "Postanovka 'D. Ye.' v 'Teatre imeni Vs. Meyerkhof'da,'" *Zhizn' isskustva* no. 26 (June 24, 1924), p. 6, as cited in Katerina Clark, p. 162.
- 37.Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 59; Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 2-3.
- 38.Peter Holquist, "'To Remove' and 'To Exterminate Totally': Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia," Paper presented to "Empire and Nation in the Soviet Union," Univ. of Chicago, October, 1997.
- 39.P. Popov, "O zadachakh gosudarstvennoi statistiki," *Vestnik statistiki* 1919 #1, p. 31.
- 40.RGAE f. 1562, op. 21, d. 356.
- 41.RGAE f. 1562. op. 21, d. 434.
- 42.RGAE f. 1562, op. 18, d. 54, l. 6.
- 43.RGAE f. 1562. op. 18, d. 38, ll. 4-5; d. 54, ll. 11-26.
- 44.A. Kosarev, *Otchet TsK VLKSM desiatomu vsesoiuznomu s"ezdu Leninskogo Komsomola* (Moscow:

- Molodaia gvardiia. 1936), p. 21.
- 45.Hacking, pp. 107-109.
- 46.RGAE f. 1562, op. 18, d. 54, l. 1.
- 47.Hacking, pp. 168-9; Rabinow, p. 327.
- 48.David L. Hoffmann, "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in its Pan-European Context," Paper presented at AAASS Conference, November, 1997.
- 49.V. V. Bunak, "Antropometriia kak metod sotsial'noi gigieny," in A. V. Molkov and N. A. Semashko, eds., *Sotsial'naia gigiena: Rukovodstvo dlia studentov-medikov* vol. 1 (Moscow/Leningrad: Gos. izdatel'stvo, 1927), pp. 84-91.
- 50.GARF f. A-482, op. 11, d. 58, l. 27.
- 51.*Gimnastika na predpriiatiiak*, p. 25.
- 52.A. V. Mol'kov, ed. *Shkol'naia gigiena* (Moscow/Leningrad: Gos. izd. biologicheskoi i meditsinskoi literatury, 1937), pp. 360-71.
- 53.Riordan, pp. 69-76. See also Plaggenborg, pp. 70-1.
- 54.GARF f. A-482, op. 11, d. 58, ll. 19-20.
- 55.GARF f. A-482, op. 11, d. 40, l. 81.
- 56.Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 34.
- 57.Riordan, p. 122.
- 58.Keys, pp. 11-12.
- 59.Riordan, p. 137; *Fizkul'tura i sport* 1937#1, pp. 4-5.
- 60.RTsKhIDNI f. 17, op. 3, d. 978, l. 130.
- 61.*Fizkul'tura i sport* 1937 #1, pp. 6-15; Riordan, pp. 127, 140.
- 62.TsMAM f. 528, op. 1, d. 383, l. 46.
- 63.*Izvestiia* July 26, 1938, as cited in Edelman, p. 44.
- 64.Riordan, pp. 35-36. See also Josh Sanborn, "Empire, Nation, and the Man: Conscription and Political Community in Russia, 1905-25" (Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1997), chapter 5.
- 65.GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 153, ll. 2-3.
- 66.GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 245, ll. 2-6; *Fizkul'tura i sport* 1937 #1, p. 14; #2, pp. 4, 12; #13, p. 15; GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 183, l. 117.
- 67.See for example GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 210, ll. 1-10.
- 68.GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 153, l. 5.
- 69.GARF f. 7576, op. 14, d. 2, l. 1.
- 70.For further discussion, see Keys, p. 16.
- 71.GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 153, ll. 3-4. The report also paraphrased a German article that claimed Hitler

had “restored the pride of the German people,” and that gymnastics societies had helped develop this pride.

72.GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 153, l. 4.

73.GARF f. 7576, op. 2, d. 201, l. 64.

74.*Fizkul'tura i sport* 1937 #3, pp. 8-9.

75.Kosarev, pp. 28-34.

76.TsKhDMO f. 1, op. 23, d. 1268, l. 3.

77.M. Likhachev, *Byt' gotovym: Rabota oboronnoi sektsii sel'soveta* (Leningrad: Izd. Lenoblispolkoma i Lensoveta, 1935), pp. 26-8. The pamphlet's preface explained that fascist Germany planned a “crusade” against the Soviet Union and that Japanese fascists conspired to grab territory in eastern Siberia; p. 3.

78.RTsKhIDNI f. 17, op. 3, d. 1016, ll. 37, 79-80.

79.*Komsomol'skii rabotnik* 1941 #6, p. 1; #11, p. 1.

80.*Gimnastika* 1937 #1; *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo* 1939 #15, p. 28.

81.RTsKhIDNI f. 17, op. 3, d. 987, l. 91. See also GARF f. 3316 s.ch., op. 64, d. 1651, ll. 5-7, for the detailed plans behind a 1935 physical culture parade.

82.*Fizkul'tura i sport* 1937 #13, pp. 4-5.

83.Cited in Katerina Clark, p. 254.

84.Katerina Clark, p. 80.

85.The mass spectacles of 1920, for example, ridiculed foreign leaders and included a reenactment of the storming of the Winter Palace: Stites, pp. 94-96.

86.In the early 1930s, parades still stressed the egalitarian character of physical culture, but by the late 1930s participation was restricted to those who had earned “Prepared for Labor and Defense of the USSR” medals: Edelman, p. 42.

87.For further discussion see Stites, p. 228. and Katerina Clark, p. 306.