

**Pyotr Franzevich Lesgaft
(1837-1909)
The Founder of Russian
Physical Education
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INTRODUCTION

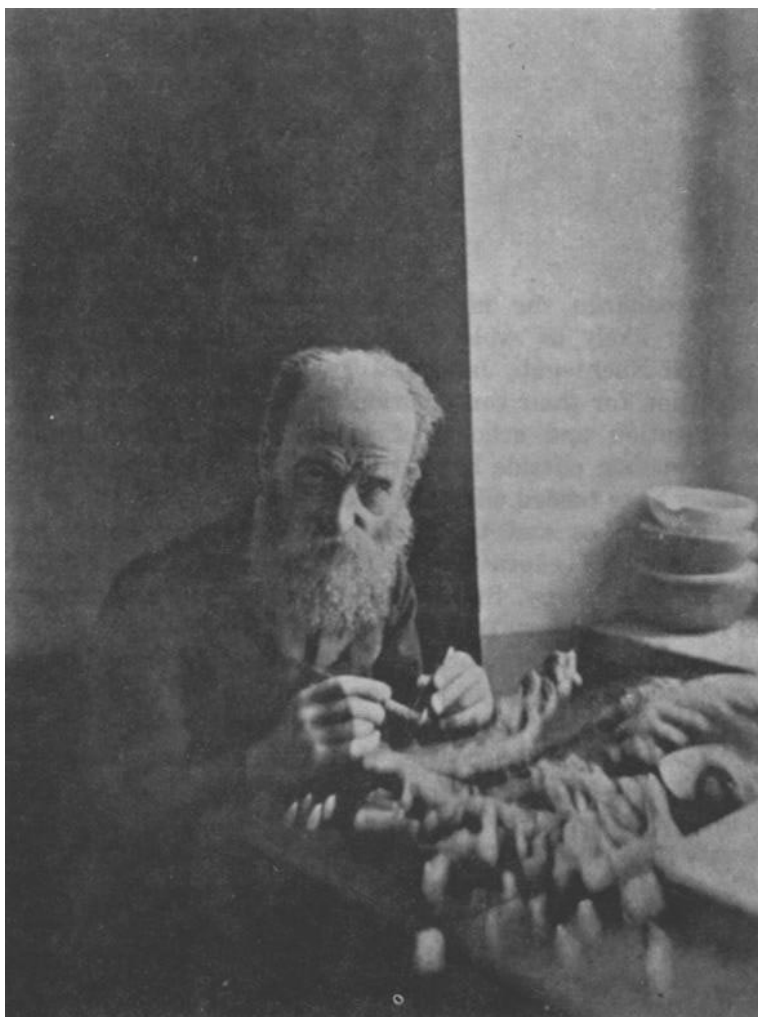
To pronounce the name 'Lesgaft' in Western educational circles is likely to evoke puzzled cries of 'Les who?'. While Ling and Nachtegall, Jahn and Tyrs have received world-wide recognition for their contributions to the development of physical education and schools of gymnastics, Lesgaft's glory is mostly unsung outside his native Russia.¹ Many Western publications have tended either to underestimate or to ignore native Russian sources and to ascribe the formative influences on Soviet physical education to British sports, the gymnastics schools of Germany, Sweden and what is now Czechoslovakia, and Prussian military training. Rare is the Western author who has a good word to say for Russian sources, particularly Lesgaft. One notable exception is the book by Van Dalen and Bennett, but even they claim that "the Soviet programme, both in and out of school, is modeled after the calisthenics of Germany and the Scandinavian countries and the sports and games of England and America";² Morton makes the trite comment on Lesgaft that "his preeminent position in Soviet physical culture rests — aside from his 'correct' scientific concepts — on the fact that he held 'progressive' political views and was sympathetic to the revolutionary cause."³ None of these authors seems to have investigated Lesgaft's position *before* 1917.

We are the poorer for our ignorance.

For Pyotr Franzevich Lesgaft — biologist, anatomist, educationalist and social reformer — was not only the founder of the modern system of physical education in tsarist Russia; it was he more than anyone else who made the most lasting impression on contemporary Soviet physical education. His seminal role is attested to in his own land today: "Pyotr Franzevich Lesgaft was the founder of the scientific system

FIGURE 1

Lesgart in 1894



W. Lesgart

of physical education in our country.”⁴ The respect for him extends to the honour of having his name grace one of the two leading colleges of physical education in the USSR — the Lesgaft Institute of Physical Culture in Leningrad.

MAJOR WORKS

Born nearly 140 years ago in the then Russian capital, St. Petersburg, the third son of a jeweler of German descent, Lesgaft went on to study medicine at the Imperial Academy of Medicine. Upon graduation in 1861 he began his career as teacher of anatomy at the Academy; he was subsequently invited to take up a professorship at the University of Kazan and went there in 1869, but was soon dismissed for his outspoken criticism of the unscientific methods used. Barred from all teaching, he took a job from 1872 as consultant on therapeutic gymnastics in the private practice of Dr. Berglindt but, after the publication of several articles and books (including a descriptive history of sport in Europe and ancient Greece and an article published in 1874 on naturalistic gymnastics), he was put in charge of the physical training of military cadets — one of those acrobatic changes of fortune not uncommon in tsarist Russia.⁵ The next year, 1875, he was commissioned by the War Ministry to spend two summers in Western Europe, studying the systems of physical education current there. Altogether, he visited 26 cities and 13 Western European states. The British system was evidently most to his liking, despite the almost total lack of civilian colleges training gymnastics teachers in Britain. What especially took his fancy was the ‘English’ predilection for strict rules of hygiene, team games in the open air, long walks and boat trips, swimming and other regular exercises,⁶ although he abhorred the “strict orders, fagging and lording of senior pupils over juniors”⁷ that he witnessed in some public schools. In addition to English public schools, he also visited the Central Army Gymnastics School at Aldershot, the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and Oxford University. On his return to Russia in 1877, he published his *Relationship of Anatomy to Physical Education and the Major Purpose of Physical Education in Schools*, in which he outlined a physical education programme for military colleges. He was, in fact, able to supervise its progress in twelve academies. At the same time, he took a keen interest in organizing courses for physical education instructors for the military academies — provision for which, until then, had been non-existent.

While supervising officer training, Lesgaft published his major works, *Family Upbringing* (1884), *Teaching Physical Education to Schoolchildren* (Part 1 in 1888, Part 2 in 1901) and *Fundamentals of Theoretical Anatomy* (1905). His desire to organize physical education and games in civilian schools was for some time thwarted by the authorities, who were inclined to look on them as frivolous and tending to encourage academic idleness. This led Lesgaft to take an active part in the 'Society for the Encouragement of Physical Development' which was founded in Odessa in 1892 and quickly spread its branches to St. Petersburg (1893), Moscow (1895) and other towns.⁸ Besides stimulating public discussion of young people's physical development both in the home and in school, this philanthropic organization constructed play areas in a number of towns and provided sports amenities for children of the poor, arranging for them team games, camps and excursions as well as boating in summer and ice skating and sledding in winter. In 1894, Lesgaft became Secretary of the St. Petersburg Society for the Encouragement of Physical Development; through this Society he campaigned for the setting up of civilian physical training courses for men and women. The Society finally, in 1896, persuaded the Minister of Education to set up the first civilian physical training courses, with Lesgaft in charge. However, these 'Part-time Courses for Training Women Instructors of Physical Exercises and Games' were, as their name implied, *for women only* and were not entirely what Lesgaft had envisaged. Initially for two years, Lesgaft eventually managed to extend the courses to three years.

The admission of women to training was certainly novel: the official view in Russia had long been that sport was the preserve of men and that women were not suited to it by their social status and anatomical structure. For much of his academic career, Lesgaft fervently espoused the cause of women's sporting rights, giving official physical education and anatomy courses to women students at his home and, after 1896, at the university; 100 women students attended in the first year and 166 in the second. They studied physiology, theory of movement, hygiene and history of physical education, while assigned to practical work in nurseries and orphanages where they could study child development, particularly through games and exercises. They were also encouraged to attend fencing classes four times a week, to play team games, skate and engage in gymnastics.⁹

FIGURE 2

Lesgaft with some of his women P.E. students



П. Ф. Лесгафтъ со своими ученицами.

Lesgaft regarded women's participation in sport a means to social liberation : "Social slavery has left its degrading imprint on women. Our task is to free the maidenly body of its fetters, conventions and drooping posture, and return to our pupils their freedom and suppleness which have been stolen from them. We must develop in them firmness, initiative and independence, teach them to think and take decisions, give them knowledge of life and make physical educationalists out of them."¹⁰

PRINCIPAL THEORIES

Lesgaft's medical studies of the human system led him to the conclusion that it was in constant development and change, partly under the influence of the social environment; physical exercise was the only means of developing the system overall and in its individual components. It attained optimum development when all bodily organs were exercised in a balanced way. Physical education instructors should, in his opinion, have a knowledge of chemistry and physics, particularly the general laws of mechanics, so as to be able to apply them to the 'human mechanism'. Only thus could they comprehend the phenomena of nutrition, growth, development, only then could they dare to take it upon themselves "to guide and assist the proper development of young people's physical powers."¹¹

On the basis of his theory, he elaborated and recommended a system of physical education for the school and the home:

- (1) the child starts by simple movements which are explained to him but not demonstrated; he has to analyse them himself and distinguish one from another, then begin to understand them. The movements, recommended for early school classes, consist of normal walking, running, jumping and throwing a ball;
- (2) the child then learns to master exercises of gradually increasing complexity in various conditions, after which he can tackle more difficult tasks more swiftly and easily. These exercises are designed for the intermediate classes and consist of running against the clock, long and high jumping and distance throwing ;
- (3) the child then learns to harmonise his movements in time and space and in relation to surrounding objects, already foreseeing the result. By these exercises, he develops muscular control and learns to act in the best possible way in any circumstances. Exercises for the upper forms

include running at a set speed, target or distance ball throwing, exercises associated with an understanding of spatial relationships and the temporal distribution of effort;

- (4) simultaneously with these groups of exercises, the child checks the skills he has acquired and consolidates them by employing difficult actions during games, excursions and work movements.¹²

At each stage of physical education, different, increasingly complicated, pedagogical aims are pursued, the main purpose being to teach the child consciously to master the movements of his body and to attain the best results with the minimum energy and time expenditure. In Lesgaft's opinion, just as in intellectual education, the child should not merely accumulate knowledge but be able to apply it, so in physical education, he should both develop physical skills and be prepared to apply them in the best way possible.

ATTITUDES TO GERMAN AND SWEDISH GYMNASTICS

The exercises to be included in his system were mainly gymnastics, team games, excursions and nature rambles. Lesgaft, however, opposed the German system and any gymnastics that employed special equipment: "Exercises employing equipment involve sharp sensations; they therefore blunt the emotions of young people and make them less receptive and impressionable; it is hardly surprising that, when young people go to university, they smoke heavily, drink and challenge one another to duels."¹³ One of his closest followers, S. Pozner, records that his thoughts on the harmfulness of "artificial stimulants" permeated his lectures and lay at the basis of his pedagogical views. He criticized parents and teachers for mollycoddling children and then, when they go to school, "in order to encourage them to study, again resort to artificial stimulants in the form of praise, marks, gifts and certificates. The apathy induced in such circumstances causes young people to create false impressions; the confectioner's becomes the threshold to the wineshop and carousing, in the same way as school marks and awards develop a taste for various sports and card-games. Young people become a prey to unbearable boredom, they are ready to indulge themselves in any wasteful pursuit and rude diversion merely to stifle the sensations that oppress them."¹⁴ He therefore firmly upheld the view that

gymnastics which employed Swedish or German apparatus, along with organized sports and other such "rude diversions" should be eschewed in Russian schools.

Lesgafft also thought that the type of gymnastics in vogue in Germany¹⁵ did not correspond to children's anatomical structure and were therefore physically harmful. On the other hand, there was much that attracted him in Swedish gymnastics, in particular the consecutive and gradual principles of Ling's system. Lesgafft himself favoured the type of free gymnastics which would satisfy the children's natural desire for physical movement and achievement, and also encourage such qualities as will-power and initiative: "A person develops in the family, the family gives him affection, warmth, makes him responsive and kind; the school develops his mind, gives him the ability to form his own views, judgments and thoughts; his moral values are formed along with an independence of mind. Physical exercises develop activity in a person and he acquires the ability to subordinate his desires to his own will."¹⁶

GAMES AND HARMONIOUS DEVELOPMENT

Games were also a means of character training. These did not, however, include (competitive) sport which, he believed, adversely affected the moral outlook of young people, encouraged egotism and was educationally harmful inasmuch as it did not develop exercises gradually. Games were to encourage a group spirit, unselfishness, social awareness and devotion to society: "Games arouse and gradually develop social instincts. . . . In every school game, the player is a member of a small society, actively participating in it, forgetting about his personal, selfish aims and engrossed exclusively in the attainment of common aims, all the while adhering to all the accepted principles and laws that restrict the right of every individual. . . . A sense of justice, of comradeship, of fair play, an acquaintance with public opinion — these are all given us by games. Are not these the feelings we wish our children to possess, both as future citizens and as useful and active members of society?"¹⁷

Nature rambles were to encourage creative thought and action by acquainting the child with Nature at first hand rather than through learning to rote. That is why "excursions should not be spoiled by triumphal marches, military evolutions, flags, badges, prizes, sport or the like. One should constantly remember that the fewer the strong diversions, the less the loss from the child's standpoint, the more he will preserve his

strength and the better his self-possession. I personally believe that excursions will encourage the child to think, ennoble his feelings and inspire creative thought.”¹⁸ For adults, too, “there is a very good English custom of taking a walk before breakfast, even if it is only 5-6 versts (5-6 km). After that, one can tackle any mental or physical activity in a more active frame of mind.”¹⁹

It has to be remembered that at the time Lesgaft was writing the contempt for physical exertion rather general among the conservative section of the Russian nobility was evoking a reaction among progressive writers who saw physical effort as something to be revered for its own sake; man’s physical development through labour and exercise was presented as a sense of pride and a source of honour — and its cultivation a duty. Such were the views of some of Lesgaft’s contemporaries, like Count Leo Tolstoy and the physiologist Ivan Pavlov (who referred to Lesgaft as “an outstanding scholar and enthusiastic teacher”). As Lesgaft himself put it: “Labour is the essence of life, its *raison d’être*; work not for yourself but for others. Only this human labour performed by generations of people leads to eternal perfection of the human personality.”²⁰ Following his own example, he recommended to his students: “Take yourselves by the scruff of the neck, my Dear Sirs, and force yourselves to work !”²¹

Lesgaft’s ideal child was to grow up into the ideal citizen — most able, physically and mentally, to provide the greatest contribution to the common good. Such a person had to be harmoniously developed, both physically and intellectually, and possess the ‘ideal’ organism: “Only if all organs are developed harmoniously is the human organism able to improve and produce the greatest effort with the least expenditure of time and energy.”²²

CONFLICT WITH AUTHORITY

The implications of Lesgaft’s system and views went far beyond what the tsarist authorities were willing to allow, clinging as they did to an idealistic dualism of mind and body. In fact, Lesgaft had his work halted by the authorities in 1901 — on the grounds that he was aiding and abetting student protest groups (it is true, he had, in fact, signed petitions seeking to alleviate the harsh conditions imposed upon many protesting students). Thus, in the twilight of his career, as at the dawn, he was again prohibited from teaching and “forbidden to reside

in capital cities of the Empire, provincial centres and university towns for a term of two years."²³ Under constant police harassment, he petitioned the tsar for a pardon, writing that "my many years of educational and scientific work have been wholly dedicated to the younger generation and have never brought me personal gain, which I have not sought. I have founded three useful institutions which are so closely associated with my own personal fate that the sentence imposed upon me will essentially be fatal to my work."²⁴

However, being the subject of an autocracy which knew next to nothing about his work, and understood even less, Russia's leading professor of anatomy, doctor of medicine and director of the renowned Biology Laboratory was confined to a cottage in a Finnish²⁵ village, virtually put under house arrest. At the end of his sentence, he returned to the capital to resume his courses. But after his students had taken an active part in the events known as 'Bloody Sunday' and other revolutionary rumblings of 1905-07, his courses were closed down altogether in 1907.²⁶ Even now Lesgaff did not give up: he continued to teach his students, illegally, and constantly badgered the authorities to revoke their ban on his courses. But without success.

Finally, dispirited and his health broken, Lesgaff left Russia for warmer climes but died of uraemia in Cairo in November 1909. An idea of the extent of popular affection for him and the official fear of his teachings may be gained from the events surrounding his funeral in St. Petersburg which, despite police cordons and a legal ban on graveside orations, was attended by some six thousand people.²⁷ Just four months later, the tsarist authorities gave way and permitted the reopening of Lesgaff's Courses, which continued to operate until 1919 when they became the Lesgaff Institute of Physical Education.

CONCLUSIONS

Certain of his views are reminiscent of Rousseau's advice to *Emile* — character training through physical activity, the political and national ends of physical culture and its therapeutic value. Others were clearly inspired by his acquaintance with the British system of physical education, which he lauded, and British public-school ideas on the unselfishness and team spirit of the type of games encouraged by the English 'Muscular Christians'. He himself paid tribute above all to the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, as the figure who most in-

fluenced his thinking. Typically, it was to Lamarck that his last article was devoted, written in Locarno four months before his death. Like Lamarck, Lesgaft believed that “the form changes as the influence of the environment changes; everything that exercises itself improves itself, whatever remains inactive decays, is destroyed, disappears. This applies as much to the animal as to the plant world, as much to man’s moral as to his physical world.”²⁸

He himself was no revolutionary; if anything, his educational philosophy reflected the ideology of the small but growing Russian and the large West European liberal intelligentsia. It was, though, Lesgaft more than anyone else who came to influence Soviet physical education. Although his hostility to sport — competition and the paraphernalia surrounding it, such as badges, trophies and flags, professionalism, public displays, victory celebrations and similar rituals — while finding ready accord among groups such as the ‘Hygienists’ in the 1920s, came to be rejected totally with the onset of full-scale industrialization in the early 1930s, several major tenets of his theory and his system today underlie the physical education system prevailing in the USSR: ideas of ‘harmonious development’, of social awareness and self-realisation through physical education, of the principle of gradual and consistent training, of belief in a biological justification for exercise and games in general, of women’s social emancipation through the bodily liberation of games and physical education, and of the strict observance of age, sex and individual characteristics of children when playing games and engaging in physical exercise can all be derived from him. Training and teaching in the USSR are still largely guided by Lesgfat’s views on mastering bodily movements by stages, starting from the learning of correct forms of movement in the nursery and gradually increasing the load up to the elaboration of spatial and temporal orientation. The debt to Lesgaft is considerable.

But it is more than a Russian debt. Lesgaft merits consideration not only for his formative influence on physical education in one of the world’s leading sports nations, but for a contribution of some significance to the general development of the philosophy of physical education.

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Ponomaryov of the Lesgaft Institute of Physical Culture and Mikhail Prokofiev, the Lesgaft Museum Director. I am also indebted to Professor Bruce Bennett, Chairman of the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, Ohio State University.

FOOTNOTES

¹Even in the USSR, part of his career and work is still obscure, since Lesgaft's archives in Leningrad were partly destroyed during the last war — over 6000 documents being burned in a German raid. Most of my own material on Lesgaft is taken from books by or on Lesgaft purchased from second-hand book stores during my five-year residence in the USSR.

²Van Dalen, D. B., Bennett, B. L.. *A World History of Physical Education*, New Jersey, 1971, p. 318.

³Morton, H. W., *Soviet Sport*, New York, 1963, p. 114. Lesgaft is totally ignored in the standard histories of Rice, Hutchinson and Lee; Leonard and Affleck; and Hackensmith.

⁴Samoukov, F. I. (ed.), *Istoriya fizicheskoi kul'tury*, Moscow, 1964, p. 230.

⁵A special committee of representatives from various ministries had drawn up a project for a gymnastics institute in 1874. Lesgaft was to be its first head. But the tsar refused to ratify the project. It was then that the War Ministry, whose officials had been on the gymnastics institute committee, proposed setting up a similar college under its tutelage (Alpatov, N. A., *Ocherki istorii kadetskikh kornusovi voyennykh gimnazyi*, Vol. II, Moscow, 1946), p. 750.

⁶Lesgaft, P. F., *Sobranie pedagogicheskikh sochinenii v pyati tomakh*, Vol. I, Moscow, 1951, p. 281.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁸Toitik, P. D., *Vydayushchiysya deyatel' fizicheskoi kul'tury Sibiri V. S. Pirvskiy*, Novosibirsk, 1958, p. 9.

⁹See Ekonomov, L., *Strastny uchitel'*, Moscow, 1969, p. 81.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹¹Lesgaft, P. F., "Fizicheskoye obrazovanie v shkolakh". *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 1902, No. 97, p. 2.

¹²Lesgaft, P. F., "Ob igrakh i fizicheskoy vospitanii v shkole," (Rech' skazannaya v torzhestvennom zasedanii v pamyat' N. I. Pirogova 23 noyabrya 1882), *Trudy Russkovo Obshchestva Vrachei*, St. Petersburg, 1883, p. 99.

¹³Quoted in Garf, M., "Vzglyady. na fizicheskoye obrazovanie P. F. Lesgafta," *Pamyati Pyotra Frantsevicha Lesgafta*, St. Petersburg, 1912, p. 95.

¹⁴Quoted in Pozner, S., "Iz vospominaniy o Pyotr Frantsevich Lesgafta", *Pamyati Pyotra Frantsevicha Lesgafta*, p. 273.

¹⁵In Germany, Lesgaft visited several schools and colleges, including the Royal Central Gymnastics Academy in Berlin, the Central Gymnastics School in Dresden where he became acquainted at first hand with Jahn's *Turnen* and the German Gymnastics Society in Leipzig. While in Sweden, he visited the Central Gymnastics Institute founded by Ling in 1814, met Ling's son and attended seminars in Lund.

¹⁶Quoted in Garf, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

¹⁹Lesgaft, P. F., *Sobranie pedagogicheskikh sochinenii*, Vol. III, Moscow, 1956, p. 299.

²⁰Ekonomov, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

²²Quoted in Garf, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

²³Ekonomov, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

²⁴*Ibid.* The three institutions he refers to were the Physical Education 'Courses' School (today the Lesgaft Institute), the Women's Medical Institute and the St. Petersburg Biology Laboratory.

²⁵Finland was then part of the Russian Empire.

²⁶In 1905, Lesgaft had set up a new educational institution, a 'Higher School of Free Exercises', whose official nomenclature was 'Higher Courses in the Biological, Educational and Social Sciences'. The earlier Courses were merged with the Educational Faculty. The new school was open to men and women.

²⁷*Pamyati Pyotra Frantsevicha Lesgafia, op. cit.*, p. 304.

²⁸Lesgaft, P. F., "Pamyati Zhana Lamarka", *Mir*, 1909, No. 21-24, p. 35.