

# Sport, the Body and the Totalitarian Mentality

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MANGAN, J.A., ED. *Shaping the Superman, Fascist Body as Political Icon—Aryan Facism*. London: Frank Cass, 1999. Pp. xiii + 215. Illustrated. Bibliography, index. \$24.50 pb.

MANGAN, J.A., ED. *Superman Supreme, Fascist Body as Political Icon-Global Fascism*. London: Frank Cass, 2000. Pp. xiv + 257. Illustrated. Bibliography, index. \$26.50 pb.

WILDMANN, DANIEL. *Begehrte Körper, Konstruktion und Inszenierungen des "arischen" Männerkörpers im "Dritten Reich."* Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998. Pp. 159. Illustrated. Bibliography. €15.50 pb.

I have found that the best time to review a book is during a long flight, preferably a transoceanic flight. The food is lousy, the films are unbearable, the lines to the lavatory are long, and, most importantly, one has the time to concentrate on work. I started to review the first of the three books, *Shaping the Superman*, during one of those flights. I could not put it down; I took copious notes, reread passages, took more notes, and often argued mentally with the authors. I guess this is the mark of a book that needs to be read. Although it does not have to be right in every detail, it has to bring up enough provocative ideas and new information. Even more importantly, it should make you think long after you put the work down.

The two other books captured my attention as well. No matter how much we have read and no matter how much we want to believe that everything has been said about the history of Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism, and all other totalitarian forms of governments during the interwar years—encompassing the emergence of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, the Spanish Civil War, Stalinist purges, and rising militarism in Japan—there is something

about this period that invariably mesmerizes us and captures our imagination. The theme of these three books reaches out, indeed, to a hitherto unexplored aspect of a dark ideology—the use of the body to “irretrievably” recast societies, and, in a larger context, transform the face of the world.

Daniel Wildmann’s *Begehrte Körper*, a slender yet intellectually challenging book, specifically deals with the idea of the body in Nazi Germany, incorporating not only primary literary sources but also extensive art criticism and cinematic analysis. Although it is an interdisciplinary work, it hangs together well. The two anthologies, edited by Tony Mangan, *Shaping the Superman, Fascist Body as Political Icon—Ayan Fascism* and the *Superman Supreme, Fascist Body as Political Icon—Global Fascism* incorporate a much more eclectic view about “Fascist” and Nazi ideologies of various shades and their influences on the perception of the body and various sports movements across the globe.

Among the three books, the most focused and coherent, in spite of its slimness, is *Begehrte Körper*. Daniel Wildmann presents an important angle, which is sorely missing from the two anthologies. He provides a balance and clear direction. It is unfortunate that this work came out too close to the other two, because the authors of various chapters in the two anthologies could have used some of Wildmann’s insights. Although Wildmann places the 1936 Olympic Games and Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* in the center, he expands his analysis of the Nazi corporeal ideology in concentric circles through art, cinema, and scholarship. While *Shaping the Superman* also deals almost exclusively with Nazi Germany, drawing a relatively coherent though unbalanced picture, its disjointedness sets it apart from Wildmann’s work. A sequel to this anthology, *Superman Supreme*, sketches a much more diffused montage of how this totalitarian ideology permeated or influenced sport, physical education, and the perception of the body in various societies in such diverse locations as Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America under the general rubric of Fascism.

In spite of the obvious unevenness of the scholarship and writing style, both anthologies cry out for a strong editorial hand. The publication of these books signals the strengthening of a refreshing trend in sport history, moving away from pure social history—which undoubtedly is very important in its own right—toward intellectual history and a history of ideas.<sup>1</sup> Good intellectual history is hard to come by. Somehow it is much easier to compile numbers and details than understand the complex interaction of ideas and mindsets in a historical context. After all, to provide a fairly typical example, Marxism was a grand idea, though with lousy consequences. It reshaped the world as we know it. Yet the psychology behind it, which ultimately caused the downfall of this grand idea, had never been fully and creatively explained. Someone once flippantly remarked that the failure of Karl Marx was not the soundness of his ideas but that he could not consult Sigmund Freud before coming up with them. But we should not obscure the central point, which is that these three books touch a very important nerve: the use, misuse, and abuse of the body by totalitarian ideology.

This is perhaps the crux of the matter: totalitarianism. Whether on the right or the left of the political spectrum, totalitarian political systems exhibit many similarities in their rigid ideology, authoritarian power structure, and complete disregard for the individual. Ideologies traditionally impact us not only in the spiritual but also the corporeal

domain. Of course, there is nothing original about societies' quest to remold their constituencies; this quest was not invented in Berlin, Rome, or Moscow. The "soldier hero" is not particularly a twentieth-century invention either—one just needs to think about the premodern Prussian military spirit or, going back to antiquity, Sparta. Every revolution starts with the premise that in order to achieve an everlasting change the movement must "re-educate" society. And, like all "revolutionary" movements, Fascism and Nazism appealed and were directed toward the young. There are many examples of this axiom in our ideological century.<sup>2</sup> Nazi Germany, traditionally the most extreme example of a totalitarian system, attempted to create a drastically new society through various benign (and not so benign) means, just like Communist Russia, China, and, Cambodia. Of course, the preoccupation with the body was not uniquely Fascist or German; it is as old as humankind itself. In some form or another, every fledgling nationalistic movement had to address this issue. The fixation of the Jewish community on the "Jewish body" in Central Europe, a far cry from Fascist ideology, is a good case in point. Zionists advocated the resolution of the *Lufmensch*: the nagging problem of the enfeebled, deracinated, and feminized Jew. It advocated the creation of a new society, which would be drastically different from "Ghetto Jewry" by returning to the soil and reshaping the body. Their ideas were deeply rooted in German *völkisch* ideology. We can easily discern a common thread in almost all cases in this quest for re-engineering human societies in that totalitarian regimes, be it Fascism, Communism, or religious cults, always attempted to impose full control over every facet of human existence—body, mind, and soul. The differentiation between various shades of totalitarianism, or all political ideologies for that matter, is the degree of control and the means to exert this control. While Marxism believed in environmental factors—re-education, in creating a new person, and eliminating real and perceived enemies of the state—Nazism was the first political ideology to fully embrace biology as a means to recast the new "Aryan man." This was not present either in the original Italian Fascism or many other shades of right- or left-wing political philosophies. There is a tragically long list through human history of "demographic engineering"—a euphemism for genocide—through which the dominant elite was to recast the demographic makeup of an entire people. One only need recall the deliberately unleashed famines in the Ukraine by Stalin, or the Cultural Revolution of China, or the murder of over a million people in Cambodia, or more recently the Rwandan genocide. Yet we can easily accept the notion that no other country went to such a length in controlling its own population by harnessing biology as Hitler's Third Reich.

*Shaping the Superman* aims to discover how Nazi authorities regulated the body through infusing a convoluted ideology, pseudoscientific theories, and outright quackery. It might be a misnomer to call Nazism a well-developed political ideology, especially in its quest to create a new "human species." The unbelievable naivete and complete lack of scientific knowledge, coupled with muddled logic, of these charlatans is astounding even in retrospect. After all, Heinrich Himmler—a chicken farmer by trade and one of the architects of Nazi genocidal policies—had not the faintest idea of the laws of heredity. The famous filmmaker Saul Landau once commented that "the essence of Nazism was not so much ideology but a complex web of corruption and order to maintain this corruption, they needed an ideology."<sup>3</sup> In a recent lecture by Paul Hochstim, he noted that Nazis properly

called themselves a *Bewegung* (movement), not just a revolution. Their paradigm was rooted in a concern for parliamentary legitimacy, which was initially important to Hitler. Also, the Nazi movement was a dynamic though destructive force that was to move forward “never-endingly” in an ever-evolving struggle with real and imaginary enemies.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, if we carefully observe the history of the Nazi state we find that it perpetrated a momentum, that finally ended in its own immolation. In many ways, it reminds us of another totalitarian system—Communism—that imploded of its own weight when there was nowhere to go, no more to sacrifice, no more internal or external “enemies,” spending itself like a neutron star.

The ultimate irony of Nazi policies for the “betterment” of the German race was that the three most powerful architects of the National Socialist state, Hitler, Himmler, and Goebbels, were the antithesis of the Aryan superman. Their direct interest in sport was minimal. Reinhardt Heydrich, the feared head of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service, or SD) was a different story. The paradigm of the tall, blond, long-faced Aryan, he was a fencing aficionado with aspirations to assume a major role in the international fencing scene. Yet German military leaders did not put too much faith in sport as a means for combat readiness. Instead, exercise and physical training were promoted for that purpose. The question is not only what steps were taken to bolster the gene pool of a group of people such as the SS, but we need also to find out the means used for achieving the final aim in creating a new “human species.” Unfortunately, *Shaping the Superman* falls short of fully addressing these questions. The complex ideological web of half-baked ideas permeated not just the political machine but also the educational establishment, from kindergarten all the way to the halls of higher learning. The ultimate Nazi delusion, for example, was rejecting Einstein’s theory of relativity as “Jewish science.” But for our purpose, it is more interesting to note the role primary and secondary education has played in teaching race sciences to children. In a recent exhibit in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, one of the most revealing themes was the role of education in the public school in disseminating racial ideas. I would have liked to see an extensive examination of the health curriculum of the Nazi school system, in which “racial hygiene” became a distinct and required subject. But, the main caveat of the *Shaping the Superman* is that it presents a one-dimensional story about the Nazi attempt to create an *Übermensch* through art, social engineering, and biology, instituting a breeding program for the purification of the race. There was, however, a second frontal attack that was much more sinister and lethal. It required the extermination of all those who were considered pollutant for this race. This included not only the racially “impure,” but also Aryans whose physical or mental abilities did not measure up to Nazi standards. We cannot forget that besides the Jews and the Gypsies, mentally and physically disabled Germans were also either sterilized or killed to accomplish this program. Although Arnd Krüger dedicates some paragraphs to this subject, we need to note that the *Shaping the Superman* deals mainly with the first aspect of this process. Yet I believe that these two are inseparable and closely intertwined in Nazi theory and practice. After all, selected breeding mandates the prevention of either inferior stock interbreed with the superior one or a complete cessation of breeding by the inferior stock altogether. The Nuremberg Laws, enacted in 1935, already forbade intermarriages or even employing Aryan servants beyond a certain age by Jews.

Racial purity is achieved not only through selective breeding but simultaneously also by eliminating the inferior “polluting” races. Thus Nazi authorities pursued their program of keeping the purity of the Aryan blood through progressively drastic measures. These included, boycott, exclusion, race laws, isolation, and finally total annihilation. Goldhagen, in his controversial book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners, Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, reduced this into two categories: from elimination to annihilation. In order to create a perfect race, Nazis first had to separate Jews, Gypsies, and the mentally disabled or infirm, from non-Jews in the physical sense—hence the ban for Jews to enter swimming pools, parks, athletic fields, resorts, etc. The next step; they had to dehumanize and depersonalize the Jews and Gypsies in order to be able to kill them.<sup>5</sup> There is a revealing picture on the book cover of Wildmann’s book: a smiling German soldier shearing the beard of an elderly Jew in the newly conquered East. The aim is to humiliate him, to rob him of his dignity. There is a direct path from this picture to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

The second anthology, *Superman Supreme*, brings up other deep-rooted and problematic issues touching the core of writing about sport, art, or cinema: the intellectual influence of various ideologies and their translation and transplantation into a native culture. No culture is willing to accept and absorb unconditionally every facets of a cultural intrusion, Without denying that Germany and Italy could have served as models to various groups, one must ask the question as to how much and how deep Nazi or Fascist ideas influenced various societies. Was it possible that some common characteristics in totalitarianism of the twentieth century existed, beyond the philosophy of Fascism—if there was such a generally practiced political philosophy by various states—both on the conscious and subconscious levels? In reading the chapters about art, festivals, and cultic practices in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and elsewhere—the flags, the colors of red and black, the Nazi preoccupation with the fire, the theatrically-staged ceremonies—the same analysis can easily be applied to the huge Communist rallies in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s and later in Eastern Europe in the 1950s. I don’t need to consult the *Gulag Archipelago* to recall from my childhood the forests of red flags, the thousands of chanting party members, or the rhythmic storms of clapping hands during Communist celebrations.<sup>6</sup> Anthropologists can attest to the fact that the preoccupation with the color red, fire, and blood were not unique to Nazi ceremonies. Fire as a pagan symbol was also present in every militaristic society, including the modern state of Israel. Fire, just like water, has a certain purifying psychological quality. These symbols have been exploited repeatedly in the twentieth century by every shade of the political spectrum: clever psychological manipulations of a tribal instinct that exists in every society in various levels and degrees. Art is perhaps the weakest link in identifying or rather distinguishing Fascism from other political ideologies. The form of art and architecture, as a recent book so aptly noted, has never been uniquely Fascist even in Italy during the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> The social realism in painting, sculpture, and design imposed by Stalin and Mao is frightfully reminiscent of Hitler’s Germany or Mussolini’s Italy.

The main issue, then, boils down to the essential question: what is Fascism? While Wildmann never uses this term, there are no discernable attempts in the two anthologies to provide a workable definition, except that of Allen Guttmann in the last chapter of the *Shaping the Superman*. But then, even some scholars who might have an inkling of the

complexity of this idea need some enlightenment. I am not convinced that “fascist” is the right word. Based on the content of the two anthologies, we are dealing with greatly diverging experiences and contexts. Nazism is Nazism and Mussolini’s Fascism, muddled as it may have been and admired by Hitler, is Fascism. Historically, only Nazism—and perhaps on a much lesser scale Japan militarism—incorporated deliberate racism, biological breeding policies, and mass extermination into its political agenda. For example, Jews in Italy, or under the Italian army’s jurisdiction elsewhere, were relatively safe until the last year of the war; Franco’s Spain provided safe haven for many Jews escaping from the clutches of Nazi Germany.

The term “Fascism” itself is one of the most ambiguous and abused idioms of contemporary political lingo, coined often by political expediency. As often the case, one is tempted to categorize all right-wing movements or “politically incorrect movements” at any given time as Fascists—from Mussolini in Italy to Hitler in Nazi Germany; from Franco in Spain to Horthy in Hungary; from Antonescu in Romania to Hirohito in Japan, just to mention a few. It all depends on political circumstances and context. For example, Hungary’s prewar government was often described by its postwar heirs as “Fascist,” yet a relatively free parliamentary system and press existed there until 1944. Very similar arguments can be advanced for the militaristic Japanese government before the war. The Soviet Union established an anti-Fascist block in the 1930s not only against France’s Spain, but all regimes not friendly with the communist state. The Fascist tag was transferred with equal ease to Marshall Tito in the early 1950s by the communist press, labeling him the “lackey” and “lapdog” of the imperialist and Fascist West. Indeed, being labeled a Fascist depends on where you stand in a given time and space: “authentic” Fascism lies in the eye of the beholder. Steven Kasher’s comment, quoted by Mangan, that “compulsively assigning the labels ‘Nazi’ and ‘Hitler’ serves to reinforce an image of ourselves as innate anti-Fascist-anti-Fascist without having to work at it,” is right on the mark! But theoretical constructs are a must even in history and, if indeed we could reach a generally accepted definition of Fascism, I believe that we still need to set up a differentiating formula for its various variants in Italy, Germany, and Spain.

More importantly, in an avowedly a historical age, when many college students in America have a rather vague idea of who Hitler was, and Mussolini is a completely forgotten figure, an intellectual discussion of some substance about the origins of Fascism is imperative. How the complete post-world-war hopelessness, anarchy, national and individual self-hatred, and reflexive response to the alleged “vices of modernity”—decadence—provided the background to the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Italy, Germany, Spain, and elsewhere, and influenced in various degrees groups in different societies, would make a fascinating and indeed essential appendix to these two anthologies.<sup>8</sup>

In reading the *Shaping the Superman* and *Superman Supreme*, I was reminded about the problems inherent in anthologies: the uneven scholarship and quality of writing. The limited number of authors available for the subject matter makes this almost inevitable. It is especially true when these writers’ works must be translated into English, often falling short of the original contribution’s quality. A more dictatorial hand—not Fascist, mind you!—would have done wonders to these two anthologies. In the final account, it would have eliminated repetitions in quotations and statements (sometimes on the same page!),

grammatical errors, and words that do not appear in any dictionary. But, then, we must be fair; a strong editorial hand is apt to ruffle some egos. It is also prudent to admit that I have faced this predicament often in the past. Yet I admit that I have also failed in the past—it is never easy to hurt a colleague's feelings.

These books reminded me also that language is a most beguiling thing. It all depends on the cultural context and political symbolism attached to various images and cultural icons. While the 1930s saw in Germany the emergence of the image of the "Aryan Superman," coincidentally or not, and almost contemporaneously, the figure of a radically different image of an archetypal American hero, Superman, made its debut. One is naturally inclined to ask the question: how and which way did this Nazi image influence, if at all, the American Superman? Was it a coincidence? Was it a subconscious response to, or rather rejection of, Nazi ideas? After all, the timing is uncanny. Superman, complete with blue tights and a red cape, debuted in *Action Comics* in June in 1938—at the apotheosis of Nazi power. The American Superman was the creation of two Jewish high school pals, Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster from Cleveland. Contrary to the Aryan image, the American Superman, The Man of Steel, exhibited distinct "Semitic" characteristics. Superman, whose real name is Kal-El, which can be translated from Hebrew as "all that God is," is a timid, bespectacled news reporter in real life. Yet he came to protect and save the world from evil. It conveys a certain messianic allusion. Thus, in a quintessential immigrant society as America, "Superman achieves truly mythic stature, interweaving a pattern of beliefs, literary conventions, and cultural traditions of the American people more powerfully and more accessibly than any other cultural symbol of the twentieth century, perhaps any period in our history."<sup>9</sup>

While America was content to leave Superman in the realm of make-believe, Nazi Germany, and in a much lesser degree other totalitarian states, implemented psychological and biological programs which not only promoted the survival of certain demographic groups but also eliminated (murdered) the undesirable elements of society. The German *Übermensch* had a mirror image in the *Untermensch* ("subhuman"). There is no equivalent in American vernacular. Superman in America is a positive figure who came to save human kind from evil forces, while the Nazi *Übermensch* connotes all the dark images of the black-uniformed SS men—the exemplification of evil itself. We might also interject that the American image harbors a different symbolism in the image of Superman. One does not need to play Freud in surmising that both images of Superman, the Nazi and the American, convey dramatically opposite messages: one came to save the German race, while the other was to save the world and not to impose world domination by a superior race.

I have always been uneasy about the smugness of some reviewers who start a book review or an essay by exclaiming, "If I have written this book. . . I would. . . ." Indeed, I did not write these three books. Thus, we should remain with the original idea that these works are important because they opened some new and most provocative angles and vistas for us to ruminate about. But we need to read them for other reasons as well. They definitely made me ponder the futility of totalitarian regimes in solving human problems and issues. The failure of Nazi policies, Fascist policies, and all other totalitarian policies became apparent even during their existence. The absolute futility of the Communist

system, which crumbled within weeks in Eastern and Central Europe, is fresh enough in our memory to prove this point.

The tragedy of this whole analysis is that breeding the Nazi or Fascist Superman failed miserably. Expediency virtually stopped the selective breeding of the Nazi Superman. By the last two years of the war, there were more foreign soldiers serving in the SS—the ultimate place for the *Übermensch* from satellite nations, including *Untermenschen* like Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and others—than Germans. Also, because of the hemorrhaging of German human resources and a quest for replenishing the “racial stock,” a policy of kidnapping Aryan-looking babies from Poland and elsewhere also signaled the doom of a dismal and failed scientific experiment.

I cannot say that we have been particularly successful in the past in learning from history's lessons. The Nazis learned from the Communists and, in turn, the Communists were willing to adopt Nazi ideas, though with a twist. A Russian quip about Germans in the 1970s was that the Soviet Union introduced Communism, but the East Germans perfected it. It might seem a little unfair to say so, but they might have had a head start in learning from a totalitarian, Nazi heritage. Experimentation without regard to the health and well being of athletes in East Germany was reminiscent in many ways to that of the 1930s Nazi Germany. And these three books at least force us to think and reflect on these issues.

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1. Without going into an extensive bibliography, not more than a handful of historians have made major contributions to intellectual and cultural history in sport.
  2. George Eisen, “Jews and Sport: A Century of Retrospect,” Special Issue: “One Hundred Years of ‘Muscular Judaism’: Sport in Jewish History and Culture,” *Journal of Sport History* 26 (Summer 1999): 225-239; George Eisen, “Jewish History and the Ideology of Modern Sport: Approaches and Interpretations,” *Journal of Sport History* 25 (Fall 1998):482-531.
  3. He made this comment in an informal discussion with the author.
  4. Dr. Paul Hochstim, “The Origins of Nazi Germany,” lecture delivered at Central Connecticut State University, 13 March 2000.
  5. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
  6. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (reprint; Greenwich, CT: Westview, 1997).
  7. Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics Under Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also an excellent review of the book by Tim Parks, “The Non-Conformist,” *The New York Review*, 21 September 2000, pp. 30-35.
  8. Max Nordau's ideas in his provocative book, *Degeneration*, which were later borrowed by the National Socialists, point to this “decay” and “decadence” as rooted in “modernity.” Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (translation from 2nd ed.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).
  9. Gary Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?” in Carol J. Verburg, ed. *Ourselves Among Others* (Boston: St. Martin's, 2000), 428.