

Physical Activities in the Service of the Fatherland. Turnen and the National Movement in Germany, 1810-1820

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'We now have a smaller picture of the Olympic Games outside of the Hallisches Tor. Because of the activity and the engagement of Dr. Jahn...young men of a Berlin gymnasium (high school) came together,

have built an enclosure and have made all preparations in order to practice wrestling, jumping, running, climbing and other exercises which give the body balance/equilibrium.”

This article, printed in a newspaper, the “Morgenblatt fr gebildete Stride” 1811 presented the reader with a new, and until then unknown concept of physical culture, referred to as Olympic Games, whereas the initiators called it Turnen. The new activities in the Turnplatz (the outdoor gymnastic field where turnen was conducted), attracted attention and a lot of spectators not only because such activities were unknown but also since it was considered improper in the ancien regime for honest men to conduct physical exercises in public. The ideal of the 18th century was the aristocrat, the ‘galant homme,’ with a graceful body, elegant clothes and harmonious movements

Based on the relevant sources, especially the works of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, but also on the publications of Pickier-Muskau or Bomemann, in this paper I will first describe the central aims of Turnen, i.e., the national unification of Germany, human rights and codified laws (constitutionalism), and the liberty of Prussia from French occupation. The means to effect these aims were national education (Volkserziehung) and military preparation,

This paper discusses the aims and ideology of Turnen against a backdrop of the social and political situation of the time. What, for example, did military preparation mean in a time when Prussia was occupied by French troops, when mercenary armies were criticized, and the armament of citizens (people’s army) was demanded as a step in the direction of democratization. Which role did the turner play in the National and the liberal movements which developed after the turn of the century? What ideas were connected with the patriotic concept of the turner and how is their nationalism to be judged?

The aims of the Turnen corresponded with its principles, organization, rules and content, and all of these differed decisively from the gymnastics of the Philanthropen and the leading ideas of English sport. I will try to answer questions concerning which ideas and ideals of the body were adopted and transmitted by Turnen, which patterns of movements and forms of organization were chosen and what effects were expected from the Turnen exercises.

Turnen reflects a new definition of the body and reproduces not only the social but also the gender order, which was demanding new legitimization at the turn of the century. The last part of the paper deals with the failing of the Turner movement, which is connected with the failure of the national and liberation movements and their

political aims. Turnen was forbidden between 1820 and 1842 in Prussia, and after this time Turnen changed considerably in both its political aims, its organization and the kind of exercises it promoted.