

Civilization Fitness, Blitzkrieg: Summer of 1940

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Official American military involvement in the Second World War began on December 7, 1941. However, that infamous date did not mark the beginning of American concern about the conflict. Indeed, a spasm of worry wracked the United States during the Summer of 1940, when the sudden success of Germany's *blitzkrieg* ended the Phony War, crushed Europe's continental democracies, and threatened Britain with invasion. In the process, the Nazi war machine smashed long-held verities about American strength and security. This paper explores ways in which the unexpectedly easy German victories of that summer prompted reassessment of notions about democratic power, using athletics and fitness as a model.

War, nationalism, and sports are often conflated. Axis fascism used fitness and athletics as a window onto purported cultural vigor. German National Socialism paraded examples of youth and potency to impress onlookers, whether in the arena or on the battlefield. Observing British prisoners of war in conquered Holland, CBS radio correspondent William L. Shirer noted "Their physique...Hollow-chested and skinny and round-shouldered." Military drill could not overcome lives of "Bad diet, lack of fresh air, and physical training," he concluded, when comparing the prisoners to the young German soldiers who looked "Bronzed, clean-cut, physically healthy as lions."

Shirer was not the first American to muse over fascist physical fitness. Bernarr MacFadden trained a contingent of Italian cadets, receiving thanks from General Renato Ricci for helping to awaken Italy's sporting tradition, "The sign of a virile people."

The summer of 1940 saw the Axis on the threshold of victory. Facing this prospect from both sides of the isolationist-interventionist divide, Americans examined the state and strength of their own democratic civilization. That summer saw a host of sporting occasions, from airplane races to boxing, swimming, and rowing matches, the response to which reveal the depths of popular concern in the United States over national fitness, competitiveness, and power.