

POLITICS & INSTITUTIONS

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Skiing: Nationalism and the Military **Prior to 1914**

After the humiliations and anguish of the 1870 defeat of France by Prussia and the creation of the German state, great effort was made to regenerate the French race. The French Alpine Club (ClubAlpin Français, CAF) was the first of the large organizations to inculcate a patriotic spirit along with its crusade for fitness, exemplified in its motto: Pour la Patrie par la Montagne (For the Fatherland by way of the mountains).

Individual Frenchmen were on skis in the early 1890s, and the first clubs, founded in mid-decade, were all bourgeois inspired, bourgeois led, and the goal was sporting on skis. Individual army officers, not against the sporting ethic, also experimented with skis at the same time. These officers, however, thought in strategic and recruiting terms.

This paper analyzes two institutions: the Club Alpin Français and the French Military. They combined to promote skiing in order to improve the prospects for national defense as well as better the physical and mental fitness of the population, Skiing in the years before World War I was a heady mix of serious chauvinism and social fun and games, of concern about degeneracy and certainty of courage, of a desperate search for fit recruits led by fervent apostles of ski doctrine. Nowhere else in Europe was there such desperation in the enjoyment of skiing in the years before 1914.

The paper is based on archival sources, various contemporary journals and newspapers as well as secondary literature.