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Jürgen Court. *Deutsche Sportwissenschaft in der Weimarer Republik und im Nationalsozialismus: Vol. 1: Die Vorgeschichte 1900-1918.* Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008. 320 pp. EUR 24.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-8258-1379-6.

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Thinking Sports in the Early Twentieth Century

This first volume in Jürgen Court's planned multi-volume exploration of the emergence and nature of sports science in twentieth-century Germany explores the two decades that preceded the 1920 foundation of the Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen (German College of Physical Exercise), which marked the beginning of institutionalized sports science in that country. By focusing so closely on this period, Court hopes in the later volume(s) to illustrate continuities and discontinuities in the academic discipline.

Apart from an early effort by Karl Friedrich Friesen in 1812 to develop explanatory charts for proper form and technique in *Turnen*–an effort that ended with his death in 1814–significant initiatives to study sports did not emerge in Germany until after the establishment of the modern Olympic Games in 1896. Because the Olympics emphasized both peak athletic performance and national representation, questions about proper training, about the physical limits of the human body, and about the role of sports in the nation shaped the study of athletics and physical exercise in Germany for the next twenty years.

As German academics began to research the health effects of athletic training on the body in the early 1900s, for instance, two camps gradually emerged. One tended to emphasize performance-improving strategies and specific training with an eye to producing elite athletes, while the other tended to focus on a program of measured exercise that aimed at a general level of fitness in the population as a whole. At the same time, academics also wrestled with the question of how physical exercise contributed to national strength and what forms of exercise would best realize these goals. Here again, several camps emerged. Whereas some Germans criticized the Olympic Games as a dilution of national identity because they fostered an international spirit and promoted sports that were recent imports to Germany, others countered that the Games, in fact, fostered German identity by showcasing the nation's best athletes on a global stage, and still others–albeit a tiny minority–sought to separate discussions of physical fitness from any consideration of national power whatsoever.

Court describes, in great detail, the positions of the key figures in these academic debates. Carl Diem, for example, advocated specialized research designed to groom high-performance, world-class athletes, research that he believed would also have application in the school system and thereby improve the health of the masses, too. In conjunction with the decision to stage the 1916 Olympic Games in Berlin, Diem and others pushed for the creation of a sports science institute on the Olympic grounds, an institute that would place its primary emphasis on producing medal-winning athletes for Germany.

Arthur Mallwitz, on the other hand, who wrote the first work of what we would later call sports medicine in 1908, raised concerns about the "sports heart," a debilitating condition purported at the time to result from high-intensity athletic training of precisely the kind that Diem advocated. The discourse of a "sports heart" further fueled the indigenous *Turnen* movement's own skepticism of competitive sports and underpinned the distinction that it drew between "Gesundheitssport," which fostered general well-being, and "Luxussport," whose high-performance imperatives–aimed at breaking records–ostensibly led to medical problems and a decline in the individual's value to society. Georg Friedrich Nicolai, a medical doctor, also warned against overdoing athletic training, and he envisioned medical research guiding the masses toward improved health through exercise, with a particular emphasis on women and frail men, who would otherwise never receive the benefits of exercise during military service. Nicolai, however, distanced himself from the Turners' explicit linkage of physical health and national power.

The second half of Court's book looks at the impact

of the First World War on these early debates, and Court concludes, certainly not surprisingly, that German scientists and officials increasingly framed their discussions of sports and exercise in terms of how best to build physically and mentally strong men for the national defense. Both the proponents of competitive sports around Carl Diem and the proponents of *Turnen* around Mallwitz and Wilhelm Winter used the conflict to promote their particular positions. Winter, for instance, published a tract in 1916 that insisted on the fundamental contradiction between sports, which led, in his view, to a dangerous level of overexertion, and *Turnen*, which emphasized the physical development of the population as a whole and, therefore, made the greatest contribution to a nation's military capacity. Diem countered in 1917 that the war had shown Germans that the limits of their physical abilities were much higher than previously assumed. The war, Diem argued, simply corroborated his stance all along that rigorous training in the pursuit of peak performance was both healthy and in the national interest.

By the end of the First World War, Court argues, sports science in Germany had decisively shifted toward a more explicitly nationalistic and militaristic paradigm, and he presents the June 1918 decision by the outspokenly pacifist Nicolai to flee to Denmark as symbolic of the dramatically changed perspective within Germany's sports and exercise community and, perhaps, within the nation as a whole.

Jürgen Court has written a very detailed study, but this overwhelming detail often winds up crowding out his argument. Court has a tendency to quote extremely long passages from the original texts, when a short summary of those texts, followed by Court's own analysis, would be both more effective and more engaging. Court spends twenty-six pages (pp. 206-232), for example, providing a chapter-by-chapter summary of Wilhelm Winter's 1916 booklet *Der Weltkrieg und die Leibesübungen*, including extensive block quotations, a level of detail that seems particularly excessive when one considers that Winter's original text was only 147 pages long in the first place. Shortly thereafter, Court reprints in its entirety a three-page letter by Carl Diem (pp. 238-241). The fact that Court then succinctly summarizes that letter in four sentences raises the question of why he had the reader slog through the letter itself, with its various details and niceties that have little bearing on Court's argument.

At yet another point earlier in the book, on p. 99, Court gives a long list of the titles of talks and the names of participants at an early sports conference. Without any sense of the content of those talks or any analysis of their significance, though, it is hard to see what purpose this serves. To give just one last example, Court describes in great detail the contents of Wilhelm Benary's 1913 dissertation, which Benary published later that year as a 68-page work under the title, "Die psychologische Theorie des Sports." Court spends the next three pages giving a paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the first twelve paragraphs of that work (pp. 128-131). Again, Court could have adopted a much more analytical approach in which he drew out key points from that work and framed them clearly within his own argument regarding the evolution of German research on sports.

The four aforementioned examples illustrate the principal weakness of Court's extensively researched book: Court himself is absent from large stretches of it. He does not summarize enough; he does not analyze enough; and he does not provide enough of the larger context for the developments that he describes. Moreover, Court's tendency to summarize works in very close detail–if not to quote entire pages from them directly–contrasts with his reluctance to explore potentially fascinating and important lines of inquiry. For instance, Court does mention, in passing, that some German sports researchers promoted women's physical development as well as men's. He notes, for instance, that the researcher Robert Sommer pointedly insisted that his findings applied to female students as well as to male ones (p. 170), and Court also mentions that Wilhelm Winter called both for women's physical development and for women to perform a year of national service (p. 218). Court does not elaborate at all on these two researchers' positions on women's physical education, nor on that of Nicolai, who had also advocated for women's exercise. Granted, an author cannot pursue all of the potential lines of inquiry opened up by his or her research, and it is therefore perhaps a bit unfair of me to criticize Court on this count. Nevertheless, given how important the "Frauenfrage" had become in German social and political discourse at this time, particularly during and immediately after the First World War, it seems a missed opportunity.

In the preface, Court criticizes contemporary academic publishing for privileging the "impact factor," a single number that indicates how many readers a study has reached or the number of times that it has been cited by other studies. Court derides this tendency as indicative of the "total economization of academic study" and as the biggest erosion of academic study "since its total ideologization in the 'Third Reich' and the GDR" (p. xiii). There is value, however, in trying to reach out to as broad an audience as possible; there is value in establishing the broader context; and there is value in clearly

articulating how a given study shifts our perceptions of an historical period. I found myself wishing for more of these things in Court's book. Court has clearly done his research, and his book will surely be of interest to historians of early twentieth-century German sports and exercise, but–at the risk of writing something that Court himself would find most unfair–I cannot help but think that this book could have had a much greater "impact factor" than it actually has.

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