

Bodies for Battle: US Army Physical Culture and Systematic Training, 1885-1957

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ABSTRACT: This book, part of the University Press of Kansas' Modern War Studies series, furnishes a comprehensive review and analysis of the U.S. Army's physical training practices and values—referred to as physical culture—from the late nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. Author Garrett Gatzemeyer is a contingency planner with the United States European Command who previously taught at the U.S. Military Academy. Research material for the study was drawn from library and collection holdings at West Point, the University of Iowa, the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Kansas, and at Fort Benning in Georgia. The content includes an Introduction, six chapters, a Conclusion, and end material.

In the Introduction,

Gatzemeyer poses four key questions accompanying the examination of physical culture. He notes that at every stage of its growth, the Army's physical culture "reflected unique contexts informed by perceived military demands, the state of exercise science and physical education, popular culture, and its own accumulating tradition" (p. 3). He identifies three distinct periods in the evolution of the Army's physical culture.

Chapter 1

covers influences on the origin of the physical culture created in the 1880s. Among those catalysts were the impact of foreign wars, changes in American life, political and social movements of that time, and findings from studies conducted by the military.

Chapter 2

delineates features of the first defined period in the Army's physical culture, which traversed the years from 1885 until America's entry into World War I. Without question, the person who contributed most to this initial period was Herman Koehler, Master of the Sword at West Point from 1885 to 1923. Koehler expanded mandatory physical training and emphasized gymnastic-type exercises. Among the characteristics of the physical culture at this juncture were the need for psychological development to accompany physical training, an emphasis on discipline, placing unit fitness above individual progress, and embracing expert advice. The first official Army manual on physical training was published in 1914 and drew much of its material from Koehler's 1892 manual outlining calisthenic exercises.

Chapter 3

delineates elements which led to the second defined period of the Army's physical culture, that during World War I. Preeminent among those molding physical culture during this segment were civilian educators, especially Joseph Raycroft of Princeton University. He favored a uniform training program which was simple yet intensive. It changed previous traits by integrating athletics, teaching combat-oriented fitness, and focusing more on individual training. Raycroft's mark is clearly seen on Army physical training manual addendums published in 1918 and 1920.

Chapter 4

is labeled "Reversion, Disaggregation, and 'Prehabilitation'" and describes the Army's physical culture between 1919 and 1940. Several changes occurred after America's participation in World War I. First, there was a mass exodus of men leaving the military. Second, budget cuts hampered new projects associated with the physical culture. Third, the nation exhibited an isolationist approach to foreign policy. With military trainers

now in charge again, the Army's physical culture more resembled Herman Koehler's training system than that of Joseph Raycroft, particularly in its minimization of sports and athletics. However, concern over rejection rates for military service during World War I and the need for national preparedness for potential future conflicts precipitated civilian military training camps and coordinated programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In Chapter 5,

Gatzemeyer presents trends which highlighted the World War II era, the third defined period in the maturation of the Army's physical culture. Perhaps the two persons whose views contributed most to this period were Charles H. McCloy, a physical educator at several universities around the country, and Lt. Col. Theodore Bank, both of whom were associated with the Army's newly created Special Service Athletic and Recreation division. They helped to instill changes in the Army's physical culture which were needed during World War II, including framing exercise around combat, embracing scientific methods of measuring performance, and intertwining athletics with systematic training. Further, they understood how societal changes such as mandatory conscription and the addition of women serving in the military affected such training. In this manner, the Army's 1946 field manual updated and revised previous manuals published during the interwar period.

Chapter 6

relays how the Cold War years between 1945 to 1957 impacted the Army's physical culture. Stung by findings of World War II rejection rates of draftees and the mortality rate of prisoner-of-war deaths during the Korean War, Army officials revised physical training to ensure that conditioning programs were both consistent and continuous and reinstated a regimen that emphasized individual skills. Further, to counter obesity in the ranks, they put a premium on weight control. Partnering with the Dwight Eisenhower administration as well as local schools, churches, and community organizations, the Army created youth fitness programs. Still, some proposals such as requiring a year of military training following high school were rejected, demonstrating the limits of universal rehabilitation measures.

In the concluding chapter, Gatzemeyer moves quickly from the 1980 revamping of the Army's physical fitness test to that which was created in 2018. He then offers a series of observations. First, he states that the Army's physical culture has always been multifaceted and educative. Second, he posits that advances in military technology will never replace the need for physical prowess among soldiers. Third, he believes that the evolving physical culture must overcome its gendered nature by establishing fitness standards for all. Finally, Gatzemeyer disagrees with the proposition American society is in terminal decline as it pertains to readiness for military service, noting the success of the Army's physical culture in adjusting to changing conditions and its record in addressing moral and mental facets of service.

There are two ways to compare this book with others on the same topic. One approach is to view it alongside contemporary physical training studies of other branches of the service, such as the Navy, Marines, and Special Forces. Another is to probe the civilian history of physical fitness in the United States. Along these lines, Martha Verbrugge (2012) describes the history of women's physical education in America during the 1900s. Shelly McKenzie (2013) analyzes the governmental, scientific, commercial, and societal forces which steered the development of America's fitness culture. Rachael Morton (2018) explores the manner by which the Federal government strived to define and shape the American physique during the twentieth century. Finally, Jason Shurley, Jan Todd, and Terry Todd (2019) examine how strength coaching altered the physical culture of American sports.

Bodies for Battle is not without its flaws. Much of the text is repetitive and some material is presented in a disjointed manner. Further, the Conclusion skips important features of the Army's physical culture which transpired between 1957 and the present. Of course, the fact that the book is limited in its focus to how the Army dealt with physical fitness is an inescapable shortcoming. Yet, this book is groundbreaking in its review of the subject matter over time, especially in its portrayal of the "tension between tradition and innovation that reflects a paradox in the military culture writ large" (p. 214). Just as important, the author's views on the current state of the Army's physical culture are shared by contemporary critics of physical training there and elsewhere in the military.

REFERENCES

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