

Victor Zilberman

## Physical education in the Soviet Union

If there is to be a system for maintaining health in a population, let it be one that works well. In Britain most schools encourage but do not insist on the children playing games to keep them active, and many do go on playing games into middle age; many don't, but it cannot really be elitism that deters them. In North America the options for physical exercise at school quickly become narrower and specialised, and only winners persist with them, often going on into competitive careers in sport; the popularity among adults of such unsystematic and non-competitive activities as jogging and cross-country ski seem to be an index of reaction against the efforts of official education, in alliance perhaps with a quite proper concern for personal grooming. Zilberman's description of the Russian system, that embraces the entire population, carries us into unfamiliar seas; on paper, and in such evidence as international competition presents to us, the system is an impressive affair indeed. In actuality, he seems to ask, are they really finding elite athletics compatible with mass participation? Without having the answer, we must remind ourselves that in sport, as in education, being Communist doesn't have to mean you've got it wrong.

Because of its achievements in international sporting competitions, the U.S.S.R. holds a leading position in the international sports movement. In the socialist countries, especially the U.S.S.R., it is believed that elite athletics and mass participation in sport are compatible and complementary - one needs the other (Botterhill, 1979). Physical education in schools is an important part of the Soviet sports movement inasmuch as it encourages mass participation while facilitating the identification of athletic talent. The Soviet government places much importance on education and sport as two means of

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developing loyalty to the State and Party, and of developing such qualities as discipline and collectivism.

To provide some understanding of the physical education program in Soviet schools I will briefly describe a few important dimensions of the Soviet sports movement, its ideological basis, its organization, and the importance of the All-Union Sport Classification and the GTO rating systems.

### **Making new men**

In contrast to the educational systems of some western countries, the Soviet system is very centralized, for the Soviet Union, with its large territory and population, requires such centralization. Many government agencies participate in making the educational system a smooth mechanism, the ministries of education at the republic and national levels cooperating and working together. Decisions affecting the physical education of the general schools are mainly made by the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Education and the U.S.S.R. Committee on Physical Culture and Sport. Instructions are passed on to the ministries of republics, to regional, city, and district educational departments, and ultimately for implementation to school directors and teachers. As Grant (1972) has noted, "By the time it comes to the teacher, the area of personal discretion, though greater than it used to be, is very small...not only basic policy, but the content of the curriculum, schemes of work, textbooks, and the like are prescribed for the teacher in considerable detail."

The Soviet government considers the creation of a "new man", a builder of the Communist society, of great importance; the Soviet school plays an important role in raising the young generation with a Communist mentality. Folsom (1957) writes, "Education is viewed by the Communist Party as an instrument for the formation of a Communist society." This orientation is carried on through the school system in many different ways: through every subject taught, through the Communist youth organizations (the Octobrists, ages 7-9; the Pioneers, ages 10-14; the Komsomol, ages 15-27), and through school celebrations, competitions, and so on. By means of such school activities an attempt is made to produce politically trained, disciplined "builders" of Communism, patriots, and internationalists (*Pravda*, Aug. 22, 1969).

Soviet education begins in kindergarten, where Soviet poetry and songs are learned and political holidays celebrated. Political education in the U.S.S.R. continues through the entire education program - general school, secondary, and higher education, and through every part of life. Outside of school, Communist ideology

is presented through radio, television, books, newspapers, magazines, movies, songs, celebrations, and the arts - opera, ballet, sculpture, paintings.

Teaching and learning in Soviet schools is planned with the intention of inculcating responsibility to the collective. This feature of Soviet education has its origin in the work of Makarenko, who experimented with collectivist methods of raising children during the early 1920's. In his view, the purpose of the collective in the Soviet education system is to develop such qualities as discipline, comradeship, and respect for elders, teachers and the State. Makarenko believed that children are most easily influenced and disciplined through peer pressure. For example, if a student is not spending enough time to do well in his studies, according to Makarenko, improvement is more likely if the collective (his classmates) encourage him to study, offer him help, and try to make him realize that his poor grades are a reflection on the class as a whole. Responsibility for monitoring behaviour is therefore placed on the students, with the teacher's guidance. A friendly, purposeful collective is thought to provide a positive environment where the best qualities of an individual should develop. The collective is a mini-society, a model of adult society; it is an environment where the individual learns and experiences relations between himself and society. Makarenko used sports terminology in describing the functioning of collectives. He pointed out that Communist resoluteness, spirit, and purposefulness cannot be fostered without "exercise" in appropriate behaviour. And the collective, he added, is "the gymnasium for this type of gymnastics." (Krasovitskiy, 1978)

### **The all-round developed personality**

The important goal of creating a new man is being achieved by the Soviet state through different institutions embracing all of the Soviet population at different ages starting from kindergarten - through the school system, the military forces, factories, farms, and so on. The task of raising the young generation as all-round developed individuals, as Soviet educator Korolev (1960) has stated, "is a root problem, the main problem of pedagogical theory and practice." In Lenin's words (Belorussova, 1972), "Our aim is toward education, teaching and the preparation of the all-round developed person who will be able to do everything...this is the direction of Communism and to achieve it will take many years." Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), Gorkiy, Makarenko, Lunacharskiy, and other Soviet educators concerned themselves with this subject. Krupskaya, for instance, suggested that the Soviet schools should prepare all-round developed, spiritually disciplined men; to achieve this, people have to be healthy, brave, and physically prepared, she said. She therefore considered

physical education essential to a complete education. Attaching importance to the fostering of all-round developed personalities has continued down to the present day. In his speech celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Komsomol, Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev remarked "we want to see our youth not only beautiful, but also healthy and physically strong."

Marx and Engels (Folsom, 1957) stressed that "education should be mental, physical (gymnastics and military training), and technical, (acquainting children with the process of production)." Their educational philosophy was based on the writings of Fourier and Owen, regarding the harmonious development of physical and mental aptitudes. Fourier and Owen, according to Korolev (1960), had argued that "man must develop his abilities in every way through varied practical activity, and work must regain the attractiveness it (has) lost as a result of its division." This point was later elaborated by Marx, who according to Korolev "performed a great service in discovering and formulating an objective universal law of social production that demands changes in labour and the rounded development of the individual...the very nature of large-scale industry requires that the incomplete worker, the simple performer of a particular social function, should be replaced by a roundly-developed individual for whom different social functions represent successive means of vital activity." In this process, the division between intellectual and physical work is completely removed.

What precisely is the "rounded development of the individual", as understood by Marxism? Answers vary, but Korolev's explanation touches on the essential points:

It means moulding a person who will perform both physical and mental work, will produce both material and spiritual values, will be harmoniously developed physically and spiritually, and will be active in public affairs. It means inculcating lofty ethical ideals and aesthetic tastes, and varied material and spiritual needs. It is the training of a person who can orient himself anywhere in the system of production and in its scientific and technical principles, has mastered the basic principles of modern science, and is prepared to change his occupation if the interests of society and his inclinations require it. (p.12)

In other words, the physical, ethical, aesthetic and cognitive aspects of education are supposed to complement each other in achieving a common goal which is expressed in terms of the upbringing of a worthy citizen of a Communist society. For this reason, the program of the Communist Party gives encouragement to all forms of mass sport and physical training (**Soviet Sport**,

Questions and Answers, 1974).

### Rating systems

Much of the accomplishment of Soviet physical education and sport should be attributed to the rating systems of the All-Union Sport Classification ("Edinaiya Vsesoyuznaya Sportivnaya Clasifikatsiya") and GTO ("Gotov k trudu i oborone", or Ready for Labour and Defence) which facilitate mastery in sport and mass participation in all areas of the sport movement. The All-Union Sport Classification is a system of norms and requirements according to which athletes are awarded ranks, titles, and categories in different sports. It covers 56 sports and is updated every four years after the Olympic Games. The 1977-80 Classification includes (1) Juniors (Third, Second and First levels) and (2) Seniors (Third, Second, First, Candidate for Master of Sport, Master of Sport of the U.S.S.R. International Class, Grand Master in Chess and Checkers, and Merited Master of Sport).

The GTO system's purposes are to encourage sport in the everyday life of the Soviet people, to enhance military preparedness, to teach civic defence, and to improve personal hygiene. GTO programs span the ages of 10 to 60 and are organized into 5 stages. First, Brave and Adroit (for boys and girls 10 to 13 years old); Second, Rising Generation (for boys and girls 14 to 15 years old); Third, Strong and Courageous (for boys and girls 16 to 18 years old); Fourth, Physical Perfection (men 19 to 39, divided into two groups: 19 to 28 and 29 to 39; women 19 to 34, divided into two groups: 19 to 28 and 29 to 34); and Fifth, Vigour and Health (men 40 to 60, divided into two groups: 40 to 49 and 50 to 60; women, divided into two groups: 35 to 44 and 45 to 55).

The goals of the GTO and the All-Union Sport Classification systems are similar in that they encourage people to participate in the sports movement, but they are different in other respects. The GTO was created to increase mass involvement in sports, and to provide the requirements for physical education in the general school as well as the physical exercise programs for the military and for collectives in rural and urban areas. The main goal of the All-Union Sport Classification system, on the other hand, is to raise the proficiency of Soviet athletes essentially to the level of winning major Soviet and international sport competitions.

The goal of fitness programs in Canada and other western countries like Sweden is getting fit, reducing weight, and so on, and their achievements in fitness are not tested in competition. In Russia, fitness has a different meaning. The GTO rating system can be considered a fitness program that helps people

improve their physical abilities and their health; this is the way Soviet physical educators present it. The GTO test consists of two parts, the requirements of each of which must be satisfied in order to obtain the GTO badge for a particular age group. The first, which is the most difficult and most important, involves a point system test in various sports, which is carried out in the context of competition. An individual is tested in running, long or high jumping, swimming, grenade throwing, or shot put throwing and so on. The second part is academic, and participants are examined on personal hygiene, civil defence, and the organization of the Soviet physical education system. Depending on the points accumulated in the academic and practical tests, badges are then awarded.

### **Physical education in the curriculum**

The Ministry of Education, the Committee of Physical Culture and Sport, the Central Committee of the Komsomol, and the Ministry of Health participate in planning and organizing physical education programs for students in general schools. Such programs seek to improve the health of the students by developing motor skills which would be useful in their daily lives, to encourage fitness and participation in sport, to raise the level of sports achievement, to instill moral and aesthetic values consistent with Communist ideology, and to prepare students over 10 years of age to pass the GTO tests (Kukushkin, 1975).

From grade 1 onward, students are divided into three groups for physical education according to their health and physical abilities:

- (1) The basic group - all healthy students who exhibit normal or above normal motor development;
- (2) The preparatory group - pupils who are in poor physical condition, overweight, or physically underdeveloped; and
- (3) The special group - students with physical or mental disabilities.

In this paper, the author's concern is with those physical education programs which are oriented to the needs of children without physical deficiencies or disabilities.

Physical education is provided in various ways by the schools: regular classes which are included in the general education curriculum; recreational activities held during school hours; after-school recreational activities conducted within the school's general educational program; and athletic competitions and special events supervised by the school, in which participation is voluntary.

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Physical education lessons are based on the requirements of the curriculum of Physical Culture for each school grade. The curriculum includes compulsory and, in later grades, elective physical education subjects to be used, depending on the qualifications of the teachers, the school's geographical location, the availability of suitable facilities and equipment, and so on. No elective subjects are offered in grades 1 to 4, whereas in the higher grades electives comprise about 10% of physical education classes (Schneidman, 1978).

Table 1. Percentages of total time devoted to physical education activities in the General Schools.

Age	Gymnastics %	Games %	Sports %	Hiking %	Total %
8 - 9	40	50	5	5	100
10 - 11	40	40	10	10	100
12 - 13	30	35	20	15	100
14 - 15	30	25	25	20	100
16 - 17	20	25	35	20	100

(Kukushkin, 1975, p.193)

Table 1 shows the percentage of time devoted by schools to various activities according to the age of the students. Here **Gymnastics** means general exercises used in many sports, for warm-up, for example. **Games** include basketball, volleyball, and soccer. **Sports** denotes such activities as track and field, gymnastics, skiing, and swimming.

In allocating time for different activities within the curriculum, physiological and psychological differences among children of different ages are taken into consideration. For example, the table shows that during physical education classes for children between 8-9 years of age (grades 2-3) half of the instructional time is spent on games. This is because children of that age have difficulties concentrating on physical activities requiring sustained performance, and therefore the learning of motor skills is often undertaken in the context of games. Games (50%) and gymnastics (40%) take up the majority of teaching time at this age, but decrease in importance as the children get older. In the final grades of school the teacher can concentrate more on the teaching of various sports. Nevertheless, games remain an important part of the physical education program, as can be seen by the fact that even at the 16-17 age level (grade 8) games are

still scheduled for 25% of the physical education curriculum in the general schools.

Considering that children spend up to 10 years in general schools, it is understandable that their exposure to physical education is felt to affect their future involvement in sport. Physical education classes are compulsory from grades 1 through 10, with two 45 minute periods of instruction per week under the supervision of a teacher. Following language and mathematics, physical education requires the next highest number of hours in the curriculum over the 10 year period, an indication of its importance.

Many schools begin their day with eight to twelve gymnastic exercises for about 10 minutes. These are usually conducted in the school yard, auditorium, or school corridors, depending on weather conditions. Such exercises are also urged during breaks between other activities, to help reduce fatigue and to refresh the students by giving them a change in routine. Recess is usually spent playing games or in activities using various sports equipment set up in the school yard. Students participate voluntarily in these activities. The games and exercises are of a simple nature, like soccer or basketball, and the students are well acquainted with them.

### **Competition**

The syllabus and class guides prescribed for physical education programs include suggestions for teachers. Teachers are advised to pay close attention to the body construction of the children. They are shown how to prevent injuries and given necessary first aid information. Beginning with grade 4 physical education classes, children are prepared for the GTO and participate in trial competitions. This is not the sole purpose of physical education classes, but preparation for GTO makes up a large portion of the physical education program, and teachers are expected to prepare a certain percentage of students to become GTO badge holders.

Athletic competitions constitute an important part of the physical education program and are used to improve the health and fitness of the students and, significantly, to develop such qualities as comradeship, collectivism, and team, class, and school spirit. Competitions are organized on various levels: students are divided into four age groups (11-12; 13-14; 15-16; and 17-18) for inter-school competitions. Usually, students compete in up to fourteen sports: basketball, volleyball, water polo, cycling, gymnastics, track and field, swimming, diving, table tennis, lawn tennis, soccer, shooting, canoeing, and chess (Howell and Van

Vliet, 1965). The sports and events vary for each age group; research institutes of physical culture establish the guidelines. For example, the 13-14 age group run the 400 meters, but are not allowed to compete in the 800 meter race (Howell and Van Vliet, 1965). To participate, students must have the permission of a physician; the competition site and sports equipment are inspected to prevent any harm or injury to the children. The results in competitions are often of a high standard, especially at the national level. Talented athletes are "discovered" at these competitions.

The highest level of competition for the general school students, however, is found at the U.S.S.R. School Games, which the press refers to as a "holiday of children's sport and a festival of friendship." U.S.S.R. School Games finals are preceded by city, district, regional and republic tournaments, in which millions of school children compete (Shtukalo, 1976). During these competitions many boys and girls receive GTO badges and qualify for sports ratings. The best stadia, gymnasia, and swimming pools are put at their disposal. The 1964 Olympic high jump champion Valeriy Brumel and Vladimir Iashenko the world record holder in the high jump were discovered at school competitions, along with many other top Soviet athletes. These competitions help develop team spirit and friendship in the children, and can also be a means of judging the work of the physical education teachers.

### **Special schools for sports**

Students who have exhibited a desire and talent for a sport may attend special sports institutions. There are boarding sport schools where children continue their general education and perfect their mastery of a particular sport under the guidance of well-qualified coaches. To be accepted at such a boarding school a young athlete must achieve at least 1st Junior ranking in his chosen sport according to the criteria employed in the All-Union Sport Classification system. Applicants are rigorously screened for admission. Room and board in these schools, as well as coaching fees and travel expenses to competitions, are paid by the State. Students in these schools study and practice their sport 6 days per week.

Other institutions for students who wish to be involved in high level sport are the children's sport schools. These schools are attended either in the afternoon or evenings. The local boards of education and sport societies usually operate such schools free of charge. The children are coached by professionally qualified instructors. In 1974 there were more than 4,600 children's sport schools in the U.S.S.R., with over 1.6 million children aged 9 to 14 years attending (**Soviet Sport, Questions and**

**Answers, 1974).** The programs in the boarding and the children's sport schools are designed to perfect mastery in the various sports.

### **Conclusions**

The ideological purpose of physical activity, according to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, was to develop the new socialist man. Those views on physical culture were adopted by the leading Soviet educators, Krupskaya and Makarenko among others. Mass participation in the sports movement was emphasized, and international athletic competitions were avoided in the early years of the Soviet State. However, a major change in the Soviet sports movement occurred after the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, when the U.S. and U.S.S.R. competed for medals and team standings. While the Soviet Union could not then favourably compete with western countries (especially the U.S.A.) in agriculture, industry, science, or standard of living, it saw a chance for domination in sports and an opportunity to use success in international sports competitions as a means of showing the advantages of a socialist regime. Over the years the Soviet government became more involved in international sporting competitions. An increasing proportion of the sports budget, consequently, was spent on the development of international athletic excellence.

The highly-developed Russian sports system is the major reason for the Soviet's success in international athletics. This system embraces the whole of the Soviet population, beginning with schools at all levels - the army, factories, and clubs, which all utilize the All-Union Sport Classification and GTO systems. All these components of the sport movement stimulate both involvement in sport and a high level of achievement.

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