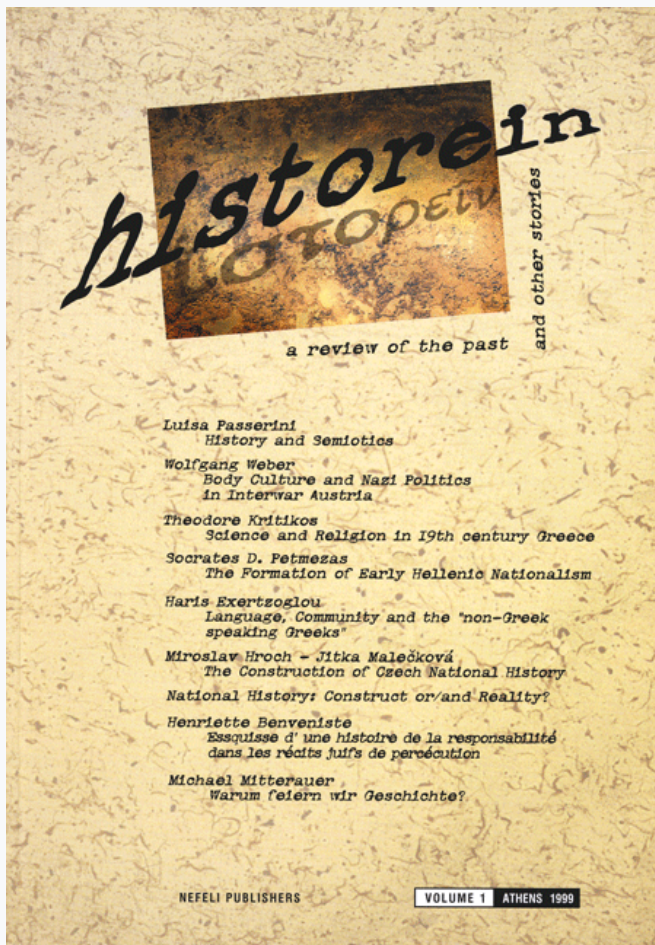


Historein

Vol 1 (1999)

History and Semiotics



Gaps in a Nation's Memory: Body Culture and Nazi Politics in Interwar Austria

Wolfgang Weber

doi: [10.12681/historein.124](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.124)

Copyright © 2012, Wolfgang Weber



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Weber, W. (2000). Gaps in a Nation's Memory: Body Culture and Nazi Politics in Interwar Austria. *Historein*, 1, 21–34.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.124>

*Gaps in a
nation's
memory:
body culture
and
Nazi politics
in interwar
Austria*

Wolfgang Weber

In 1991 an Austrian local radio station broadcast a program entitled "Gymnastics and Politics in the Austrian Province of Vorarlberg".¹ In it the former press officer of the Vorarlberg Gymnastics Association, Kuno Fend, said the following about his motives for joining a gymnastics club in the 1920s:

I became a gymnast exclusively because I wanted to train my body, not to do politics. There were no political motives in gymnastics, even in the training sessions we just practiced on the apparatus. Yes, we sang some nationalist songs at the beginning of the sessions, but this is not political, it just shows our love for our German culture. I never joined any political party.²

This article investigates the myth of the non-political content of German body culture in Austria. As the above quotation illustrates, certain contemporary Austrian gymnasts still believe in the possibility of a pure body culture, far away from the influences of day-to-day politics, almost existing in a vacuum. In order to decode this metaphor I will look at the historical and ideological roots of the German Gymnastics Movement in Austria, discuss its collaboration with the Nazi movement in inter-war Austria, and finally look at the involvement of Austrian gymnasts in the illegal NSDAP and their work for an *Anschluss* of Austria to Germany.

Political aspects of German gymnastics in Austria

In German the term *Turnen* (gymnastics) describes a specific form of body culture, which was introduced at the beginning of the

19th century by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn³ in Prussia. Jahn's sport is characterised by a strong emphasis on the ideological benefits of sport. He demanded from his pupils not just the training of the body, but also training of the mind. In his opinion the task of gymnastics was to prepare the German people physically and mentally for a rebellion against the French occupation troops in Germany and to unify the various German states existing at that time into one national state under the leadership of the Prussian king. For this reason his training sessions were organised along para-military lines:⁴ gymnasts had to exercise in disciplines such as walking, marching, swimming, riding, shooting, and fencing. At the end of each training session Jahn assembled the gymnasts in a place which he called, after an old Germanic word, *Thing-square*. There he read from a book which he published in 1810 entitled *Deutsches Volkstum* (German character). This piece of work is full of racist remarks and intolerance. For example, Jahn stated: "The purer a nation is the better; the more mixed it is the worse. (...) Deficient nations and deficient languages must terminate or be exterminated."⁵

The political import of Jahn's sport is fundamental to understanding it. It was transferred through the decades and formed the ideological foundation on which Austrian gymnasts in the inter-war period built their activities. In the radio program mentioned above, Kuno Fend, the former press officer of the Vorarlberg gymnastics association, stressed that Jahn's work for a unified Germany was not political.

No, Jahn's sport is not political. It was born out of the French wars of that time, out of the liberation struggle the Germans fought against Napoleon. If the French hadn't occupied Germany there wouldn't have been a need for this war. It is not politics if you want to set free your people from the dictator Napoleon. Don't we have the right to fight dictatorship? The world just wants to deny the German people's right to keep their freedom by fighting. This is what they want. And then they turn the tables and call it political, if we fight for our national freedom.⁶

In Fend's perception Jahn's sport could not be political, because he was fighting for all German people. In contrast to political parties, who usually represent social classes and are political because they only represent a certain part of society, the gymnasts claim to speak for the whole nation and consequently do not see themselves as political. I argue that politics deal with the society itself, its economical, structural and social organisation. Narrow definitions of politics such as Fend's were one of several ideological and sociological reasons why Austrian gymnasts became Nazi supporters in the 1920s and 1930s, because as far as they were concerned, Hitler was not political, he was only advocating the German people's right "to defend their freedom."

After the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the creation of the new Republic of German-Austria in autumn 1918 there was a political need to re-organise the structure of the German gymnastics movement in Austria. By then it was separated into four main factions: the Social Democratic *Arbeiter-Turnerbund Oesterreich*, the Conservative *Christlich-deutsche Turnerschaft fuer das Gebiet Deutsch-Oesterreich* and the two German nationalist associations



Turnkreis XV Deutsch-Oesterreich and *Deutscher Turnerbund* (1889). Efforts to create a single Austrian-wide umbrella organisation for all of the four politically divided gymnastics associations were in vain. The Social Democratic and the Conservative federations were re-founded after World War One. Only the German nationalist gymnasts brought their sections together successfully. On September 7-8, 1919, they founded the *Deutscher Turnerbund* (1919) (DTB) as the umbrella organisation of all nationalist gymnastics clubs in Austria and Germany. As goals of their activities they declared “the creation and strengthening of mental and physical fitness and of the tribal identity in the German people.” The task of its gymnastics should be the preservation of “health, power and agility”, the creation of “intellectual and moral values” and the improvement of the German people’s ability to defend themselves. The ideological basis on which all of its activities were founded were the so-called three Aryan wisdoms: “Purity-of-Race, Unity-of-People, Freedom-of-Thought”. To make sure that its members were not “seduced” by outsiders, the DTB

added several regulations to its statutes. First, it forbade people of the Jewish religion to join its clubs, because they were seen as a substantial enemy of Germans. This regulation became known as the so-called “Aryan paragraph”. Second, the DTB excluded “supporters of international movements”, because due to their ideology they could not support the German nation; third, it banned “all party politics” within its clubs; and finally, it only allowed its clubs to participate in “competitions with other sports organisations if members of Germanic tribes attend and German character and German sentiment are not diminished.”

In realising this program the DTB acted very inconsistently. I will give a few examples which illustrate why. The regulation relating to participation only in sports competitions where Germanness was not in danger of being “contaminated” proved to be very difficult for gymnastics clubs in the West Austrian province of Vorarlberg, which has a common border with Switzerland and Germany. Many of its first gymnastics instructors were Swiss or German. Vorarlberg gymnastics clubs attended several Swiss and German sports festivals. These links were decisive for the establishment and the further development of gymnastics in Vorarlberg. In the view of the DTB, Switzerland was not a Germanic state due to its multi-ethnic constitution and it forbade the Vorarlberg clubs to attend Swiss gymnastics festivals. The DTB also prohibited its members from attending gymnastics festivals organised by the *Deutsche Turnerschaft* (German Gymnastics Association) because Jewish people were members of these clubs. In 1923, the DTB forbade a group of Vorarlberg gymnasts from attending the central

festival of the *Deutsche Turnerschaft* in Munich because Jewish people and “foreigners” would participate; on the other hand it sent its national gymnastics trainer to Munich. When Vorarlberg gymnasts attended the Swiss and German national gymnastics festivals in Lucerne and Cologne in 1928, they were banned from the DTB. In this context I would like to draw attention to the sixth guiding principle of the DTB, published in 1919. In it the DTB demanded that a proof of “national knowledge” had to be provided at gymnastics competitions, which was usually not done at Swiss or German gymnastics festivals. Principle number six on many occasions prevented the participation of foreign gymnastics clubs at Austrian sports competitions. In 1923, for example, the Austrian *Vorarlberger Turngau*, a sub-organisation of the DTB, organised its annual festival. It released ten so-called ‘national questions’ which had to be answered by the gymnasts after the practical exercises. Both the theoretical and practical exercises were marked by referees and then awarded an overall mark which decided the ranking of the individual gymnast. The questions in 1923 mainly referred to events of German history and the DTB’s organisational structure. The Swiss gymnastics clubs, which had traditionally participated in Vorarlberg sports competitions since the 19th century, withdrew their entry for the 1923 festival because, “in relation to the proof of national knowledge all sorts of things were demanded from them by the Vorarlberg side.”⁷

The DTB’s ban on “supporters of international movements” from joining their clubs was also handled contradictorily. In 1925 the Austrian decorator Heinrich Reisecker joined the DTB-club *Turnverein* Feldkirch. Reisecker spent the World War One years in Swiss exile. There he was in contact with Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin. In 1920 he went to Linz, the capital of the Austrian province of Upper-Austria and co-founded the province’s branch of the Austrian Communist Party. In the early 1920s he left Upper-Austria to settle down in Vorarlberg where he became one of the most influential activists from the local communist party. Although he was well known as a communist, the board of the *Turnverein* Feldkirch had no objection to his membership in the *Turnverein*. Reisecker was never excluded, even between 1933 and 1945, when the Austrian Communist Party was illegal and carried out an undercover fight against the fascist regimes of Austria and Germany.⁸

As the example of Reisecker shows, the DTB was willing to ignore the political beliefs of individuals. It was not willing, however, when it came to its sub-organisations. A few weeks after the end of World War One the majority of the board of the German nationalist *Turnverein* Hoechst in the Austrian province of Vorarlberg changed its political beliefs dramatically. Five out of seven functionaries declared themselves to be Social Democrats and no longer German nationalists. The club’s annual general meetings from 1919 to 1921 re-elected this board. In 1921 the two remaining nationalist functionaries provoked a conflict which ended in the disbanding of the *Turnverein*. The property of the club was passed over to the Nationalist *Vorarlberger Turngau*, a member of the DTB, by the state’s authority. The *Vorarlberger Turngau* entrusted the two nationalist functionaries with the re-founding of a Nationalist *Turnverein* in Hoechst, which they did successfully. With the support of the Austrian Labour Party the former Social Democratic

functionaries founded a new gymnastics club too, but it did not develop as well as the nationalist one. The Labour gymnasts suffered from a lack of gymnastics apparatus, training places, and funding.⁹



Regarding the ban of “party politics” within the DTB-statutes, the *Deutscher Turnerbund* was not nearly as consistent as in the case of the *Turnverein* Hoechst. When the DTB-gymnasts passed this regulation in 1919, they stressed that their own ideological and body work could not be political, because they were only working for “the creation and strengthening of mental and physical fitness and of the tribal identity in the German people.” In contrast to the internationalist parties of the Social Democrats and the Conservatives, which were organising the German people along class and religious lines, the DTB aspired to the unification of Germans irrespective of class or religion. Its work was devoted to the entire German nation, and therefore could not be seen as political. After the German nationalist parties suffered several defeats in the elections to the Austrian parliament between 1919 and 1923,¹⁰ the DTB reconsidered its regulation against party politics. In a leading article in the gymnastics magazine *Turnen und Sport* the chairman of the DTB-district Styria-Carinthia, Dr Robert Hesse, called upon the gymnasts to “join the nationalist parties.” The gymnasts task would be to “take care that the hazards of day-to-day politics do not lead the parties astray, do not remove them from the nationalist goals.”¹¹ In Hesse’s view gymnasts were the guarantors of the non-political mission of the German nationalist movement in Austria. The national chairman of the DTB, Klaudius Kupka, supported this view. Almost a week before the general election for the Austrian national parliament in October 1923 Kupka wrote in a gymnastics journal:

We nationalist gymnasts have to perform our duty also in political life, outside our association life. We shall not stand aside and by abstention help our rivals in Vienna, for example, the Social Democrats and their allies, the Jews and the Czechs, to win.¹²

The clear political view that expresses itself in Hesse’s and Kupka’s statement did not make it necessary to re-write the DTB-statutes. The *Deutscher Turnerbund* understood the value of keeping the myth of its non-political mission alive. The following resolution of the upper-Austrian *Inn-Traun-Gau*, a DTB-sub-organisation, illustrates how it managed to do this.

In its resolution of 1923, the *Inn-Traun-Gau* stressed that gymnastics clubs and the DTB had to keep a distance from day-to-day party politics due to their statutes. The task of individual gymnasts, however, was to make sure that “they engage themselves in public life, everyone according to his own energies and his suitability. Our motto, purity-of-race, unity-of-people, freedom-of-thought, has to become real. (...) In public life this is only possible through engagement in politics and, given the facts, on the side of the nationalist parties.”¹³ Though political parties were still a necessary evil for the DTB, the primary goal of its politics remained “to become a people without parties.”¹⁴ Under the “current constitutional conditions in Germany and Austria” political parties were a necessity; “the nationalist parties are substantial because there are non-nationalist parties, too.”¹⁵

After this principle decision to engage in party politics had been taken, the DTB defined what a nationalist party was. Its task should be “to protect and to patronise the activities of organisations which work on the moral, mental and physical education of the German people; furthermore to make sure that the nationalist principles are not in danger of being questioned in case non-nationalist powers in legislation and administration influence the fate of the people.”¹⁶ These demands were fulfilled by three parties in inter-war Austria: the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei* (Greater German People’s Party), the *Landbund* and the NSDAP. Consequently, Austrian gymnasts engaged in the propaganda activities of these parties. Dr Robert Hesse for example, chair of the DTB-district Styria-Carinthia, was vice-president of the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei*. The president of the DTB-sub-organisation *Vorarlberger Turngau*, Alfred Wehner, led the Vorarlberg branch of the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei*. From the mid-1920s onwards, gymnasts also worked for the NSDAP. They were co-founders of local branches of the NSDAP, for example, in the West Austrian towns of Bregenz, Dornbirn and Feldkirch;¹⁷ and they had a prominent role in the building of the Austrian SA (*Sturmabteilung*, stormtroops).

The forerunner of the Austrian SA was the so-called Patriotic Protection Association (*Vaterländischer Schutzbund*), a German nationalist organisation founded in the mid-1920s. Its main tasks were guarding the Austrian constitution, the support of the state’s security forces, the defense of a prospective putsch, and the protection of individuals, property and public events.¹⁸ For these purposes its members engaged in para-military training. In 1931 the *Schutzbund* was re-organised as a National Socialist subsidiary and re-named *Sturmabteilung*. A considerable number of its activists came from DTB-clubs. This was possible because the DTB had practiced a specific discipline of gymnastics which it called *Wehrturnen* (military gymnastics) after 1919, and because of common ideological features which I discuss later. The exercises in military gymnastics were similar to those practiced by the SA, for example, throwing hand-grenades, cross-country running, parading, and marching. The newly formed SA-squads suffered from a lack of infrastructure such as training grounds or halls. For this reason they hired the halls of nationalist gymnastics clubs or even joined the relevant teams within the clubs. Especially in the Austrian country-side, where communities were comparatively small, this meant military gymnastics squads were virtually equivalent to an SA

unit. 42% of the military team of the West Austrian *Turnverein* Dornbirn, for example, were members of the local SA-branch.¹⁹

In the mid-1920s some factions in the DTB criticised the fact that the German nationalist movement in Austria was represented by several parties. This was seen to contradict the DTB's motto "unity-of-the-people" and was also a disadvantage for the German nationalists in the political fight against the Social Democrats and the Conservatives. Therefore, it was time that there was "only one nationalist party which includes all classes and estates of the people."²⁰ In the following years a fight to be the sole legitimate representative of the German nationalist population in Austria took place between the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei* and the NSDAP. By the early 1930s the NSDAP had won. In 1931 the DTB-board and the leader of the Austrian SA (stormtroops), Hermann Reschny, met for an exchange of ideas. After this meeting Reschny declared that the Austrian NSDAP would "refrain from founding its own National Socialist gymnastics and sports clubs, because due to the German nationalist Aryan principles of the *Deutscher Turnerbund* there are no intentions to withdraw NSDAP-members from the *Turnvereine*."²¹

In May 1933 the Vorarlberg branch of the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei* recommended to its members that



they join the NSDAP "because this movement holds the main demands of the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei* especially the will of the *Anschluss* and anti-Semitism."²² The same can be said for the DTB: it also practiced a strong anti-Semitism and since its foundation in 1919 had stood up for an *Anschluss* of Austria to Germany. In addition, its membership had a comparable sociological makeup to the NSDAP's.

Common ideological, symbolical and sociological features of the NSDAP and the DTB

Amongst others, the DTB declared "purity-of-race" as a binding principle of its work. To preserve this racist value all DTB-clubs had to add the so-called Aryan paragraph to their statutes. It forbade any individual of the Jewish religion to become a member of a German *Turnverein*. The "Aryan paragraph" was the reason why Austrian gymnastics clubs left the *Deutsche Turnerschaft* at the end of the 19th century. Until 1904 the majority of the Austrian gymnastics clubs belonged to the *Deutsche Turnerschaft*. They formed its district *Turnkreis XV Deutsch-Oesterreich*. In 1901 the *Turnkreis XV* "Aryanised" its statutes which meant that from then onwards it was obligatory for all of its member clubs to include the Aryan paragraph in its club program. The *Deutsche Turnerschaft* did not agree with this policy and excluded the Austrian clubs. They founded several independent gymnastics federations until 1914. After

World War One they unified in the DTB. The DTB saw itself as the sole legitimate successor of these organisations and practiced a strong anti-Semitic policy. In 1923 the Styrian German Sports Club Leoben was banned from the Styrian Football Association because they refused to play a match for the Austrian championship against the Viennese Jewish football club Hakoah. The DTB praised the Leoben football players for this decision and criticised the Styrian Football Association in their journal:

Let's hope that there are more sports clubs in Styria which will not understand the Football Association's ugly favoring of the Jews. (...) Sportsmen unite in all fields in Aryan sports federations! (...) Don't let yourself be pushed together with the Jews, the deadly enemy of our people. Found Aryan federations, refuse the Jews entry to your clubs!²³

As uncompromising as its anti-Semitism, the DTB stood for an *Anschluss* of Austria to Germany. Its clubs were urged to celebrate the DTB-principle "unity-of-people" in its parties and festivals. In 1923 the organisers of the annual *Vorarlberger Turngau* gymnastics festival declared as their goal:

A national uprising and a lasting strengthening of our will to survive through the difficulties of the time and to go on collecting our energies until the one big moment when our leaders will call us to help in the rebuilding of the great and unified fatherland which will include all German tribes.²⁴

At a DTB-district festival in Bregenz in 1924, the town mayor, Dr Ferdinand Kinz, reminded the gymnasts in his opening speech that their task was "to clear the way on which our separated national comrades in the North and in the South, in the East and in the West will be able to move into the great unified parental home."²⁵

Dr Hermann Schmid, the ideological secretary (*Dietwart*) of the *Turnverein* Bregenz, expressed the same sentiments as Kinz, but much more directly, at a midsummer night celebration in 1933. Schmid said:

Our fatherland is only the great German fatherland. This ground on which we stand is German and has to stay German. We will remain faithful to our German brothers who fought with us in the World War shoulder to shoulder. *Heil Alldeutschland!*²⁶

Anti-Semitism and the vision of a Greater Germany were two ideological constants which were shared by the DTB and the NSDAP in Austria. This correspondence also expressed itself at the symbolic level of both movements. In 1919 the DTB chose a swastika with round beams as the emblem of its organisation. It symbolised the four capital Fs of the gymnasts slogan *Frisch-Frohm-Froh-Frei* (Fresh-Pious-Cheerful-Free). The four Fs were arranged around a central point from left to right which gave them the look of a swastika. At a common meeting of Austrian, Czech and German National Socialists in 1920, Adolf Hitler declared a swastika with angular beams to be the emblem of the Nazi movement.²⁷ These similar emblems led to rumors in the

early 1920s that there was a strong collaboration between the DTB and the NSDAP. When the *Vorarlberger Turngau* held its annual gymnastics festival in 1923 the local press hinted that this sporting event was simply a swastika party, that in fact the sports activities would only be an excuse for party politics. The festival's organisation committee released a press statement in which it stressed that

the swastika was the emblem of the DTB long before it became a heavily criticised party symbol of our current days. The DTB rejects any kind of politics in its own ranks, the DTB is national, but it hasn't anything to do with the modern National Socialist movement which carries the swastika in its party badge.²⁸

Several years later, in 1934, the DTB-emblem was banned by the Austrian government as a political symbol.²⁹ The reason for this was that after the banning of the Austrian NSDAP in 1933 the illegal Nazis wore the gymnastics symbol as an unofficial party badge. Consequently, the Austrian government forbade the nationalist gymnastics clubs to decorate their training halls, their equipment such as club banners and publications with the round-beam-swastika. At sports competitions the decoration had to be in the Austrian colors, red-white-red.

In addition to these ideological and symbolical similarities the DTB and the Austrian NSDAP shared some sociological features. Gymnasts and Nazis recruited their supporters mainly from the middle classes. In the West Austrian town of Dornbirn the professional profile of the local DTB and NSDAP branches in 1932/33 was as follows:

Professional Position	NSDAP (N=76 men)	Turnverein (N=538 men)
employee	32.9%	29.9%
worker	10.5%	5.0%
craftsmen	38.6%	30.6%
self-employed	17.1%	32.3%
farmers	1.3%	1.1%
others	0.9%	1.3%

If we compare these data to the population of Dornbirn we can see some differences in the percentages of "farmers" and "self-employed".³⁰ In 1934, 10.1% of the Dornbirn population worked in agriculture. Gymnasts and Nazis recruited about 1% of this stratum. On the other hand approximately a fifth to a third in their ranks were self-employed, where the total proportion of this stratum in the Dornbirn population was 3.7%. Overall it becomes clear that both the Nazi and the nationalist gymnastics movement consisted of middle class supporters, which was one reason why individuals were members of both organisations. In 1932 the NSDAP had ten local branches in the Austrian province of Vorarlberg with 550 members. 143 of these Nazis were also members of their local gymnastics clubs.³¹ As the following example shows, NSDAP and gymnastics clubs collaborated in recruiting new members.

On 25 May 1932 the *Turnverein* Feldkirch and the local NSDAP branch organised a commemorative ceremony for Albert Leo Schlageter in the gymnastics hall. Schlageter was a German nationalist who carried out bomb attacks against the French occupation troops in the *Ruhr* district after World War One. In 1923 he was captured and executed by the French. The National Socialists made him a martyr for their movement and commemorated his death in several events. A few days after the ceremony in Feldkirch six men joined the Feldkirch NSDAP branch, amongst them five gymnasts. Not only ordinary gymnasts, “seduced” by politics, worked for the NSDAP, but also high ranking functionaries of gymnastics clubs, as the example of the Austrian province of Vorarlberg shows. The NSDAP-*Gauleiter* of Vorarlberg, Anton Plankensteiner, was president of the *Turnverein* Dornbirn. The leader of the Vorarlberg SA (stormtroops), Eugen Koelbl, led the military squad of the *Turnverein* Dornbirn. The president of the province’s Hitler-Youth, Otto Weber, was a gymnast too, so was Rudolf Gunz, one of two NSDAP-MPs to the Vorarlberg local parliament. Half of the chairmen of the Vorarlberg NSDAP local branches in 1932 were gymnasts.³² This very close relationship between the Hitler-party and DTB-clubs did not end when the NSDAP in Austria was banned in 1933. On the contrary, gymnasts went undercover and supported the illegal Nazi activities.

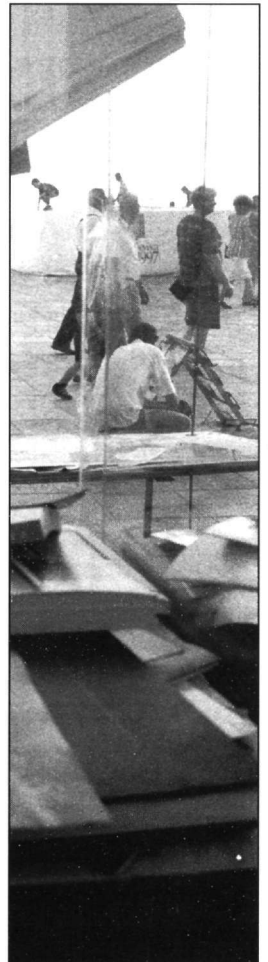
In July 1934 the Austrian NSDAP organised a coup against the government. It started from a gymnastics hall of the DTB in Vienna. The Austrian Chancellor Dr Engelbert Dollfuss was murdered by Nazis. On the side of the putsch-organisers seventeen gymnasts fell and five were executed after the failure of the putsch. As a first reaction to these events the Austrian government banned all DTB-activities until October 1934; its gymnastics halls were closed and all DTB-clubs were put under police supervision. In autumn 1934 the ban was lifted on the condition that the gymnastics clubs accept a person of trust, named by the Austrian government, who supervised their activities and reported any anti-Austrian activity to the state’s authorities. Despite these strict requirements the DTB-clubs continued to support the illegal NSDAP. Their relevant activities included disrupting so-called Austrian patriotic rallies by shouting *Heil-Hitler* or singing the German national anthem, building and maintaining the illegal party-structures of the NSDAP, carrying out bomb attacks against Austrian state property, and kidnapping.

In August 1934 the security offices exposed the illegal SS of the Vorarlberg province. This was only made possible because the authorities had a contact man in the SS. The Austrian SS was founded in January 1930 by the Viennese *Gauleiter* Eduard Frauenfeld. In its early years it did not develop very well. In Vorarlberg the only two SS-branches were founded from Germany in 1931-2. They had up to 40 members. A third of their officers were members of the *Turnverein* Bregenz. The main tasks of the Austrian SS, which was sponsored by Hitler-Germany, was to keep the NSDAP-functionaries and Austrian public life and police forces under surveillance. It also had to make sure that it was represented in the best circles and that it recruited new members from this section of population. In addition to the “surveillance-squad”, the Austrian SS had a “combat unit”. It was responsible for the majority of the illegal Nazi propaganda

activities, amongst them the putsch in July 1934. Its members were trained for absolute obedience. On 30 May 1933 Siegfried Haemmerle, a gymnast and SS-member, was captured by the Austrian police. He had distributed Nazi leaflets and brochures without permission. In the interrogation that followed his imprisonment Haemmerle was asked if he did not know that he had committed a crime. He responded: "I don't care if this is prohibited or not. When we get orders from the headquarters we have to carry them out, no matter what happens. We are obliged to blind obedience. If we get punished we have to accept it."³³

Haemmerle was involved in other criminal offenses too. Weeks before the exposure of the Vorarlberg SS, rumor had it in NS-circles that a contact man of the Austrian government was amongst the SS-officers and this was substantiated. Haemmerle and other remaining SS-members kidnapped the officer and took him to Germany where he was put in front of a NSDAP-party court. He was found guilty and imprisoned in the NS-penal camp Lechhausen. From there he fled back to Austria in autumn 1934. Four out of seven men involved in his kidnapping were members of a Vorarlberg gymnastics club.³⁴

The example of Vorarlberg also shows the dimensions of the engagement of DTB-gymnasts in illegal NS-propaganda. 715 out of 3,300 DTB-gymnasts in Vorarlberg were punished for illegal NS-activities between 1933 and 1938. The offenders came from 14 out of 32 DTB-clubs in the province. Six of these clubs were banned because of their central role in undercover Nazi propaganda. 71 Vorarlberg gymnasts fled to Hitler-Germany to avoid imprisonment. There they joined the so-called Austrian Legion, a paramilitary troop which was recruited by the NSDAP and trained for an invasion of Austria. In 1934 an illegal SS-branch was founded out of the *Turnverein* Goetzis. 90% of the Vorarlberg Hitler-Youth had their personnel base in the youth-squads of the DTB-clubs. Vorarlberg gymnasts collected membership subscriptions for the illegal NSDAP and they distributed illegal NS-leaflets and newspapers.³⁵ None of these criminal offenses were carried out in a gymnastics context, but before or after weekly training meetings. The Hitler-Youth (HJ) in the West Austrian town of Feldkirch, for example, handed out NS-press material to its members after the training sessions of the youth squad of the local *Turnverein*. This material was mainly of German origin, but in 1936 the Vorarlberg HJ produced its own illegal magazine entitled "The Fanfare", which contained news of local and national NS-circles. Funding came partly from the Austrian HJ-headquarters in Vienna and partly from Germany. The main leaders of the Vorarlberg HJ were based in the German town of Lindau, a couple of miles from the Austrian border. From there they directed the HJ-activities. These included collecting membership subscriptions, distributing NS-leaflets, smuggling NS-propaganda material into Austria, organising weekend camps with scouting games and drill exercises, and political schooling at secret meeting points in the woods, in shelter huts, in the mountains or at somebody's home. The overall goal



of these activities was to “keep Hitler’s idea alive in the National Socialist youth” and “to strengthen our comradeship in the spirit of Hitler.”³⁶ An absolute physical dedication was demanded from HJ-members. At an illegal training camp over Whitsun 1937, the German HJ-leader Kurt Clemens spoke to Vorarlberg Hitler-boys and demanded that they stand together and not lose heart, even if one or the other was imprisoned. If this happened they could always go on hunger-strike, which had already helped in the past. The average age of the Vorarlberg Hitler-boys was seventeen, about a third were unemployed, and the rest were trainees, apprentices or schoolboys. The social background of their parents was petit-bourgeois. Almost 10% had single parents. The vast majority were Austrian, but 8% were German, Czechoslovakian or Yugoslavian citizens.³⁷

The DTB and its clubs were very concerned to stop the engagement of its gymnasts in National Socialism. The board of the *Turnverein* Goetzis distributed a circular in 1933 in which it asked its members to distance themselves from any party politics inside and outside the club, to strictly control themselves and to follow the instructions of the state’s authority. However, the ideological superstructure of German gymnastics in Austria meant that initiatives such as this failed. 63% of the Goetzis gymnasts, for example, were punished for illegal National Socialist activities. In 1934 its members founded an illegal branch of the SS; in 1935-6 young members founded a branch of the Hitler-Youth and of the BDM (*Bund deutscher Maedchen*), which was the female HJ.

The crucial role gymnasts played in NSDAP activities between 1933 and 1938 in Austria became obvious again after the occupation of Austria by Hitler-Germany in March 1938. The secretary of the *Turnverein* Dornbirn wrote in his annual report in October 1938:

It has to be mentioned that we collaborate with the party (NSDAP, WW) and its units in friendliest terms, although we lost the best people after the *Anschluss* to the party and many of us can hardly find time for our club business because we are too busy with party affairs; but even this will change once the new state is erected and the East March (*Ostmark*) catches up on the advantage the Old Empire (*Altreich*) has over us.³⁸

These hopes were not fulfilled. The National Socialist state had no interest in keeping the autonomous life of its former collaboration partner alive. The Nazi government forced the DTB to disband itself. Its clubs were transferred into the united *NS-Reichsbund fuer Leibesuebungen* (*Reich-Association for Physical Education*) where they became part of the one and only German national body, led by the NSDAP.

¹ Thanks to Dr Paula Black BSc MA, University of Derby, and Martin Koriotoh MA, Bregenz, for their comments on this article.

² Radio Vorarlberg 1.6.1991.

³ For Jahn see Christiane Eisenberg, "Charismatic Nationalist Leader: *Turnvater Jahn*", *The International Journal of the History of Sport (IJHS)*, 13 (1996), pp. 18-27.

⁴ *IJHS*, p. 18.

⁵ H. Ueberhorst, *Zurueck zu Jahn? Gab es kein besseres Vorwaerts?*. Bochum, 1969, p. 23.

⁶ Radio Vorarlberg 1.6.1991.

⁷ *Turnen und Sport*, 13 (1924), 27 March, p. 50.

⁸ J. and W. Weber, "*Jeder Betrieb eine rote Festung!*": *Die KPOe in Vorarlberg 1920-1956*. Feldkirch, 1994.

⁹ For details see W. Weber, *Von Jahn zu Hitler: Politik- und Organisationsgeschichte des Deutschen Turnens in Vorarlberg 1847 bis 1938*. Constance, 1995, pp. 213-214.

¹⁰ Overall they lost about 5% of their electorate; see E. Weinzierl and K. Skalnik, *Oesterreich 1918-1938: Geschichte der Ersten Republik*, Vol. 2, p. 1092.

¹¹ *Turnen und Sport*, 4 (1924), 24 January, p. 13.

¹² *Turnen und Sport*, 20 (1923), 18 October, p. 1.

¹³ *Turnen und Sport*, 7 (1924), 14 February, p. 30.

¹⁴ *Turnen und Sport*, 9 (1924), 1 March, p. 33.

¹⁵ *Turnen und Sport*, 4 (1924), 24 January, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Turnen und Sport*, 4 (1924), 24 January, p. 13.

¹⁷ Weber, *Von Jahn zu Hitler*, pp. 118-120, 138, 159-160.

¹⁸ Vorarlberger Landesarchiv, Austria (hereafter VLA), VLandreg. I-146/1925.

¹⁹ VLA, VLandreg. Ia-1124/1934.

²⁰ *Turnen und Sport*, 4 (1924), 24 January, p. 14.

²¹ *Zur Abwehr der klerikalen Angriffe gegen den Deutschen Turnerbund*. Vienna 1929, p. 17.

²² *Vorarlberger Tagblatt* (1933), 8 May.

²³ *Turnen und Sport*, 21(1923), 25 October, p. 86.

²⁴ *Turnen und Sport*, 5 (1923), 5 July, p. 21.

²⁵ *Turnen und Sport*, 26 (1924), 25 July, p. 104.

²⁶ VLA, BH Bregenz III-1516/1935.

²⁷ Alois Graenz, "Das Hakenkreuz" in A. Schilling, *Dr. Walter Riehl und die Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*. Leipzig, 1933, pp. 378-380.

²⁸ *Turnen und Sport*, 5 (1923), 5 July, p. 1.

²⁹ Oesterreichisches Staatsarchiv, Archiv der Republik, BKA ZI.215.770-GD2.

³⁰ Dornbirn results of the national census in 1934: industry and business 59.5%, trade and traffic 11.8%, agriculture and forestry 10.1%, unemployed 8.8%, self-employed 3.7%, public employees 2.8%, no information 2.2%, banking 0.8%, domestic services 0.3%, in *Dornbirner Schriften XI. Beitrage zur Stadtkunde*, p. 56.

³¹ Weber, *Von Jahn zu Hitler*, p. 270-1.

³² Weber, *Von Jahn zu Hitler*, p. 272.

³³ VLA, BH Bregenz III-423/1936.

³⁴ VLA, BH Bregenz III-4214/1934.

³⁵ Weber, *Von Jahn zu Hitler*, pp. 101-84, 188-208, 211-33, 234-45, 250-255, 259-64.

³⁶ VLA, BH Bregenz III-2322/1934.

³⁷ For details about the Hitler-Youth, see Weber, *Von Jahn zu Hitler*, pp. 112-52, 157-75, 188-97, 234-45, 250-55.

³⁸ Turnverein Donbirn, Chronicle 1939.

