sciendo

Land Forces Academy Review
Vol. XXX, No. 3(119), 2025

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE HISTORY OF SOME EUROPEAN MODELS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM

Robert STĂNCIULESCU
"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
stanciulescu.robert60@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

If approaches regarding the field of physical education have been limited until now to the strictly normative aspect of documents, with an emphasis on a descriptive presentation of the phenomenon, and the specialized literature in Romania is relatively limited from the perspective of the historical approach regarding the aspects related to content, as well as the lessons that arise from it, not to mention their usefulness and their transposition into practice, through this work, I have tried to make an incursion through the history of the discipline in several European countries where physical education has represented and represents a perfect way of maintaining physical and mental health and an important pillar of support for other categories of education in the military system. In fact, going beyond the exterior of the problem, I will try to deduce the main ideas that led to the evolution of the field in certain periods of time. What is of interest is not only the collection of data, which is also important in the first phase, but especially the lessons that emerge from these past events in order to highlight once again the extremely important role of physical education in the life of humanity, and also to foreshadow future knowledge.

KEYWORDS: combat techniques, physical education, systems, warfare, warrior

1. Introduction

The development of the physical and mental qualities necessary for the fighter is carried out in modern armies in the physical education system, a system that starts from national traditions, which combine individual activities of physical effort of a spontaneous nature with the activity organized in voluntary physical education and sports organizations. The practical component, truly useful in the process of training the modern fighter, is physical training. The function and position of physical training in modern armies are established by its status, as one of the main disciplines of troop training. This reality is enshrined in laws, regulations, adapted to each army in particular, but having generally established similar objectives and characteristics. Over time, there have been concerns for the development and maximization of the system, but it has always started from the historical beginnings of the field.

The permanent modernization of the armies has imposed the orientation of the training process towards its finality, which is established according to the requirements and goals of the war. In order to be fit for war, the armies have always prepared a certain type of soldier, capable of going into battle when required and of achieving victory. The process of training fighters in modern armies, of achieving the goals and objectives of the missions is complex, therefore the contemporary military phenomenon needs to be studied in all its depth, the concerns, trends and perspectives

DOI: 10.2478/raft-2025-0037
© 2025 Robert Stănciulescu. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 3.0 License.

in the combat training of modern armies representing one of its defining elements (Flynn, 1991).

2. Characteristics of the Development of Physical Education in Europe

2.1. Characteristics and Objectives

As fundamental objectives, physical education must determine the maximization of the moral-volitional and physical components of combat capacity, help to increase the general mental and physical health of the military, develop resistance to states of fatigue, hunger, fear, panic, as well as to a multitude of physical and mental stress factors during combat, develop the fighting spirit, determination, courage and group cohesion (Dragnea & Teodorescu, 2002).

Good physical training leads to increased survival capacity in unfavorable combat conditions and helps to quickly solve various problems arising in the performance of missions. The main task of physical training is to help permanently improve general physical qualities (strength, speed, endurance, and coordination) through specific forms and methods.

The special objectives of military physical education refer to the training required by the specifics and peculiarities of the weapon. Therefore, they aim at:

- developing the motor capacity of the military;
- mastering and perfecting self-defense and hand-to-hand combat procedures in difficult conditions;
- rapidly and efficiently adapting to the special physical and mental requirements of the battlefield;
- increasing the capacity to resist prolonged efforts and rapid recovery of strength;
- preventing illnesses, accidents and eliminating the negative effects of military service (occupational diseases);
- improving the physical appearance.

The characteristics of military physical education are:

- it is a mandatory activity for all categories of personnel;
- it is regularly carried out over a long period of time, requiring the establishment of stages with rigorously specified objectives;
- it shapes the competitive and team spirit of the military;
- it represents a means of social integration at the national and international level;
- it constitutes an essential aspect of integral and permanent education within the military training system;
- it is the field with the most efficient means of physical and mental recovery of the military;
- it has precise, clear goals of improving the motor capacity of the military, necessary for the efficient fulfillment of the missions assigned to them.

In the process of physical training, the intentional formation of various elements of the structure of the military's physical training is achieved, namely:

- motor capacities;
- special motor skills;
- physical resistance;
- mental regulation mechanisms.

Physical education is capable of ensuring, among modern armies, the development of the physical and mental capacity necessary for the fighter who will act on the battlefield of the future (Clausewitz, 1982).

2.2. Models of the Physical Education System in Some European Countries

Inspired by general pedagogical concepts, training models were adapted to the specifics and political goals of the respective states. The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century mark the beginning of a period of

great turmoil regarding the theory of the content and forms of promoting physical education in the army (Stănciulescu, 2008). Taking into account the fact that the armed conflict is so complex today, physical education becomes increasingly linked to the evolution of the military phenomenon and, as a result of these turmoils, a series of trends, methods or models for promoting physical education in national armies emerge.

The French model was developed by Georges Herbert, a naval officer who proposed and introduced into the French army of the early 20th century a new method of training, under the name of the "natural method", based on the observations he made during the long journeys undertaken around the world. His method aimed at respecting the natural rules of life of people, that is, he tried to respect the "natural" way – running, physical effort – of soldiers who came from "exotic tribes", with well-shaped bodies, swimmers, excellent runners and climbers. Applied to the French army, this technique assumed that the training was done on large groups of fighters and over relatively long periods of time. In his conception, the soldier had to obtain a level of development by using the means at hand and the rational practice of "indispensable utilitarian" exercises. These were also true instructive-educational exercises. The most effective exercises were walking and running, jumping over various obstacles, climbing, swimming, fighting and carrying equipment.

The method widely applied in the French army in the first part of the 20th century was not based on "scientific data", but relied on observation and empirical research, taking as a model the exercises of the ancient Greeks. The statutory art of the Greeks shows us that through physical exercises they managed to achieve outstanding performances. This method aimed to make well-balanced soldiers from a physical point of view, qualities without which the officer would no longer be an officer and the soldier would no longer be a soldier.

The method and the training practices that Herbert proposed also aroused much criticism from other schools or officers. Among these, the most contested were: its empirical character, which stemmed from the fact that his method was not linked to scientific discoveries. Others had objections to the "natural" method, as Herbert called it, because it did not correspond to the practical needs of contemporary civilization, being empirical and only pursuing the development of qualities such as strength and endurance. However, its efficiency was proven by the good physical training of the French army in the First World War. In educating the physical qualities of soldiers, the Romanian army got inspiration from the French model in the early 20th century, when it largely took over the model of training and educating soldiers from them.

The German model had a pronounced nationalist character in terms of physical education. Physical exercises were also put at the service of national education. Physical education evolved during two stages: the period before the First World War, and the one carried out in the interwar period. In the first stage (1900-1914), the emphasis in the army's physical training was placed on physical exercises, especially those in the gymnastics category, but also others through which aptitudes were formed for jumping, climbing, orienteering, appreciating and overcoming difficulties in the field. The second stage (1919-1939) is characterized by a large-scale action of preparing for revenge for the defeat suffered in the First World War.

Due to the political measures imposed during this period, physical education received a special role, acquiring a pronounced military application character. This role conferred on physical education reached its peak in the 1933-1945 period. The leadership of the Hitler

regime took over all the sports associations and organizations into one called Hitler Youth (Lehman, 2000). By law, German youth had to be educated in the spirit of German militarism and, outside the school system, benefited from a complex physical training system carried out over a long period of time. In this program organized in Nazi Germany, the young man therefore went through four periods of physical training: in school, in Hitler Youth, in the "labor service" and in the armed forces, to get used to the established physical exercises. Thus, the Hitler Youth became a main force in the gears of the huge German war machine.

The Nordic model. Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland adopted a model that has distinct characteristics and features. In broad outlines, we encounter the Swedish training model (Per Henrik Ling, the creator of Swedish physical education) in the armies of the other Nordic countries. It was based on principles that aimed at the physical and mental development of the human body. It started from the Latin etymology of the term (principium = basis, foundation, beginning or princeps = first, most important), which defined the principles of training as fundamental theses, requirements of maximum generality, with a legal character, the observance of which ensures efficiency, according to the following scheme:

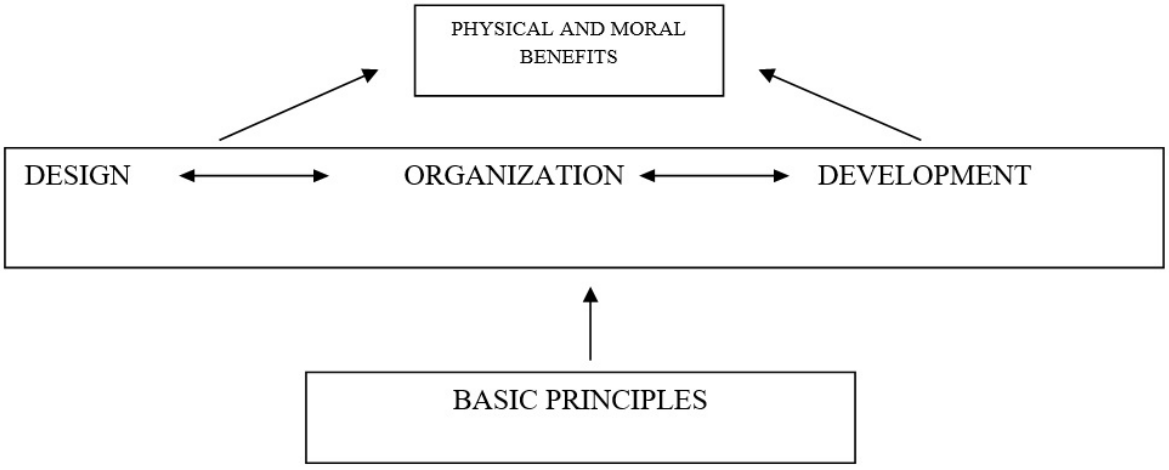


Figure no. 1: *The Swedish training models*
(Lehman, 2000)

– *The principle of harmonious development*, which had as its main objective the development of the body in its entirety, aiming to obtain a harmonious body posture;

– *The principle of exercise selection.* Physical exercises had to be chosen so as not to present a risk of injury, eliminating unnecessary, even dangerous movements of a violent nature on certain gymnastic apparatus (bars, rings, etc.). The problem of selecting exercises was limiting. From this point of view, if this principle were applied, today's sport-related exercises would have to be excluded;

– *The principle of gradating the exercises.* This principle followed a progression of exercises from simple to complex ones, aiming both to avoid injuries and to acquire and develop skills at a much safer and easier pace;

– *The principle of precision of movements*, which aimed for any movement to have a precise form, from start to finish. The usefulness of the movements promoted by this model is all the more evident since the armies, where it was applied, also promoted special physical exercises related to sports, such as shooting, fencing and athletics (marching, running, etc.).

The national character of this model was given primarily by the specifics of the climate and relief, with major emphasis also placed on training on skis and in low temperature conditions. The criterion for choosing exercises was given by their usefulness, thus their purpose became well defined. By resorting to gradual efforts, they developed the health of the human body, strength, endurance and elasticity. At the same time, energy, self-control and courage were developed, qualities indispensable to any soldier of the past, present and future.

The English model started from the educational idea embodied in the "Christian gentleman" type which shapes man through the traits of physical and moral perfection. To these were added several Christian beliefs, crystallizing an original method regarding physical exercises. This fact makes physical education be enveloped in the mystical atmosphere of a religious education. The model aimed at achieving good morals through physical activities. The founder of this model was Thomas Arnold, who was considered the founder of physical education through sports. He started from the principle according to which a strong and resistant organism contributes to the formation of a high morale (Jones, Smith & Burns, 2022).

The result was the creation of an education system based on the practice of exercises. The English model did not resemble the French, German or Swedish models. Adopted first at the level of English society and then in the army, this model was embodied by the practice of traditional physical exercises in English society: walking, running, jumping, boxing, and fighting. The military, especially the officers (coming from the high class), practiced some sports such as rowing, cricket, tennis and especially team sports. In fact, England was the cradle of the team sports (football, rugby, etc.) practiced in the modern era. These team games gave impetus to the spirit of emulation and cultivated the presence of mind, practical spirit, self-control (Lacher, 2001).

Last but not least, the strengthening of rational discipline, consenting to the orders of the one who was in charge was sought. This conception, which is the basis of the notion of fair play, assumed strict rules of respect for the opponent and the rules of competition. The model caught on very well because it was appropriate to the English way of thinking and prepared its force for colonial domination. Extended to the entire society, this made an important contribution, not only in the army, to the development of the spirit of enterprise, exploration, and conquest (Foch, 1976).

The end of the 19th century was marked by another current of thought, that of Herbert Spencer, who considered physical education essential in everyday life, physical exercise having a utilitarian nature. He introduced physical education into the ensemble of integral education and consistently supported the necessity of practicing physical exercises rationally. In his fundamental work "On Intellectual, Moral and Physical Education", H. Spencer formulated that physical exercises that were intended to harden soldiers should be extended to the entire society (Schamber, 2005). Spencer also stated that physical qualities are essential and useful in everyday life. This vision of physical exercises removed many prejudices of the English society of the time and stimulated correct thinking in the army as well. Thus, he managed to emphasize the importance of physical education in the ensemble of concerns coming from military and social life.

3. Conclusions

These models have been known to the theorists and practitioners of the Romanian military phenomenon since the beginning of the 20th century. The pioneering in the scientific-medical approach to the educational

phenomenon from a physical point of view was achieved in the Romanian society by officers of the Romanian army trained in the specialized institutions of these countries. The physical training models in the Romanian army at the beginning of the 20th century aimed precisely at the fundamental aspects of the physical training practiced in the armies of these countries. The applied-military character of sport was given by the physical exercises performed in the armies of the countries of Europe and America. A question lingers in our minds: why was the army the one that gave the first outstanding personalities in that field? Or, why is the emergence of the complex phenomenon that is physical education and sport so closely linked to the evolution of the military phenomenon? An answer can only be given by following physical exercise from the perspective of its military function. Knowing how physical activities are carried out by other armies represents for military theorists a concrete and useful resource through which both performance and the system of planning, organization and execution can be improved.

REFERENCES

Clausewitz, C. (1982). *Despre război.* Bucharest: Military Publishing House.

Dragnea, A., & Teodorescu, M. (2002). *Teoria Sportului.* Bucharest: Fest Publishing House.

Foch, F. (1976). *Principiile războiului.* Bucharest*:* Military Publishing House.

Flynn, F. (1991). Preparing for combat. In *Military Review no. 8*, USA.

Jones, M.V., Smith, N., Burns, D., Braithwaite, E. & Turner, M. (2022). A systematic review of resilient performance in defence and security settings. *Plos One, 17(10)*, 1-37. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0273015.

Laker, A. (2001). *Beyond the Boundaries of Physical Education*. London: Taylor & Francise-Library, UK.

Lehman, W. (2000). *125 Jahre deutsche Ausgrabungn I Olympia.* Berlin: Diplomatics Ringen um OlympiaI Tages Spiegel.

Scambler, G. (2005). *Sport and Society: History, Power and Culture.* UK: Open University Press.

Stănciulescu, R. (2008). *Educaţie Fizică Militară – Fundamente teoretice şi metodice.* Sibiu: Land Forces Academy Publishing House.