

## Sport under authoritarian regimes in times of crisis

Xavier Pujadas

**A**t the end of the 1980s, Zeev Sternhell spoke of the cultural origins of fascism in the interwar period, noting that «in reality we were facing a generalized European phenomenon» (Sternhell, 1994). Without a doubt, fascist-style authoritarian regimes existed in different European countries in the years after the Great War. Their emergence can be attributed to a preexisting fascist culture that was generalized throughout Europe and which had its origin in anti-rationalism, neo-Romanticism and the «revolution of nihilism», present before 1914 (Mosse, 1997). While the fascist dictatorships of Europe manifested themselves in different ways – or at least with ideological and structural differences – it is also true that they shared many cultural aspects.

In this respect, the study of the politics of sport or, simply, the development and role of the sporting phenomenon in authoritarian settings is of great interest to scholars. It demonstrates broad similarities in the ways in which European fascism mobilized the sporting phenomenon to fulfill perverse objectives of control, propaganda, value transmission, social militarization and the repression of citizens. It reveals, then, how sport inevitably formed part of Europe's shared fascist culture. This occurred because sport was largely already part of the daily life of many citizens and because it had already resulted in the creation of the mass media industry. Therefore, the mobilization of sport was not merely possible; it was also beneficial for the interests of those authoritarian regimes.

This kind of study contributes valuable and little-known information about the use of sport in the deployment of internal and external propaganda in those countries during the 1920s and 30s. It is also important because it allows us to better reconstruct the development of the repressive machines of dictatorships in general, which typically have been studied from traditional social and political perspectives. For example, the persecution of political organizations, trade

unions and opposition groups has been well studied. Therefore, taking into account the repression and control of citizens by means of the sport system in interwar Europe allows us to paint a much more realistic picture of the modern machinery of the European authoritarian states and their ability to control the daily life of young people and, of course, to influence the future of society.

This special issue presents five studies about the use of sport by different fascist-style regimes during the crisis that embroiled the continent in the years preceding the Second World War.

The first article, written by specialists Evangelos Albanidis and Panagiotis Ioannidis of the Department of Physical Education and the Science of Sport of the Democritus University of Thrace, is a study of the sport policies of the dictatorship of General Ioannis Metaxas in Greece (1871-1941). The text, entitled «The role of sport in the totalitarian regime of Metaxas in Greece (1936-1941)», highlights the structure of sport during the Greek dictatorship, as well as its similarities with sport in other totalitarian regimes of the period. Without a doubt, the articulation of an education system that emphasized nationalist-oriented physical education, the promotion of militarism in exercises for young people and the creation of a National Youth Organization – inspired by the Hitler Youth and the Opera Nazionale Balilla – allows us to observe the existence in 1930s Europe of a fascist-style sport culture which goes beyond national peculiarities. In the Greek case, which for Albanidis and Ioannidis is partially comparable to the Nazi sport project, Metaxas' construction of a «political religion» (Kallis, 2008) combined a return to classic athletic culture and the perfection of the Hellenic body. This ideal of the «Third Hellenic Civilization» needed a youth that would be healthy and strong, militarized and nationalist, formed for the defense of the regime. Sport and the physical education of young people, there-

fore, became a privileged instrument of the state that emerged on August 4, 1936 to carry out a fascist revolution, in both culture and politics.

This youthful ideal of European fascism was also developed in the construction of a discourse for youth in the Franco dictatorship in Spain, which incorporated sport and physical education. In the new Francoist state that emerged from the civil war, moreover, sport came under the control of the single party, *Falange Española*, which acted as the ideological stronghold of the dictatorship (Duncan Shaw, 1987; Santacana, 2011). In Spain, as in other authoritarian regimes, sport became a powerful force of population control, militarization, the transmission of national values and regime ideology and, ultimately, of repression. Thus, as Professor Josep Andreu Bosch writes about Valencia (1939-1945) in the second article of this issue, the use of sport for repression and social control was intense and systematic. Bosch coincides with studies of the Catalan case (Pujadas & Santacana, 1995) in distinguishing between repression against individuals and collective repression against clubs, sport associations and educational institutions linked to the Republic. In any event, unlike in other European cases, the Spanish dictatorship came about through a coup that resulted in a long and bloody civil war (1936-1939). This context impacted the subsequent institutionalization of repression, which was closely linked to the experience of the war. Under institutionalized repression, the field of sport developed a vast repressive machinery, which of course was already emerging before the end of the armed conflict (Domínguez Almansa & Pujadas, 2011).

Sport – a field that was gaining in popularity in the 1930s – became one of many sites of repression throughout the European authoritarian states. Of course sport and exercise were also linked to repression in Nazi concentration camps in Germany, which were probably the most tragic expression of European authoritarianism in the interwar period. This linkage probably occurred because sport, Nazi body culture, and the strength of the Aryan race were very relevant in the management and organization of the camps and the systematic extermination policy articulated by the SS. Naturally, this was also due to the fact that physical repression was commonly an element of punishment and prison culture prior to 1945. However, Dorien Gomet points out that in order to understand the deployment of physical repression at the Mauthausen concentration camp, we must take into account the physical culture of the Aryan youth and its high regard for sport. Gomet, Senior Lecturer of the University of Rennes II and a specialist in sport, anti-Semitism and concentration camps, contributes the article «Destructive Practices, Life-Saving Practices: Corporal Activities in Mauthausen (1938-1945)». Gomet's study of sport at Mathausen presents a profound reflection on the paradoxical vision of fascism and Nazism. Participation in sport could mean survival for gifted athletes, mainly because it gave them access to better living conditions starting in 1942. At the same time, for many

prisoners it meant death and torture through physical punishment and inhuman forced labor.

Football, which had already become the most-watched sport after World War I, also played an important role in the dramatic experience of everyday life in the concentration camps. As a genuine popular expression of the social expansion of sport after 1918, football became a key element in sport policies of authoritarian states and European fascist culture. Italy won the World Cup in 1934 and 1938 and exploited this feat as a triumph of fascism. Yet beyond the Italian case, football had already spread to most of the continent and, naturally, began to fuel journalism and the mass entertainment industry. It should be no surprise, then, that European dictatorships of the interwar period considered football an important instrument in the service of the nation. The study contributed by Jakub Ferenc, «Football in occupied Poland (1939-1945)», analyzes the protagonism of this sport in Poland during the Second World War. Ferenc examines football as a political and repressive tool of the occupation authorities and also as a balsam for part of the Jewish population and for Polish citizens more generally.

Beyond its uses for repression and control, the leaders of some authoritarian regimes of interwar Europe saw in sport an unparalleled platform for national propaganda and for their own political projects. The case of Italy and Benito Mussolini is paradigmatic in this sense because it was the first state to demonstrate the propagandistic effectiveness of international sporting triumphs. The National Fascist Party not only institutionalized football as a «fascist game», but also tried to use football wins to control public opinion, infiltrate the daily life of citizens and obtain advantages in international diplomacy (Martin, 2004). The last contribution to this special issue is the article «The birth of the sport nation: sport and mass media in fascist Italy», by Professor Eleonora Belloni of the Department of Political and International Sciences of the University of Siena. This study examines the relationship between sport-spectacle and mass media – in particular the press and radio – and the propagandistic intent of the regime. Belloni demonstrates that the fascist regime used sport-spectacle as a tool for the manufacture of consensus in Italian society and, at the same time, promoted the emergence of a «sport nation», thanks to the use of the press and broadcasting. Italy's example was no doubt followed by other European leaders before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

## References

- Arnaud, P. (2002). El deporte, vehículo de las representaciones nacionales de los Estados europeos. En González Aja, Teresa, *Sport y autoritarismos. La utilización del deporte por el Comunismo y el fascismo*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Domínguez Almansa, A. & Pujadas, X. (2011). Estadios y trincheras. Deporte y retaguardia en la Guerra Civil 1936-1939. En X. Pujadas (Coord.). *Atletas y ciuda-*

- danos. Historia social del deporte en España (1870-2010)*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Duncan Shaw, D. (1987). *Fútbol y Franquismo*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Kallis, A. (2008). Fascism and religion: the Metaxas Regime in Greece and the Third Hellenic Civilisation. Some theoretical Observations on «fascism», «Political Religion» and «Clerical fascism». En M. Feldman, M. Turda & T. Georgescu, *Clerical fascism in Interwar Europe*. New York: Routledge.
- Martin, S. (2004). *Football and fascism. The national game under Mussolini*. Oxford: Berg.
- Mosse, G.L. (1997). *La cultura europea del siglo XIX*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Pujadas, X. & Santacana, C. (1995). *Història Il·lustrada de l'Esport a Catalunya 1931-1975*. Vol. 2. Barcelona: Columna.
- Santacana, C. (2011). Espejo de un régimen. Transformación de las estructuras Deportivas y su uso político y propagandístico 1939-1961. En X. Pujadas (Coord.), *Atletas y ciudadanos. Historia social del deporte en España (1870-2010)*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Sternhell, Z. (1994). *El nacimiento de la ideología fascista*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.