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**GTO CONCEPT: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION IN USSR IN
LATE 1920S-EARLY 1930S**

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Abstract

The standard of living in the 21st century raises requirements for physical fitness of a person, leading to urgent necessity to develop new programs and regulations of physical education. In the 1930s the USSR government introduced the GTO complex (“ready for labor and defense”). Millions of working people were involved in implementing the norms of this complex. Although GTO brand is rather popular, there is little information about aspects of its design and implementation in the USSR. The research on these aspects enabled revealing both positive and negative issues which can be relevant to the similar process of GTO popularization at present. The authors draw a conclusion that the foundation for the GTO complex design was the idea of militarizing the physical training movement in order to increase the defense capacity of the country. This militarization of public consciousness was in line with the discourse of external threat, which was of extreme significance in mobilized technologies of Bolsheviks. Within the framework of the project on creating a model of the “new person”, one of the key ideas of the complex was general physical preparedness of a Soviet man. Introduction of the GTO complex resulted into the logical system of physical training for working people, however, in the conditions of the economic downturn and the impoverished Soviet society in the 1920s-30s this process became vulnerable and required the immediate solution to arising problems.

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1. Introduction

Mass participation sport and physical training allow solving problems of the society, such as: improvement of population's health, longevity increase, retirement age rise, prevention of antisocial behavior. The USSR boasted a particular physical training program "Ready for Labor and Defense" (acronym GTO) for all the citizens. The main purpose of this program was to attract more people to regular physical activity. Statistically, the GTO project was recognized successful, but the collapse of the USSR led to its termination in 1991.

In order to improve young people's health today, the GTO system was revived in the modern Russia, but in a new format with relevant physical training standards. The concept GTO has had long history, however, in spite of its comprehensive popularity, the GTO brand remains poorly known in terms of its design and implementation in the Soviet Union.

2. Problem Statement

In the Soviet time there were developed a number of methodological guidelines on passing the GTO tests. The guidelines were often supplemented with the historical overview, but separate research into establishment of the GTO complex in the USSR was scarce (GTO within the physical culture training framework, 1956; New GTO complex: guidelines for physical culture enthusiasts, 1955). Despite this, researchers focused on the historical development of the GTO system within the framework of general history of physical education and sport. G.S. Demeter noted, that priority tasks of the Soviet science about physical education and sport were determined by a growing number of GTO badge holders (Demeter, 2005). It was stated that the GTO complex contributed to getting Soviet people involved into physical activity movement and to encouraging them to do sports regularly, which also resulted into all-round physical development (Stolbov, 1983; Stolbov & Chudinov, 1962; Milshtein, 1967; Starikov, 1955; Trushkov & Nezvetkiy, 1981).

Recently, with restoration of the GTO complex in Russia a number of publications devoted to this subject has shown a sharp increase. However, most of the publications provide random historical information highlighting only separate events during GTO complex development and later specifying issues of the new GTO system (Polyakova & Yarushin, 2015; Storozhenko, 2016).

Among contemporary research on this subject it is worth noting the article by K.E. Lukichev where the author considered GTO evolution since 1918, emphasizing disadvantages which caused introduction of the brand-new complex in 1939 (Lukichev, 2015). Enchenko revealed the main stages of GTO evolution by showing its effect on the growth in a number of people, who do exercise and sports, and the rise in a number of sport facilities. Relying on the historical experience, the author touches upon problems to be solved for making the GTO complex effective today (Enchenko, 2014).

Nowadays it is possible to find books, study books, papers on the history of GTO (Istyagina–Eliseeva, 2015; Salahiev, 2015). As a rule, the authors come to conclusion that establishment of the GTO complex was logical and due to the time (Burkova & Gail, 2016).

Much attention to interconnections between sports and politics in the USSR is paid in Western humanitaristics (Petrov, 2014; Dart, 2015; Dichter, 2017; Rider, 2016). S. Grant analyses administrative clashes and conflicts of interests between structures and state-run bodies responsible for sports system

management, as well as emerging alliances and units (Grant, 2010; 2011; 2014). Some researchers consider GTO in the context of cultural aspects of sports history of 1920s-1930s and on the idea of “the new soviet man” (Hoffmann, 2011; Sirotkina, 2017).

3. Research Questions

The present article considers the initial period of GTO establishment, development of GTO’s standards. From the very beginning the Soviet organization who were in charge of sport and physical education (the All-Union Council of Physical Culture of the USSR, Komsomol, trade unions etc.) faced the problem of impracticality of the established GTO parameters. This was caused primarily by lacking subsidies to the mass participation sports in the USSR, the absence of sports goods production (all the sports equipment was imported from abroad), and a lack of appropriate sports culture. In the early times the majority of the USSR citizens, especially in rural areas, regarded sport as superfluous entertainment. In our view, it is the intense publicity that helped the government break the mould and make mass participation sport integrated into the leisure of Soviet people.

4. Purpose of the Study

The integrating factor for the whole system of physical training and sport in the USSR was a military factor. The discourse of external threats was significant in Bolshevik mobilizing techniques. The idea of the possible conflict with “imperialists” laid the ground for the general militarization of the Soviet society and for using militarized governance methods. Besides, in harsh socio-economic conditions in the 1920s-1930s militarization of public consciousness and creation of the atmosphere of a “besieged fortress” were an effective tool for suppressing resistance to “radical events” implemented in the internal policy. The time of intense socialism development imposes enhanced requirements relating to workers’ health, describing workers as “well-coordinated human machines” (Physical Culture and Sport, 1931).

5. Research Methods

Methodologically, sports studies are polydisciplinary targeted at anthropologists, medical professionals, sociologists, historians etc. The studies are interrelated to various spheres and forms of the political, economic, social, cultural life of the Soviet society in the 1930s.

The present research is based on methodological issues of the new social history, which studies the system of hierarchically interrelated social positions and a set of role requirements imposed by the society on people who fill these positions.

6. Findings

Ideas of militarization of physical education and sport were presented in proposals to match the USSR physical activity to the needs of the country’s defense. These proposals were developed in September 1930 by the Commission appointed by the Presidium of the All-Union Council of Physical Culture of the USSR under the leadership of S.S. Kamenev. Necessity to prepare laborers for the country’s defense was explained from the standpoint of the “besieged fortress”: “success of socialism building ...causes furious resistance of all remnants of bourgeois classes in town and kulaks (prosperous

peasants) in a village within the proletarian state and enhances their desire to eliminate the Soviet Union...the struggle against the Soviet state pulled together all counter-revolutionary forces outside and inside the country...under the leadership of the French imperialism and their General Headquarters these forces are planning intervention against the world's first proletarian state" (Suggestion of initiatives for adjusting the physical culture movement to the needs of the country's defense, 1930, p. 23). Particularly, the proposals implied introduction of certain applied military elements into most popular sports, e.g. the complex of nautical sports had to be supplemented with such exercises as swimming fully clothed with weapons; fencing had to be supplemented with stabbing dummies and blowing them with a sword hilt, slashing; skiing had to be provided with cross-country marathons, cross-country skiing on various terrains, transportation of heavy objects (machine guns) on special carts; track and field athletics had to be supplemented with gasmask running, hurdling with natural and artificial obstacles. It was advisable to militarize the work and structure of physical training clubs, e.g. during workout routines or competitions the captain of a team became the leader of the whole unit and took responsibility for the unit's discipline, performance and morale, which made the team equal to the military unit. All the people involved in the physical training activity were recommended to enroll in the military training courses of the Society of Assistance to Defense and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR (Suggestion of initiatives for adjusting the physical culture movement to the needs of the country's defense, 1930, p. 24). Under the aegis of this defense society the authorities established shooting ranges, shooting galleries, aero clubs and military sports clubs which provided training in different majors (radio operator, telegraph operator, parachutist). The Society was one of the keystones in implementing plans to improve USSR defense capabilities. Shortly after its establishment in June 1927 the Central Council Presidium of the Society of Assistance to Defense and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR passed the resolution about military training of working people; the main forms of this training were expected to be club of military knowledge and skills, shooting clubs and aviation-chemical detachments (Isyangulov, 2009, p. 57). Everything took place at the arising exacerbation of the external political situation, when in May 1927 Great Britain broke off diplomatic relations with the USSR, which led to the subsequent "military threat".

The mass participation sport movement in the USSR was embodied in the GTO badge ("Ready for Labor and Defense"), which was the award in recognition of the general physical achievements determined by carrying out special GTO physical tasks (different distance running, long jump, hand grenade throwing, freestyle swimming, cross-country skiing of 3km and 10 km trails, pull-up, sit-up, power lifting, 1 km rowing, 10 km freeway cycling and cross-country cycling, military knowledge and skills). Notably, the possibility to be awarded the GTO badge depended not only on strength, agility and endurance, but it was determined by a number of social and political circumstances. Thus, the physical tasks were forbidden for so-called "deprivants" (people whose right to vote was revoked). Besides, it was obligatory not only to spend 10 minutes with the gasmask on and to give the first aid, but to be "high fliers in the industry or in the social work" (Suggestion of initiatives for adjusting the physical culture movement to the needs of the country's defense, 1930, p. 24).

In March 1931 the government passed the provision "On the GTO badge" with certain corrections made. For instance, it was stated that "the ability to ride a bicycle can be replaced with the skill to drive a tractor, a car, a bike etc." (Ivanov, 1932, p. 17). This correction was explained by the fact that the bicycle

was unaffordable luxury and was not available in stores at the time (The State Archive of the Russian Federation (Transcript of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture, 1931, p. 5). Those who had a bicycle did not want to share it for the GTO tasks even with friends. The solution to the problem was tractors: according to the standards, it was allowed to pass tractor or car driving tests, instead of the ones for riding the bicycle (Transcript of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture, 1931, p. 15). On August 06, 1931, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture of the USSR allowed the local Councils of Physical Culture to grant the GTO badge without bicycle tests if the bicycles were unavailable (Ivanov, 1932, p. 20).

The Supreme Council of Physical Culture of the USSR made scheduled reports on coverage of the GTO standards, whereas socialist autonomous republics, regional or local Councils of Physical Culture had to be militarily accurate in providing information about those who participated in GTO tests and who passed them. Special scheduled tasks were imposed on all the subordinate structures (workshops, production teams, kolkhoz divisions).

The key to implementation of the GTO concept was general physical preparedness, which was in line with creating the model of the “new human” within the framework of the large-scale social project of building the “new world” in the 1920s-1930s. Due to this, perfection of human physical abilities did not have to be narrowly specialized, limited only to a single sport: “A Soviet sportsman should be ahead of others not only in one sport, but should have a set of practical skills necessary for his/her labor and state defense” (Physical Culture and Sport, January 20, 1931). Therefore, the early Soviet discourse precisely differentiated “bourgeois” sport and “Soviet” physical culture, showing resentment over individual sports achievements in particular sports.

In the first year of its introduction the GTO concept hit the headlines of the main sports journal “Physical Training and Sport”, saying about failures to reach the pre-planned indices of GTO tests and a number of people who passed them. It was claimed that within 3.5 months since the provision of March 11, 1931, approved by the Presidium of the All-Union Council of Physical Culture of the USSR none of the physical educational and training organizations had undertaken an attempt to implement it. Emphatically, this negligence had to be qualified as the rude far-right opportunist practice of separate leading physical education and training organizations which did not want to reform their work profoundly, and hereby disrupted the mass participation physical training work” (Physical Culture and Sport, 1931).

Moscow Regional Council of Physical Culture was accused of a 3-month delay to establish the headquarters responsible for mass GTO testing and gaining the GTO badge; it “did not bother to distribute guidelines from the head office of the All-Union Council of Physical Culture of the USSR on regulating the GTO badge testing; and the guidelines were not sent around even in Moscow to governmental offices and physical education and training organizations” (*Physical Culture and Sport*, March 10, 1931). Similar documents, which had reached the governmental offices and physical education and training organizations, were piled up on bureaucrats’ desks and could not be realized for a long time. Due to this, the periodicals published essays with sarcastic catchy phrases: “Fantastic record. The paper covered the distance of 1 km for seven days” (Physical Culture and Sport, 1931).

Even insufficient promotion of the GTO badge concept and the GTO tests were also criticized. In reply to the question “what measures did you undertake to attract more participants?” the head of a ski station said: “I placed the brochures on the doors and the gates of factory #24. I marked test distances... But I cannot do anymore alone” (Physical Culture and Sport, 1931).

In order to promote the GTO concept, even holiday resorts were involved. Arriving at the resort during the medical check-up, holiday-makers received a special ticket with access to the GTO tests. Later a holiday-maker was interviewed on the GTO complex with further training in the sports chosen for the GTO testing (*Transcript of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture*, 1931, p. 27). However, it was considered impractical to organize GTO testing in health resorts. This could lead to excessive workload followed by a decrease in the relaxation effect (Physical Culture and Sport, 1931).

It was mentioned that even where the GTO tests were conducted on time, the work was organized in a wrong way. For instance, “In Leningrad the GTO ski tasks included only skiing, rather than skiing necessary for the Red Army service (Physical Culture and Sport, 1931). The testing office did not offer any tea or snacks; people lined up all day long till night” (Athlete’s badge “Ready for Labor and Defense”: provisions and guidelines for qualifying for the standards, 1932, p. 9).

The problems arose even with necessary equipment for the GTO tests. A lack of stopwatches did not allow organizing the test: “With a single stopwatch at the stadium where 30 people run 1.5 thousand meters. I wonder how it is possible to measure the result of 30 people with one stopwatch” (*Transcript of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture*, 1931, p. 38).

Obviously, the GTO system was underrated locally, but, on the other hand, some tangible obstacles affected the mass participation. Thus, at the meeting of the Presidium of the All-Union Council of Physical Culture of the USSR on August 06, 1931, devoted to restructuring the physical training work, a representative of the Council of Physical Culture from Kharkov replied to the question about constraints for passing the GTO test: “Firstly, no water. Our river, which 12 km far away, ran dry in the middle of the summer, that’s why we had to move training courses in Kharkov and organized the GTO tests there” (*Transcript of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture*, 1931, p. 5).

Besides, insufficient facilities and inappropriate conditions of water stations were under scrutiny. E.g. in Nizhny Novgorod at the “Metallist” station the river bank slope was too steep and wild, “it was littered with waste, cans, dead cats etc.” (Report of the Chairman of Nizhnyvolzhsky District Council of physical culture, 1932, p. 50).

GTO testing included minutes-taking where only pass/non-pass was marked without accurate results (Ivanov, 1932, p. 20). This was considered unacceptable either (*Transcript of the meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture*, 1931, p. 30).

The outcome of GTO testing, including fulfilment of the plan with reaching control indices, was declared unsatisfactory both “qualitatively and quantitatively” (Athlete’s badge “Ready for Labor and Defense”: provisions and guidelines for qualifying for the standards, 1932, pp. 91-92). In the Russian Federation the average index accounted for 38% (the lowest results were in the Yakut ASSR, Buryat – Mongol ASSR, Far Eastern Region, Karelian ASSR, Ivanovo Region). Local organizations were accused of faking figures and whitewashing. However, control indices concerning the number of participants who

passed the GTO test were quite satisfactory: along the USSR this index accounted for 88.5%, the Russian Federation – 104%. It was stated that the pre-planned requirements were fulfilled primarily in universities, army, “Dynamo” sports society.

On December 28, 1931, the Plenary of the All-Union Council of Physical Culture of the USSR confirmed again that one of the top priority tasks of the physical training movement was fulfilment of the special physical exercises to gain the GTO badge for two million sportspeople by the World’s Championship (1933). It was noted that the task was complicated, but solvable if everything should be well-organized (Athlete’s badge “Ready for Labor and Defense”: provisions and guidelines for qualifying for the standards, 1932, p. 6).

7. Conclusion

Introduction of the GTO concept became the logical establishment of the official system of the Soviet physical education, however, the obstacle in implementing a large-scale program to raise millions of “new humans”, ready for labor and defense, was unfavorable economic conditions. Military circumstances, “hostile environment” of the world’s first socialist country made the GTO concept vulnerable to the economic downturn in the first five-year plan period and to the general poverty of the Soviet society between the 1920s and 1930s.

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