

## Wartime Physical Education and Military Preparation of Youths 1915–1918

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*In the autumn of 1914, efforts to find a stable reserve of human resources necessary for conducting the war led the Austro-Hungarian authorities to initiate the preparation of youths to fulfil their future obligations towards the motherland. PE in schools underwent a transformation and military training for youths was organised not only in schools but also through various associations. Despite a whole series of problems, the military preparation of youths continued almost till the end of the war.*

Key words: *wartime education; PE in schools; youths; 1914–1918*

### I. Introduction

The First World War (1914–1918) affected various aspects of people's lives, including education. As a result of the occupation of school buildings for the requirements of the army, the organisation of teaching had to be changed: school curricula were subordinated to Austrian patriotism and there was censorship of textbooks and libraries for students and teachers.<sup>1</sup> Any account of these negative features would suggest the war had no positive effect whatsoever on education. And yet there is one such element to be found, namely increased attention being devoted to the physical prowess of pupils and students.

### II. Looking after the physical prowess of youth

The chosen activities were by no means random but based on genuinely practical principles. Significant loss of life and the need for

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<sup>1</sup> Řeháček, K. (2010). Plzeňské školství v době Velké války (1914–1918). In *Dějiny ve škole – škola v dějinách, Historia scholastica I*. Praha, pp. 169–176.

more soldiers and homeguard members required the extension of compulsory homeguard duties, so that men between the ages of 18 and 50 were conscripted. Since, however, it was necessary to continuously send army units to the front, after brief military training homeguard members had to leave for the battlefield. Thus there was a need for youths, prior to their joining the homeguard, to undergo military training.

October 1914 saw the mobilisation of students from the higher years at secondary schools, born between 1894 and 1896. For students starting either voluntary or compulsory military service, the Ministry of Culture and Education in Vienna issued a decree on October 8, 1914 concerning an early date for taking school-leaving examinations and the subsequent early issue of certificates. Those affected by this ruling entered military service as one-year volunteers or as candidates for one-year service in the homeguard. From 1915 younger students enrolled for the military preparation of youths (*militärische Jugendvorbereitung*), known in Czech as 'Junobrana' ('youthbrigade').<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective of young people, however, there was nothing particularly odd about this: training for physical prowess was a traditional part of Czech society and a generally popular activity, which was promoted primarily by schools and various PE associations; moreover, after the outbreak of the war, there were changes in the teaching of PE, which was adapted to the needs of the motherland. As early as January 26, 1915 the Moravian Landtag school council in Brno issued a circular to all Moravian secondary schools introducing so-called military PE, in order that youths at school "*in the event of subsequent military service should be in part prepared, having already received preliminary military training in PE lessons.*"<sup>3</sup> The teaching of PE was therefore "temporarily" modified so that "*military training predominated.*"<sup>4</sup> According to the circular, special attention was to be paid to training drill, manoeuvres in pairs and groups of four, and changes in military formation. Further it was necessary to train extensive marching at the double with a full backpack containing large dumbbells, etc., jumping while laden, jumping from a height, climbing a ladder with a full backpack or running short

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<sup>2</sup> For more see Řeháček, K. (2016). *Plzeňská junobrana v letech 1915–1918*. In *Léta do pole okovaná*. Praha.

<sup>3</sup> National Archive (NA), Landtag School Council (LSC) Praha, box 2300, sign. II 5a, circular of the Moravian Landtag School Council in Brno from management to all Czech secondary schools in Moravia, 26. 1. 1915.

<sup>4</sup> NA, LSC Prague, box 2300, sign. II 5a, circular of the Moravian Landtag School Council in Brno from management to all Czech secondary schools in Moravia, 26. 1. 1915.

distances. Training was to be held as much as possible outdoors and field games were to be organised.<sup>5</sup>

In connection with these changes there was an increase in the importance of PE teachers, who, given their amount of work, had their teaching loads in other subjects reduced by between two and four lessons a week. For many schools this presented a problem in covering the timetable; thus they tried various ways of working around the regulation by reducing the number of PE lessons or replacing them with other subjects. This, amongst other things, led to a reaction from the Association of Czech Clubs and Supporters of the Physical Education of Youth in Prague which, on August 25, 1915, called upon the Landtag School Council in Prague to declare that in the interests of increasing the physical maturity of pupils, PE lessons must not be used for any other purpose. The association further demanded that local councils should properly look after training areas, so that no plans for school buildings would be endorsed if they did not include a training area and spacious gymnasium, that gymnasiums should not be taken over for other purposes and that gymnasiums be kept in good condition both technically and in terms of hygiene.<sup>6</sup>

### III. Military preparation of youth

During the course of the 1914–1915 school year, “military” PE was replaced by something much more sophisticated, namely the introduction of the afore-mentioned military preparation of youths. On the basis of an order dated June 2, 1915 from the Ministry of Culture and Education in Vienna, whose aim was the creation of some sort of military reserves, the military preparation of more mature pupils was introduced. On June 15, 1915 the Minister of Defence Friedrich von Georgi issued a proclamation in which he emphasised “*general confidence in our forces, recognition of our just cause and hope for its ultimate success*”; at the same time, however, he stated that fighting “*numerous cunning, unscrupulous and trained enemies*” required more than “*the utmost determination and enthusiasm*”: it was also necessary to have “*the best*

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<sup>5</sup> NA, LSC Prague, box 2300, sign. II 5a, circular of the Moravian Landtag School Council in Brno from management to all Czech secondary schools in Moravia, 26. 1. 1915.

<sup>6</sup> NA, LSC Prague, box 2300, sign. II 5a, letter from the Association of Czech Clubs and Supporters of the Physical Education of Youth in Prague to the LSC in Prague, 25. 8. 1915.

*preparation of all physical and mental strength for our forces of able-bodied men”, which was possible “by adequate preparation of youth prior to their entering compulsory service.”<sup>7</sup> The proclamation also stated: “At a time of general conscription and especially based on experience gained during the current war, it is in the very best interests of every individual citizen that from a young age, as soon as his physical and mental development allows, he should receive appropriate military training, so that upon entering active military service, he will be able better, more easily and to the benefit of all concerned, to fulfil his military responsibilities.”<sup>8</sup>*

The aim of the military preparation of youths was *“to build and strengthen military honour and through practical participation prepare youths for military service, while it is still possible without weapons.”<sup>9</sup>* Participation was compulsory for all perfectly healthy 16-year-olds and older youths, and physically well-developed boys aged 14 and 15. The latter were expected to be aware of their obligation towards the homeland and voluntarily undergo preparation for military service. Those for whom school attendance was compulsory were to participate in military preparation at school; the others were to be prepared by the local authority in such a way that *“the native country may with certainty of victory withstand any conflict forced upon it and the soil of the beautiful homeland forever be spared the horrors of war.”<sup>10</sup>*

The main burden of the military preparation of youth was delegated to schools, gymnasiums, fire-fighting and shooting associations or war veteran societies. Local education authorities had to ensure that the training of youths not attending school would take place at least once a week; sessions were to include manoeuvres, marching, drill training and creating a battle line. In areas where none of the afore-mentioned associations existed, military preparation of youth was organised by the mayor himself or a person empowered by the mayor: in many cases this would be a local teacher. Teachers had to organise training as *“natural and legally entrusted friends and guardians of youth”*; in addition to them,

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<sup>7</sup> Plzeň City Archives (PCA), Municipal Authority (MA) Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, order of the Ministry of Defence, 15. 6. 1915.

<sup>8</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, order of the Ministry of Defence, 15. 6. 1915.

<sup>9</sup> PCA, Local Authority (LA) Doudlevice, box 1359, order from the Plzeň district governor's office, 25. 7. 1915.

<sup>10</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, order of the Ministry of Defence, 15. 6. 1915.

former members of the armed forces were also to become involved.<sup>11</sup> The District Education Authority in Strakonice, for example, noted that: *“We expect that all members of the teaching profession will devote themselves to this task, considered to be most appropriate at the current time, with the utmost patriotic enthusiasm.”*<sup>12</sup> Cooperation among all sections of society was expected also by the Ministry of Defence in Vienna, which concluded its proclamation thus: *“Only through the coordination of all our capacities and full-strength commitment of the individual can our youth be trained to become focused, physically and mentally healthy citizens, faithful to the state and capable of bearing arms.”*<sup>13</sup>

As regards organisation of the Junobrana, military preparation consisted of a theoretical and practical part – lectures and training respectively. The preparation was to focus on *“strengthening the physique, practising various forms of training, such as formation, marching, jumping, running, overcoming obstacles; then also the acquisition of such military virtues as order, discipline, decency, camaraderie, unselfishness, enterprise, awareness, equilibrium, decisiveness, courage, self-denial.”*<sup>14</sup> During military preparation, commands were given in German as the language of the landwehr; however, there also existed an order that *“instructors should give commands in German and use this language for specialist terminology; however, explanations may be offered to trainees in their mother tongue, in order that young people acquire an understanding of these new commands and specialised expressions.”*<sup>15</sup>

During training, usual civilian clothes were used, albeit the Ministry of Defence in Vienna did originally consider whether the youths should in fact wear uniforms. In the end, however, it was decided this was, for the time being, unnecessary since *“on the one hand it would involve considerable expense and, on the other, there would be the risk of the entire action thus turning into a game of soldiers.”*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, order of the Ministry of Defence, 15. 6. 1915.

<sup>12</sup> NA, LSC Prague, box 2561, sign. IV 13/n, order of the DEA in Strakonice, 10. 7. 1915.

<sup>13</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, order of the Ministry of Defence, 15. 6. 1915.

<sup>14</sup> PCA, LA Skvrňany, box 1097, order of the local authority in Skvrňany, 5. 10. 1915.

<sup>15</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, letter from Plzeň district governor's office to the mayor's office of the royal city of Plzeň, 18. 1. 1917.

<sup>16</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, letter from Plzeň district governor's office to the mayor's office of the royal city of Plzeň, 14. 11. 1915.

Participants in preparation could, however, wear black and yellow shoulder bands or bands in the national colours, which could be decorated with the national emblem, and a special head covering.<sup>17</sup> The reality, however, was that especially in the latter half of the war students undergoing training had problems obtaining even the most basic items, especially footwear, as a result of which they were often excused their Junobrana duties. A further reason for full or partial exemption (e.g. from marching or all-day training) was the state of health of youths, based on the expert opinion of a school doctor or community doctor. Military preparation of youths then came to a definitive end following the outbreak of a flu epidemic at the end of 1918.

#### IV. Conclusion

Although military preparation of youths did not have and could not have had any influence on the course and outcome of the First World War, its inclusion in the school curriculum and beyond had a significant impact on the teenage generation of pupils and students. First and foremost it contained activities which benefited the physical development of youths. Moreover, it cultivated within them a sense of duty, order and responsibility. And, last but not least, it protected them to a considerable extent from the pitfalls of daily life in wartime and the general decline in morals. This was crucial especially in larger towns where young people were exposed to many such pitfalls.

It is therefore not possible to speak of any detrimental effect which this war preparation of youths in and out of school might have brought. Society of the day regarded cultivation of the body in a relatively positive light and from this perspective accepted the introduction of so-called wartime PE and Junobrana. The situation in Plzeň was no different to that in a number of other Czech towns and cities. PE clubs, schools and municipalities adapted to the requirements of the military and political authorities and carried out related tasks according to their capabilities. In contrast to a number of other restrictions, this particular measure had no ill effect on education itself, so overall the military preparation of youths may be assessed as a positive and successful measure.

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<sup>17</sup> PCA, MA Plzeň, town hall registry (1880–1942), box 1122, letter from Plzeň district governor's office to the mayor's office of the royal city of Plzeň, 14. 11. 1915.