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Building American Supermen? Bernarr MacFadden, Benito Mussolini and American fascism in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

In 1931, Bernarr MacFadden, America's self-proclaimed prophet of physical culture joined forces with Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in an attempt to train a new generation of Italian soldiers. Done as part of MacFadden's own attempts to secure a position within President's Roosevelt's cabinet, MacFadden's trip has typically been depicted as an odd quirk of Italian-American relations during this period. Italian historians have viewed the collaboration as an indication of Mussolini's commitment to strength and gymnastics for nationalist ends. For MacFadden's biographers the trip is depicted as a new turn in MacFadden's business enterprise which sought to heighten MacFadden's socio-political importance. Building on previous studies, the proposed article depicts MacFadden's fascist flirtation as a new turn in American nationalism which both admired, and sought to emulate, European fascism. Touching on issues of gender, race, and transnationalism, MacFadden's trip exemplifies the well-established relationship between sport and nationalism.

KEYWORDS

Physical culture; nationalism; fascism; masculinity; Second World War

The old-time concept of ideal manhood is by far the best ... the master mind, the self-reliance and dependability that insure success and happiness - the great prizes for which we are all seeking ...

Bernarr Macfadden (1931)

Described by contemporaries as everything from a quack, to 'Body Love', Bernarr Macfadden remains one of the most intriguing health entrepreneurs in American history (Hunt 1989). In 1899, he established *Physical Culture* magazine, a periodical related to health and fitness which, by 1910, boasted a readership totalling over one hundred thousand (Fabian 1993). Impacted financially by the Great War, Macfadden's business interests recovered during the 1920s as evidenced by his creation of several other successful periodicals, such as a *True Crime* series. Characterised by biographers as a staunch believer in alternative medicine (Ernst 1991; Adams 2009), Macfadden was defined by the success of his magazine and book empire, as well as his, often unconventional, beliefs.

Macfadden's beliefs underscore this article. From the early 1900s, Macfadden preached a gospel of soft eugenics - that strong and healthy parents would naturally produce strong and healthy children. Often relying on a misguided understanding of evolution, Macfadden

promised that his physical culture systems could improve future generation's health (Todd 1987). He claimed that his methods protected customers from the scourges of modernity. Modernity, as understood by Macfadden, meant devitalized diets, sedentary behaviour and unfit living conditions. Distrustful of conventional medicine, Macfadden railed against purgative drugs and doctors' 'misguided' efforts to cure illnesses. The closer one lived to nature, the better one's health. In the post-War period, Macfadden returned to his soft eugenic ideals.

As retold by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2006), Joan Tumblety (2012) and Charlotte Macdonald (2013), the interwar period saw an increased interest among the masses in eugenics and physical activity. Governments took a greater interest in physical activity, specifically, institutional physical activity. Likewise, it was during this time physical education in schools, military training and voluntary government training centres emerged in Great Britain, Italy, France, Germany and a host of other countries (Bolz 2012). In regions, like Italy and Germany, this move towards physical training, as underpinned by the state, was intensified under fascist regimes (Hau 2003). On rising to power in 1922, Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini privileged sport and physical culture as a means of encouraging and advertising Italian vigor (Gori 2012). Under this system of physical training, strong and fit male bodies became an emblem for the strength of the Italian nation itself. In Germany, Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party employed similar tactics during the 1930s.

Studies of European fascism during this period have emphasised the importance of physical culture in the validation of regimes. In Italy, physiques of Italian soldiers performing mass gymnastics were used as a means of rallying the nation around the idea of a prosperous Italy (Tunis 1936). Like soccer (Martin 2004), physical training became an embodied advertisement for the nation's government. In Germany, mass physical training displays were taken as physical proof of the nation's renewed strength. What differentiated Germany from Italy was the former's ability to convert fringe interests in naturalism and physical culture into rigid forms of state pageantry (Kant 2016). Germany and Italy led the way in this regard but they inspired other European nations to undertake similar forms of physical culture as a nation building exercise (Bolz 2012). European physical culture and its relation to nationalism has been well covered by historians. Similarly, attention has been given to short-lived fascist movements in the United States, like the *Amerikadeutscher Volksbund* and Silver Legion of America (Remak 1957). What is currently missing from such studies is a thorough discussion of mass gymnastics and embodied nationalism within these discourses. As was the case in Italy and Germany, open athletic displays of fit and muscular bodies were a cornerstone of eugenic and fascist thinking in the United States.

The focus of this article, Bernarr Macfadden, is a prime example. In the early 1930s Macfadden made two trips to Europe, one to Mussolini's Italy and another to Salazar's Portugal, with two goals in mind. First, Macfadden hoped to strengthen bonds between the United States and these countries, a goal motivated by his own political ambitions. Additionally, and aware of the primacy placed on the body by both leaders, Macfadden planned to demonstrate the value that his unique brand of physical culture had for nation-states. Over the course of several months, Macfadden trained troops from both Italy and Portugal in the hope of improving their physical strength and fitness, a goal he ultimately achieved. Publicising his 'experiments' and results over several articles and monographs, Macfadden's beliefs were founded on nationalist principles infused with a fascist respect

for authority and a stress laid on the muscular body. Macfadden would, in time, come to disavow his fascist links and, during the Second World War, became an ardent supporter of American involvement.

What never left Macfadden's thinking, however, was the importance of the muscular, male physique as an embodiment of one's national patriotism. Nationalism was manifested as an embodied trait, made evident by one's muscles and strength. The emphasis Macfadden placed on the body as a cornerstone of national pride is the focus of this article. First attention is given to the idea of 'embodied nationalism' - what it means in practice and how it existed in the liminal space between nationalism and fascism. Here Benedict Anderson's (2006) theory of 'imagined communities' is combined with works on public display and embodiment to examine the rhetoric created by Macfadden and reiterated by his writers. While the article is limited in examining writers, rather than readers, perceptions, it highlights the existence of such ideals in the United States. Following this, the article delves into Macfadden's trips to Italy and Portugal. In the aftermath of these trips, Macfadden expressed a deep admiration for both dictators, that is Salazar and Mussolini. This admiration relented in the immediate period before the Second World War. The shift from admiration to a distinctly 'America first' ethos is discussed in the final section. Taken together, this paper shows that Macfadden attempted to create a form of American nationalism which began with the physique and came to represent patriotic traits such as fighting and dying for one's country. Put another way, the article argues that a distinctly embodied form of nationalism was promoted during these years, one inspired by European nations and appropriated to the American landscape.

Defining embodied nationalism

Despite years pondering over nationalism, concepts as basic as what constitutes a nation still engender much debate (Finkel 2016). Sociologist Anthony Smith (1995, 57) defined it as 'a named population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for its members'. Historian Eric Hobsbawm dismissed this idea (Elliott and Hobsbawm 2010, 43), declaring that 'Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent [...] political destiny, are a myth' (Elliott and Hobsbawm 2010, 43). He claimed that nations were not complex - they were 'any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a nation'. Though innumerable other views on the nation exist, these views can be understood as representative of the major camps in nationalism studies: one that views the national as constructed, and the other as natural. Transcending the modern liberal-conservative binary, these schools argue over whether modern nations are rooted in antiquity in some form, or if their basis for legitimacy is the belief of its members.

The standard-bearers for the latter school include Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner. Anderson and Gellner both released texts in 1983 that shaped nationalist theory. Anderson and Gellner viewed nations as recent phenomena, accidents of history or culture, respectively. For Anderson, the roots of nationalism were found in eighteenth century Europe. Contrary to Smith, Anderson suggests that it was the erosion of powerful religious and governmental institutions, not their presence, that sparked the rise of nations. Nationalism took the place of, rather than built on, these bonds. It spread through books and other media, which

Anderson classified as print capitalism. For Anderson, this created an imagined community, where a nation came into existence strictly because its members believe that it exists, and that they belong to it. As Anderson (1991, 7) writes, 'Members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. Anderson and Gellner differed in that Gellner saw modern nations as inauthentic communities. Per Gellner (1983, 6), 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist'.

Oftentimes, symbols are used to make physical the imagined community (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The form such symbols take vary greatly beyond flags or monuments, and include the bodies of a nation's citizenry. Anthropologist Oluwakemi Balogun, in a study of beauty pageants, explained how the bodies of contestants became reflections of Nigeria's idealized nationhood. 'Bodily practices and markers of appearance', Balogun (2012) wrote, 'are vehicles of collective identity'. Athletes' bodies function similarly, as numerous sport historians have discussed instances in which sporting events, and famous athletes have come to become ambassadors, and symbols, for their respective nations (Guinness and Besnier 2016). Their strong, healthy bodies are seen as reflections of the strength and health of the nation, and their performances (especially in international competitions) become referenda on a nation's international standing. This was the position taken by Macfadden and his *Physical Culture* magazine, albeit with reference to ordinary citizens. Macfadden, and his writers, ascribed to the idea that strong citizens led to strong nations, and used his pulpit to attempt to increase the nation's strength.

The connections between body and nation were also explored in anthropologist Meira Weiss study of military bodies. Weiss (2001) explained that, with soldiers, 'The national territory becomes equivalent to the personal body; the body politic and the citizen become one'. Weiss found that, in Israel, dead soldiers received special preparation for burial. They were never dissected, as part of a larger 'ideological mission of preserving the wholeness of the soldier's body'. Israel, in this respect, is not unique. Historian Avner Ben-Amos found a similar pattern in France, where he argued national monuments stand in for the bodies of French icons and saints (Weiss 2001, 38–48).

According to those who preach an embodied nationalism, stronger bodies help build, and maintain, a nation. These bodies are seen as more worthy sacrifices. Political philosopher Jean Benthke Elshtain (1991) went further, saying that not only was there a relationship between body and nation, the individual is actively subsumed by the nation. Likewise, Elshtain (1991, 398) reported that Spartan communities marked the graves of two groups of people: men who died in battle, and women who died in childbirth. Both, she wrote, 'embodied the sacrificial moment of civic identity'. Anthropologist Allen Feldman (1991), looking at the 1981 Irish hunger strike, came to a similar conclusion, deeming the body to be a sacrifice and weapon for the nation. Turning to the present paper, 'embodied nationalism', it is clear that many nations, and cultures, have ascribed to the idea that the soldier's, or at times citizen's, body can be representative of the state itself. Where Macfadden differed was in stressing the importance of the muscular body.

Macfadden's embodied nationalism was only as powerful as the organ he had to propagate it. *Physical Culture* gave him a powerful voice. Through it, he was able to build a community spread across the United States who were joined through their shared experience of

magazine. At a time which historian Joseph Morneau (2004) believed had weakened family ties, Americans were drawn to alternative forms of community. For thousands, Macfadden and *Physical Culture* helped fill that vacuum. This brings us back to Anderson, and print capitalism. Anderson (1991) explained that a shared print media can build a common level of cultural literacy, which is a key component of nation construction. This is what Macfadden strived to achieve. Macfadden's armies of readers shared in this experience. By reading the same interpretations, they developed similar understandings of the world. While Macfadden's readership was perhaps unique in its scope, his impact was substantial, and indeed, transnational.

This is not the first paper to suggest sporting magazines could be used for nationalistic ends. Sociologist Tamir Sorek's study of Palastinian sports writing in the 1940s found that it was a powerful tool for spreading such ideology. Many colonies of European empires across Asia and Africa gained their independence in the twentieth century, and it was the vernacular presses that gave these newly freed regions a nationalist conscience. Sorek (2007) echoed Anderson, writing that 'The newspaper allows one to imagine comradeship with a large number of fellow readers, most of whom had never met and would never meet over the course of their lifetimes.' The unity of cultural experiences like sport, he argued, were key. In the pages of the paper, sport was presented as a mechanism that strengthens the national body through strengthening the individual body (Sorek 2007). Physical fitness in this regard was not an individualistic pursuit, but one done for the 'good' of the community.

Macfadden's trips to Italy & Portugal

In 1932, readers of *Physical Culture* magazine, then with a circulation in the hundreds of thousands, were greeted with an unusual interview. Past magazine issues featured everyone from George Bernard Shaw to Upton Sinclair, but this was the first time a self-proclaimed fascist appeared. The man was Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italy (Mussolini 1932, 14–15). Since Mussolini's rise to power in 1922, Macfadden had kept a close eye on *Il Duce's* love of sport (Martin, 2004). Mussolini's detailed a subject deemed to be of utmost national importance, physical culture (Bolz 2016). On this point, Mussolini found a captive audience. Throughout the 1930s Bernarr Macfadden attempted, ultimately in vain, to enter American politics through a presidential bid and, later, as a member of a president's council. His guiding focus was a belief in the importance of personal hygiene, health and strength. This quest, which ultimately proved unsuccessful, explained Mussolini's appearance in *Physical Culture* magazine. Months prior to *Il Duce's* article, Macfadden travelled to Europe as part of President Hoover's Conference on Child Health and Protection (Little 2002, 58). MacFadden himself appears to have had no solid set of political beliefs (Hunt 1989), focusing primarily on issues of health above all else. He unsuccessfully ran as a Republican presidential candidate in 1936 but later attempted to gain a position in Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's office. It was during his trip that to Europe that Macfadden crossed paths with Mussolini. United, it seemed, in their appreciation for fitness, a deal was struck, the contents of which were revealed *Physical Culture's* readers.

Through Mussolini's article, and a later piece penned by Macfadden entitled, 'What Bernarr Macfadden did for Italian Physical Culture', it was reported that Macfadden took personal responsibility for training forty Italian naval cadets, ranging in age from their late

teens to early thirties (Morgan 1932, 1–12). Cadets were brought to New York, trained under Macfadden and introduced to American culture. The experiment, which lasted six months, was recorded by Thomas Morgan on behalf of the Macfadden publishing company. Between Macfadden's articles in *Physical Culture* and Morgan's 1932 writings, two messages emerged. First that Italian fascists had an appreciation of the body surpassing anything found in the United States. Mussolini's article in *Physical Culture*, which contained musings from Macfadden on the Dictator's writing, stressed the value of strength and athleticism in undertaking hard work. 'A whole country organized for work' was presented as the cornerstone of fascism (Mussolini 1932). Training men so they could undertake even greater labours was part of this project. As part of the great 'Italianization' of citizens undertaken the Fascists, men and women were trained to take civic pride in their surroundings. Macfadden later contrasted this with the selfish individualism he believed rampant in America.

Relaying his experiences, Macfadden spoke of the 'sports and athletic revival' undertaken in Italy (Morgan 1932, 33–45). Macfadden perceived this to be an extension of Italian nationalism that he wished to replicate in America. Owing to Macfadden's strict dietary regimen, cadets were fed a vegetarian diet. This, combined with a heightened attention to hygiene, was taken by Macfadden as an indication of their moral strength and virtuous living. Once more they were contrasted with American counterparts deemed to live a hedonistic and sedentary lifestyle, one defined by individualism and disregard for the nation-state. Italian cadets were presented as a benchmark through which Macfadden had the means to simultaneously criticise American lifestyles while also promoting a Fascist zeal for exercise (Morgan 1932, 100–110). The cadets were called true 'students of physical culture' who, it was hoped, would serve as inspiration for fellow countrymen and women.

Over six months, each man claimed increased strength and musculature. The transformation's aftermath this served as the foundation for Macfadden's second claim - that American politics and physical culture could, and should, develop a similar appreciation for training. Throughout his reminiscences, Macfadden spoke the 'unbounding energy' and 'dynamism' in the United States which, in the mid-1930s, had yet to be cultivated (Morgan 1932, 55–70). American athleticism and sporting prowess were praised, as were the physiques of those few American men and women who dedicated themselves to the cause of physical culture. The problem was that too few understood and appreciated the value of physical culture to either the nation or to their personal selves.

On coming to power in 1922, it was said that Mussolini believed 'the safeguarding of the people's health was one of the first responsibilities of the fascist government' (Mussolini 1932). Macfadden's expressed desire to find a similar situation in the United States. Robert Ernst, Macfadden's biographer, claimed that a combination of personal vanity and political ambition motivated Macfadden's reporting (1991, 103–105). Equally important was his unique understanding of a national sentiment expressed through the body. This assessment was reiterated in historian Charles Kupfer's (2000) appraisal of the Italian trip. Regardless of his motives, Macfadden's written accounts praised Mussolini's government and its appreciation of physical culture. The primacy placed on physical fitness and the willingness to trial Macfadden's exercises separated fascist Italy from a democratic America. Macfadden stopped short of saying Italy was superior to the United States but his writings included wishful appraisals of the Italian state and claims that America had much to learn.

According to Macfadden, his Italian sojourn was a success. This explained, or so it was claimed, why the Portuguese government extended a similar invitation to Macfadden in 1932, the same year António de Oliveira Salazar assumed control of the state (De Meneses 2013). A military dictatorship existed in Portugal from 1926 but Salazar's rise to power marked an intensification of authoritarianism alongside a growing cult of personality around Salazar (Pinto 2006). Salazar's dictatorial control differed from Mussolini's Italy in several respects, most notably Salazar's expressed and continued distancing from fascist regimes (De Meneses 2013). That withstanding, Salazar's government shared, at least somewhat, Mussolini's admiration of strong and healthy bodies. Maurício Drumond's study of sport in Salazar's regime explained that although Salazar rarely expressed an interest in sport, he used it for political purposes (Drumond 2013). Salazar saw sport as a means of mobilizing subjects around a common Portuguese identity. That Salazar's government expressed an interest in collaborating with Bernarr Macfadden is not too surprising.

Governing with an expressed interest in maintaining Portugal's agrarian economy, the promotion of strong and youthful bodies fit with Salazar's emphasis on 'returning to the soil' (Sapega 2008). His regime's efforts to distance the Portuguese leader from Mussolini and Hitler, which began soon after his appointment as Prime Minister in 1932, were well served by an alliance with the American Bernarr Macfadden. Where Mussolini asked Macfadden to train navy cadets, the Portuguese government instead asked Macfadden to devise a means of training for schoolchildren (Dixon 1934). Captain Claude de Vitalis (1932), writing in *Physical Culture* magazine in 1932, explained his country's motivations for approaching Macfadden. According to de Vitalis, his government chose fifty untrained boys, aged between ten and fifteen, from a range of different schools. Schoolchildren represented the future of the regime and securing their health was of national importance (de Vitalis 1932). It was hoped that reforming those perceived as physically weak would become a testament to Salazar's Portugal (Cairo 2006). Much like Macfadden's Mussolini experiment, the children were put into an exclusive training camp where they could eat pure food, 'devote' themselves to physical culture and improve their physiques. Like the cadets, children trained using MacFadden's unique callisthenic system of exercise. In time, the boys' 'dull and stupid little faces' became 'alert and interested' (de Vitalis 1932). As was the case with Italy, the European's zeal for exercise, and appreciation of its national implications, was contrasted with a lethargic America (Dixon 1934, 12–44). After their time in 'Macfadden Children's Colony', pupils returned to schools transformed.

Capitalizing on his successes, Macfadden co-authored another book, this time with Thomas Dixon. Dixon appeared an odd choice. Better known for his 1905 play *The Clansman*, which inspired D.W. Griffith's controversial 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, Dixon seemed to possess little interest in fitness. Macfadden, although interested in the white male physique, displayed few of Dixon's overt racial ideas. Commenting on this partnership, Anthony Slide (2004) speculated that it was Dixon's sister, May Dixon Thacker, then editor with Macfadden Publications, that facilitated the connection. Beginning with Macfadden's assertion that he 'never' works but rather enjoys every moment in life (Dixon 1934, 1–3), the book reiterated physical culture's importance, and strong bodies, for a nation. Macfadden purposely sought fifty boys from working class schools or orphanages that he could mould to be upstanding citizens. On 'a crusade for the health and happiness', Macfadden claimed to have been shocked by the enthusiasm given to health in both nations (Dixon 1934, 5–9).

Portugal was chosen by Macfadden because it was the ‘weakest of the great historical nations’ (Dixon 1934, 7–9). Its people were malnourished and its, once lauded, empire had faded. Macfadden cited luxury, comfort and lethargy in Portugal’s weaknesses. Despite such problems, the Portuguese government, at least in Macfadden and Dixons’ writings, was attempting to rebuild the nations’ glory through a rebuilding of its budding generation’s health. Macfadden envisioned himself as a catalyst in this transformation. Accordingly, it was claimed

He would take fifty weaklings ... and build them into perfect specimens of physical boyhood. If it could be done he would thus proclaim to Portugal a gospel through which she might regain an empire lost by neglect (Dixon 1934, 44).

Reporting on Portugal contained the promise that nations could be rebuilt through physical culture, and a warning that inactivity led to national decline. Portugal’s geo-political decline was framed as a natural consequence of its growing opulence. Macfadden’s experiment sought to rectify this matter, thus turning the tides of history (Dixon 1934, 12–22). On the completion of this trial, which Macfadden and Dixon were keen to note resulted in improved physical measurements, Macfadden declared that ‘powerful physiques’ had been attained by all (Dixon 1934, 32). This, he stressed, would help Portugal’s revival. It would act as the very foundation of it.

Macfadden’s two experiments were exceptional in their scope and international reach. In reporting, both during and after the trials, the message that a nation needed strong and healthy generations was continuously reiterated. Reframed slightly, Macfadden adopted and expanded on a growing European authoritarian school of thought which linked athleticism and strength to patriotism. An individual’s or group’s nationalism included a commitment to their health. When Macfadden returned to the United States in 1932, and it became apparent that the incumbent president, Franklin Roosevelt was not forthcoming with an offer of a government position, Macfadden’s interest in this message grew (Hunt 1989, 188). Over the next several years, *Physical Culture* magazine featured articles on the need for government programs, the benefits of eugenic programs and personal responsibility in health.

The aftermath of Macfadden’s experiments saw him further his admiration for fascist body cultures. Reflecting on fifty years as a physical culturist soon after he returned from Portugal, Macfadden told readers of the joy of dedicating one’s life to fitness (1933a, 4–16). Bitter about the manner he had been treated in the United States, especially by physicians, he expressed a longing for health fanaticism in all citizens. This, he stated, helped the individual and the nation maintain prosperity (1933a, 10–15). Later articles claimed that ‘Great Men’ of recent times, like Calvin Coolidge or Theodore Roosevelt, understood the importance of keeping strong, fit and healthy (Macfadden 1933b, 4–12). The focus on strong men and men of destiny was very much in keeping with the rhetoric of people like Mussolini, Hitler and Salazar (Gori 1999). The consequence of physical weakness was made apparent in later discussions of criminality, and especially in claims that ‘criminals are all abnormal’ and physically wanting. Weakness at an individual level bred criminality. At a state-level, it bred decadence and downfall. Macfadden was an outspoken proponent of the body regimes fostered in fascist regimes but he was not the only one. Equally important were contributors, like Albert Edward Wiggam, the American psychologist and eugenicist, who

published several articles in *Physical Culture* on potential eugenic programs in the United States (Selden 2000).

Wiggam's articles which ran until 1935, discussed both positive eugenics, such a national welfare program, and negative eugenics, like selective breeding. Like Macfadden, Wiggam (1934a) was a strong proponent of positive eugenics, especially the belief that parents improve future generations by making themselves strong. Showcasing the influence that fascist body cultures had on Macfadden's magazine was Wiggam's more stringent belief that negative eugenics, in the form of forced sterilization, may be necessary to improve America's racial stock (Wiggam 1934a). In 1933, roughly 16,000 sterilizations had been recorded across the United States among the 'insane, feeble-minded, criminals' (Wiggam 1934b). For Wiggam, continued progress in this vein would further America's strength.

Wiggam's support for sterilization was not unique to the United States, indeed Christina Cogdell (2010) highlighted the popularity of eugenics at this time, but his articles stressed the intense focus given to these concerns in *Physical Culture*. As a final point in this regard, it is important to note the national component given over to physical culture and eugenics. Another Wiggam (1934c) article from the mid-1930s stressed the two paths facing the United States. The first, which supported physical culture, meant individual and national prosperity. The other, which eschewed eugenics and physical culture, meant ruin. Between Macfadden's experiments and articles in *Physical Culture*, a clear appreciation of fascist body cultures existed. This admiration and appreciation stressed the link between body and nation. *Physical Culture* became an arena to propagate this European styled nationalism and Macfadden's appreciation of nationalist physiques, which intensified in the late 1930s, was born.

A turning tide? Bernarr Macfadden and wartime nationalism

As the 1930s wore on and war in Europe became an increasingly likely possibility, Macfadden turned his magazine's attention even more to the physical health of the American public. He would use the late 1930s and early 1940s to champion an embodied nationalism, drawing connections between individual and national health. Sometimes these articles came from Macfadden himself, or one of his writers, but oftentimes he used elected or military officials to make the same point. Thus, *Physical Culture* worked to spread his nationalist ideology to a wide range of readers. 'Every man, woman and child should endeavor to maintain the highest possible degree of vital vigor', he declared in a 1935 article titled 'War is an Ugly Word' (Macfadden 1935, 4). Macfadden (1936, 9) later told readers that 'life and health means more during war time than at any other period', drawing explicit connections between personal wellness and the wellness of the nation. He blamed the losses suffered in the First World War on the lack of physical fitness among Americans, and believed they would mitigate this issue with proper preparation. A few issues later, he again called for fitness to take a roll of greater import among the public. 'I would like to see every reader a fine upstanding specimen of humankind', he wrote. 'Men should be men – square-shouldered, bright-eyed, with the form of an Apollo or a Hercules and with the power of a giant in a muscular body'.

In this way, Macfadden's printing helped to generate nationalism in the process later described by Anderson – while also helping to define exactly what that nationalism would

look like. Anderson suggested that creating a shared literacy about anything would help forge a national identity. Macfadden made sure there was a shared literacy around the nation itself, which allowed him to spread his belief about the body and connect it to that of the nation.

In fall 1936, Macfadden's magazine published an impassioned plea for the country to stay out of another war, writing that the previous conflict was not a war to make the world safe for democracy, but rather an opportunity for rich individuals to become richer at the cost of millions of lives: a 'War to Make the World Safe for DuPontcracy' (Haig 1936, 16). By the start of 1938, Macfadden changed his mind, and for the remainder of the conflict he and his publication were firmly in the pro-war camp. His magazine became for readers a monthly call to increase their fitness to defend the nation. Macfadden enlisted Ernest Lundeen (1938, 34), then junior senator from Minnesota, to write an article titled 'Why I Am Sending My Boy to Military School'. Lundeen, who famously voted against declaring war against Germany in 1917, admitted that 'Probably sooner than later, the Second World War will be upon us'. In the spirit of preparation, he said he would send his teenage son to a military academy to learn the finer points of soldiering. Lundeen admitted that not only is it better to kill than to be killed, but also that 'If our life must be forfeit, it is better to die fighting an enemy, than to fall prey to the 'flu', or to be self-slain on the altar of inefficiency'.

Macfadden also commissioned an article from Dr. George Calver (1938, 13), medical director of the US Navy, who used his column space to bemoan the general lack of physical preparedness for war among the citizenry. He looked enviously upon the European powers that 'have well learned more clearly than we have how necessary it is to take compulsory steps to keep their youth healthy, to build them up into the type of man who can become of use to his country both in, and out, of the fighting forces'. Subsequently, articles arguing for national fitness appeared in many issues of *Physical Culture*. In April that year, Macfadden (1938, 8) took up the pen, writing that 'Only spirited health can save the nation', which would soon need soldiers who were 'strong, vigorous specimens of manhood'. He worried that the United States was following behind its soon-to-be-fellow combatants. Whereas previously Macfadden linked muscular and strong physiques to a nation's overall prosperity, they now became an issue of national importance.

Two years later Macfadden was fixated with this issue. He repeated his previous call for a domestic program similar to 'the carefully planned health program of the Nazi regime;' something, he said, that would become 'America's first line of defense' (Heiser 1940, 7). Likewise, Macfadden (1941a, 4) predicted that masses of men would get rejected by the draft board, which he called 'a scathing arraignment of the youth of this nation'. It was not just the frontline grunts he was concerned about, but also 'the men behind the guns, the men behind the army', he warned, 'they cannot be too vital, too vigorous'. In Macfadden's eyes, the United States had become 'a race of weaklings' who 'are in no way prepared to meet such fiendish savagery as that unleashed by Hitler's legions' because of how the country had neglected general physical fitness. In February of 1941, Macfadden put the onus on the reader, commissioning an article from Warner (1941, 6–7), the National Commander of the American Legion, which trumpeted in bold headlines splashed across two pages: 'Vital Health – Your Patriotic Duty'. And two months later, in April, Macfadden put a man on the cover of his magazine: a soldier, before and after six months of training (Front Cover 1941).

In the weeks preceding the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Macfadden (1941b, 3) launched what he labelled 'America's Own V Campaign', encouraging readers to consume 'vitamins

for national health and national defense, vitamins for victory!’ To further cajole readers, Macfadden quoted Surgeon General Thomas Parran’s claim that ‘We shall need in the days to come rugged health and coverage such as the world has never seen. The magnitude of our effort for this war is only the beginning of our historic task. [...] All the strength and courage that America can muster will be needed for the rebuilding of a shattered world. We Americans must be conscious of our destiny, for America is the last great hope on earth.’ The success of the war effort was said then, to be dependent on how well they took care of their bodies.

Even in 1943, two years into the United States’ involvement in the war, Macfadden continued to draw connections in the minds of his readers between the military and *Physical Culture*. He ran advertisements containing what were likely fictional conversations between WWI heroes Generals Bullard and Pershing. The military men fawned over Macfadden’s fitness system, with Colonel Pershing (1944, 4) exclaiming that it had ‘done much good to the Army’, and Bullard stating that he had retired to teach at ‘a military school of the Bernarr Macfadden Foundation’. Macfadden also began to include stories about how his system helped prepare women as well as men to participate in the war effort, with articles like ‘A ‘Softie’ Becomes an Air Raid Warden’ (Morosco 1944, 14) and ‘I Passed my Army Physical With Flying Colors!’ (Godek 1944, 25). He took to printing letters from soldiers, which disparaged enemy states and glorify America with statements like ‘We Americans are a nation of giants who will assure our place in the sun’ (Haigh 1944, 86). If nothing else, this type of rhetoric evidenced the kind of imagined community envisioned by Macfadden, one in which the strong body was the patriotic one.

Macfadden used his platform to trumpet the positives of the war. Nowhere were there stories of soldiers suffering from gruesome injuries. Enlisting, for *Physical Culture*, meant health, confidence, and happiness. One soldier reported how the army ‘taught him to keep clean’. Others had even more impactful experiences. In May 1945, near the end of the War, Macfadden published a story explaining how a husband getting drafted ended up saving his wife from unnecessary surgery. In the same issue, a sailor explained how he had been ‘a coward and a weakling [who] lived a miserable life’ (Gottlieb 1945). ‘I hated myself’, he wrote, ‘and all that I stood for’. Basic training made him ‘a new man’, who ‘can now look forward to a future of unsurpassed happiness and health’. In fact, the only negative story printed about the War during this time was a commentary against war rations, which might threaten the collective physical health of the citizenry (Chidester 1940). Macfadden’s emphasis on physical health during wartime may not have tipped the balance of the conflict, but it attempted to inform his readers’ actions. What may have previously been seen as a personal hobby or lifestyle choice was reframed as a deeply patriotic act. Exercising was not about strengthening yourself, it was about strengthening the nation. As Macfadden repeated this message of embodied nationalism issue after issue, he forged a distinct, but very real, imagined community.

Conclusion

Throughout the entirety of the Second World War, Macfadden made sure readers received monthly missives reminding them not just of the righteousness of the war, but also of the important role they played staying fit and staying ready. He was not alone in this effort. Sociologist Dahn Shaulis (1997) noted that a number of prominent publications, like *Time*

and *Reader's Digest*, published articles drawing similar connections, but none banged the drum as consistently and forcefully as did *Physical Culture*. Likewise no other publication proved as intensely committed to the ideal of muscular nationalism as Macfadden and his writers. It is difficult to quantify the impact of Macfadden alone at a time when the entire country was transforming in the face of the war, but his message did seem to find an audience. A 1940 Gallup poll found that over two thirds of Americans did not exercise, but two years later a similar poll suggested that the number fell to 42% (Shaulis 1997, 112). This evidences the theory of print capitalism that Anderson put forth many years later. Anderson believed that different people would come to see themselves as one when exposed to the same media and indoctrinated into the same belief system. Macfadden turned his popular magazine into an organ to do just that, spreading an embodied nationalism. He found success in doing so, providing ample evidence for Anderson's thesis. Whether or not his readers realized it, by consuming *Physical Culture* every month, they were part of a community that was developing a common level of cultural literacy. Readers acquired a shared understanding of the importance of personal fitness and how it related to the defense and wellbeing of the nation, and through them the idea spread beyond *Physical Culture's* niche market. Historians then should take note of the usefulness of applying theories of nationalism to sporting publications, and the way that it can expand our understanding of both the role the role of media and its relationship to the state.

From the early 1930s Macfadden used *Physical Culture's* wide readership to advance his theories on strength and citizenship. During the decade's opening years Macfadden promoted, and indeed aided, the role of exercise in fascist regimes. Macfadden was not alone, of course, in expressing an admiration in Benito Mussolini's shrewd use of physical culture for political gain but was unique in actively helping to advance it. Similarly, Macfadden played a small, but nevertheless significant, role in helping to bulwark António de Oliveira Salazar's regime in Portugal. Done in peacetime, Macfadden's trumpeted successes, as expressed in magazine and monographs, spoke to the foundational link he saw between the body and the nation. Where other Americans expressed admiration for the physical health initiatives found in these regimes and, at times, linked them to a nation's military prowess, Macfadden instead linked exercise to the very functioning of the state. Under this rubric an efficient, loyal and hardworking citizen was a trained citizen. This meant then that a dedication to one's body was, in effect, a patriotic act one which passed through the generations.

This was an implicit, but nevertheless attractive form of nationalist rhetoric, one which intensified in the coming years. When it became apparent that American was destined for war, or at the very least, preparing for conflict, Macfadden became even more vocal in his writings. In wartime the trained body was examined with reference to sovereignty, protection and violence. Strong male bodies were of utmost importance, but so too were those of the regular citizenry. The previous relationship between efficient citizens and strong bodies was expanded to include military prowess. Macfadden changed his focus, but only at a superficial level. He still linked strong and muscular bodies to the nation-state and to one's nationalist duties. What changed was instead the focus of what these duties entailed.

What then, can be learned from Macfadden's magazine and writings? First that the well-studied European commitment to physical fitness for nationalist ends was not confined to one side of the Atlantic. It could, and did, find ardent supporters in North America, some

of whom went to great lengths to promulgate it. This suggests a transnationalism in American physical fitness, and an embodied transnationalism, that has rarely been explored. Second, that print communities, even recreational ones like Macfadden's, had a leading role to play in debating, critiquing, and creating new ideas of American nationalism. The kind of nationalism promoted by Macfadden was in many ways a palimpsest, one which built on prevailing trends linked to fitness, eugenics, nationalism, and American identity. Macfadden created, promoted, and sustained, an American sense of nationalism that began first and foremost with the body. Despite the changing geopolitical circumstances, Macfadden's focus remained the same – built bodies were patriotic ones. Macfadden's enterprise serves then as a reminder that nationalism is both an ideological construct, but also a physical, breathing, and living reality.

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