

Hans Surén, Excerpts from *Man and Sunlight* (1925/27)

Abstract

As a military officer, Hans Surén (1885–1972) was stationed in Namibia during World War I. After the war, he was appointed head of a military school of physical education near Berlin. Beginning in 1924, he wrote books on physical exercise and nudism as the foundations of a healthy and “moral” life. Over time, he became one of the main proponents of naturism in Germany. These two excerpts appeared in his book *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (1925) [translated as *Man and Sunlight* in 1927], in which he declared physical exercise in the sun and in the nude as the ideal path towards “the perfection of the whole body.” The cult of the body, as propagated by Surén, fit in seamlessly with the National Socialist ideology that eventually took hold of Germany in the 1930s, and a revised edition of his book with nationalist and racist overtones was published in 1936. Surén himself initially served as the National Socialists’ poster boy for the “Aryan-Olympic spirit,” but he fell from grace in 1942 after he was fined for public masturbation and subsequently expelled from the NSDAP. During the final years of the Nazi regime, he was incarcerated in Brandenburg jail; after 1945, he lived in retirement in Berlin.

Source

[...]

Nakedness and gymnastics were, centuries ago, the basis of the health and strength of the Greek race. Naked exercise was the daily rule for the people in their sports grounds—the Gymnasion or the Palaestra—youths, men, and maidens also, although the latter were not always present with the men at exercise. On special days both sexes combined for rhythmic dances. It must have been a magnificent spectacle to see the naked bodies in the ecstasy of their rhythmic movements. Among the Spartans, with their rigid morals, the virgins exercised naked with the youths. The new law that contestants should compete naked in the Olympic Games was made possible by the existence of such an outlook. Thus the act of Orsippus became a new pillar in the temple of Greek culture.

It seems to me that the present age could become ripe for a similar regulation with regard to sport. The necessity of the times indeed urges us to cultivate, from now on, nakedness to the loin cloth at all sporting practice and contests. This is an essential for the re-birth of strength among the people generally, and should be equally recognised for women and girls, in whose health and strength lies the future of the race. By the male sex this nakedness would even now be gladly welcomed, for the male usually feels more bodily freedom than the female. Yet even women and girls will, in the course of time, cast off their clothes at exercise and play, to experience for themselves, the same joy of the body, and thus to lay the foundations of a purer morality. Possibly later, when an uplift in the moral sense has taken place, a new Orsippus will arise and give a higher expression to purity and beauty.

[...]

Sport with its contests; exercises with their gymnastic temper; rhythmic education with the joys of self-experience; tension and relaxation of the body, athletics, walks, sunbaths, and whatever manifold forms man’s endeavours may assume—all must be a quest for the perfection of the whole body. This perfection, so far as it is made physically evident, can only be realised and experienced in Nature. All views and all paths are right if they are inspired by this true endeavour. From knowledge of this springs the Olympic spirit—may it be a symbol to us! The age of Olympus is dead and gone, and it would be a mistake to wish the age revived. Yet as a symbol this culture of physical and mental health may serve us,

whose achievements of maturest perfection in all fields gave eternal models and examples to aftertime. The quest for harmony and perfection is bound up with iron laws; it is man's task to adapt himself to these. The weal or woe of a people depends on the physical and moral condition of every member; as was recognised by Lykurgus, the lawgiver of Sparta, and by Solon the Athenian. Thus leaders wrote thousands of years ago, and dealt accordingly; they and their people seeking health, vigour, and moral power in the Gymnasion, in the Palæstra. The methods of education will undergo change; the State may intervene or the individual act on his own initiative; yet fixed and unchanged through the ages shall stand the ideal of the soul-inspired body in all its magnificence of Nature and sunlight—the gymnast; the sun-man.

Great are the needs of the age; we want leaders—and laws. The individual can hardly save himself any longer; the overwhelming burden keeps him bound. Around us lurk decline, disease, and death—yet from heaven above streams the all-bountiful sunshine. In vain are its radiance and power, since insight and leadership are lacking. Much is written and spoken, but where are the men of action? Already some signs of the Olympic spirit flicker here and there; we read in the press of the necessity for a term of compulsory general service. Compulsory military service, too much restricted by the burden of arms drill and barrack routine, can only partially fulfill our ends. The future of a people depends on its physical and moral enlightenment; compared to these, its equipment in arms is but a fragment. Our industrial needs and the struggle of competition do not allow of universal whole-time service, but a combination of this with obligatory labour can be a way to national recovery. Work and exercise in constant alternation will restore health and strength to the race. Up then—the strong to the front; those with the gift of leadership, with sunlight in their hearts and their senses open to new perceptions.

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Source: Hans Surén, *Man and Sunlight*, authorized translation from the 67th edition by David Arthur Jones. Slough [England]: Sollux, 1927, pp. 124-26, 176-79.

Source of original German text: Hans Surén, *Der Mensch und die Sonne*. Stuttgart: Dieck & Co., 1925, pp. 138-42, 192-95.

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