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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Sports, pastimes : Russian

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Before the 1860s, aristocratic pastimes in Russia had involved competitive leisure pursuits like yachting, hunting, shooting or horse racing. These spread with the westernization of the Russian nobility and gentry in the second half of the 19th century. In as far they were not simply integrated into the societal life of the nobility anyway, they were conducted in loosely organized societies and clubs. An Imperial Yacht Club, for example, was founded in St. Petersburg in 1846 and quickly found spin-offs in provincial towns as remote from the sea as Voronež in Southern Russia. Hunting, an important pastime of the gentry in 19th-century Russia, tended to be less organized than in the contemporary British Empire. However, literary descriptions of hunting parties, above all Turgenev's *Sketches of a Sportsman* (1852) were important contributions in the invention of a specifically Russian landscape.

In much of the 18th century horse racing and in particular horse breeding had been in the hand of state-run studs, whereas in the first half of the 19th century various small societies of breeders emerged. Their number skyrocketed in the second half of the century, when race course were built around the country and a professional system of punters and reporters emerged and horse racing became immensely popular with the urban populace.

Beginning with the reform period of the 1860s and 1870s, various kinds of team sports (soccer, hockey) and spectator sports (boxing) made their inroads into Russia. Often practised exclusively by foreigners in the beginning, mixed and Russian teams and athletes appeared in the capital cities. The more liberal legislation on associations and the emergence of new urban classes (professionals, workers) facilitated the emergence of clubs and infrastructure and provided the background for a quick commercialization in the 1880s and 1890s.

By the turn of the century, cycling had become the most popular and best organized form of sporting activity among urban dwellers. Individual sports like tennis, fencing, swimming, ice skating or athletics also took root at the time. However, much to the regret of populist authors like Nikolaj G. Černyševskij, Nikolaj A. Dobroljubov or Evstafij M. Dement'ev, Russians did not develop national sports of their own in the 19th century.

Tellingly gymnastics, which had spread over Europe in wake of the Napoleonic wars and in the context of awakening nationalism, remained a state-controlled affair. Thanks, in large part, to German instructors it gained its place in educational facilities and the military drill. During the 1870s and 1880s the physician Peter Francevič Lesgaft (1837-1909) wrote extensively about the relationship between athletics and the physical and moral development of the youth, and demanded more attention for the psychological and aesthetic dimensions of physical culture. The Ministry of Education saw no need to implement Lesgaft's ideas into Russian school curricula, nor did the government consider the emergence of a Russian branch of the Slavic Sokol movement desirable. This began to change only after the military defeat of the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-05.

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