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## The Gymnast and the Shepherd The Invention of a National Games' Tradition in Switzerland

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# The Gymnast and the Shepherd: The Invention of a National Games' Tradition in Switzerland

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*Abstract: The cultural and institutional history of Helvetic national games (in particular, Swiss wrestling, or “Schwingen,” and stone-throwing) reveals several paradoxes that call into question their rural and traditional storybook image widely conveyed by the Société fédérale de gymnastique (SFG 1833) and the Association fédérale de lutte suisse (AFLS 1895) since the nineteenth century. On the basis of original archival funds combining institutional documents, specialized press, and iconographic material, this article firstly highlights the striking discrepancy between the significance of the rural symbolism of national games for the mostly urban Swiss gymnasts and the very low factual representation of peasants in the nineteenth-century SFG’s membership. Secondly, the analysis shows the importance of the invention of a national games tradition in the assertion of the patriotic dimension of the SFG after the foundation of the 1848 Swiss nation-state, whereas modern gymnastics developed mainly in Switzerland thanks to a cultural transfer from the Germanic Confederation. Finally, we highlight how Swiss gymnasts mobilized to safeguard the “authenticity” of national games, which they felt were threatened by modernity (commodification, tourism, cosmopolitanism), but also how they codified and institutionalized these traditional physical practices according to criteria that are fully in line with the theories of “sportivization” and the definition of modern sports.*

*Keywords: History, Transnational, Switzerland, Traditional Games, Turnen, Wrestling, Schwingen, Gymnastics*

## Introduction

Swiss “breeches-lifting” wrestling, or “Schwingen,” and stone-throwing are recognized as national symbols, and even as “national sports,” in Switzerland today.<sup>2</sup> Organized since 1895 at intervals of two and then three years, sometimes in modest localities of Swiss rural areas, the Federal Schwingen Festivals have retained a very strong rural, traditional, and popular scope. It also should be noted that Schwingen is officially registered as a Swiss “living tradition” (lebendige-traditionen: Schwingen), but that the competitions held during the Federal Festivals are still not open to women.

In 2013, Ueli Maurer, then president of the Swiss Confederation and representative of the *Union démocratique du centre* (UDC)—the Swiss agrarian party and most right-wing political formation represented in the federal government—said in his speech at the Burgdorf Federal Schwingen Festival that he was pleased so many people felt the need to explore the origins of Switzerland. He also stressed the importance of taking care of one’s roots, “at a time when many things are changing around us” (RFJ 2013). Moreover, the edition held in the small town of Zug in 2019 saw the construction of a temporary 50,000-seat stadium—making it one of the biggest temporary stadiums in the history of any sport (Vonnard, Mayencourt, and Gerber 2019)—and was attended by more than 400,000 spectators. In 2019, Ueli Maurer was once again president of the Confederation and participated in the Zug Festival.<sup>3</sup> After an entrance by a parade of honor made up of yodelers, bell ringers, and extras in traditional shepherd’s costume, he said in his speech that “Schwingen is linked to our [Swiss] values” (24heures 2019).

The obvious political and identity dimensions of Helvetic national games (Schwingen, stone-throwing and lifting, and also *Hornuss*) need to be critically reflected upon historically

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<sup>3</sup> In Switzerland, the presidency of the Confederation is based on a system of annual rotation among the seven members of the Federal Council.

and placed in the period which saw the considerable development of these physical practices, the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In this context, national games have played a central role in the rise and legitimization of the *Société fédérale de gymnastique* (SFG, *Schweizerische Turnverein*). Founded in 1833,<sup>5</sup> the SFG became an important part of the Helvetic civil associations that underpinned the foundation of the Swiss national state in 1848 (Jost 1991), a milestone regarded as the advent of “modern Switzerland” (Humair 2009).<sup>6</sup> With its liberal-radical political culture, the SFG was the bearer of a federal project which combined patriotism and republicanism in a desire for national cohesion that would transcend cantonal differences (Zimmer 2003), especially on the basis of a bourgeois and virile gymnastics sociability that remained the preserve of men until the end of the nineteenth century (Herzog 1995).

It remains difficult to trace the medieval origins of Helvetic national games, as contributions on this subject have been made by non-medievalist historians who tend to not to agree with each other (Strupler 1955; Schaufelberger 1972; Mathys 1975; Meyer 1982; Burgener 1983). Nevertheless, there is evidence of the presence of physical exercises in the old Helvetic Confederation (1291–1798), attested to by several chronicles from the beginning of the fourteenth century. These included shooting (with bow, crossbow, and later with harquebus), running, jumping, fencing, and swimming, as well as wrestling and stone-throwing. These exercises were performed relatively informally in the towns and countryside, but also during folk events that were not unique to the Helvetic areas. As such, if wrestling can be considered an immemorial and (almost) universal game (Philippe 2014), it has been declining in different forms, sometimes linked to national specificities, as is the case with Schwingen, which appears to be practiced only in Switzerland.

To my knowledge, no specific work has been conducted on the revival of Schwingen and stone-throwing in the context of the development of Swiss modern gymnastics since the 1820s. Nevertheless, I have to mention the various anniversary publications edited by the SFG and the *Association fédérale de lutte suisse* (AFLS 1895) (Spühler, Ritter, and Schächtelin 1907; AFLS 1945)—although these books offer a noncritical history, they are still interesting on a factual and empirical level. It is also worth noting some of the works about the politicization of tradition in Switzerland which discuss the role of shepherds, Schwingen, and gymnastics festivals in the process of Swiss national patrimonialization (Schader 1992; Gallati and Wyss 1993; Schader and Leimgruber 1993; Matter 2006; El-Wakil and Baudoui 2018; Hertz et al. 2018).

In the context of the present contribution, I have therefore drawn on wider research on traditional folk games. As such, I would like to highlight the works of Eichberg (2016), Fabian (2021), Bond (1993, 2009), Cronin (1998), Pfister (2003), and others as key contributors to the field. Henning Eichberg (2016) placed the rise of Gaelic games as well as certain forms of wrestling, including Schwingen, in the first phase of the modern revival of traditional games during the nineteenth century in the context of nation-state building. Tom Fabian’s (2021) recent PhD dissertation examines the notion of heritage linked to traditional games in the context of UNESCO safeguarding policies. Focusing, in detail, on several national cases, this work provides a broad historiographical overview from a global perspective and provides a national sport theory. Hans Bond’s papers (1993, 2009) is also very interesting for those like me who work on so-called shepherds’ practices, in particular because it underlines the Danish

<sup>4</sup> Literally, the term “Helvetism” refers to a typical Swiss idiom or expression. In this paper, we use “Helvetic” as a synonym for the adjective “Swiss,” especially when we refer to the period before 1848. The Hornuss is a kind of baseball played with a whip and a puck. It is also registered as a living tradition in Switzerland: <http://www.tl.admin.ch/traditionen/00069/index.html?lang=en&version=full>.

<sup>5</sup> The institutional history produced by the SFG defines the founding date of the association as 1832, the date of the first Federal Gymnastics Festival in Aarau, but it was not actually founded until 1833.

<sup>6</sup> In 1848, Switzerland became a federal state which linked the national principle and the maintenance of a still relatively strong sovereignty of the cantons: the cantons exercised all the rights which were not relegated to the Confederation (central power on a national scale).

particularity of peasant gymnastics, a unique case in Europe, and how this practice made it possible to dramatize and embody rural values. Moreover, Mike Cronin's study (1998) on the hybridization of Gaelic games and English sports within the framework of Irish nationalism has inspired me significantly in my reflections, as well as works on German gymnastics (Pfister 2003), in particular, its international diffusion and hybridization with modern sports (Hofmann 2004; Amgarten Quitzau 2013). Finally, I also want to position this paper in the historiography of Swiss school and associative gymnastics in progress since the 1950s (Burgener 1952; Giuliani 2001; Bussard 2007; Brühwiler 2017; Horlacher 2017; Czáká 2021).

My aim with this contribution is to show how the valorization of Helvetic national games during the nineteenth century was widely supported by SFG gymnasts to assert the national scope of their practice. In line with the concept of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983] 2012) this process also highlights the importance of adopting a transnational perspective, particularly at the European level, to rethinking the Swiss nation and identity-building history (Jost 1994; Holenstein 2014; Büsser et al. 2020), which appears as a singular enterprise of cultural and institutional "bricolage" (Marchal and Mattioli 1992, 12–13). Indeed, the highly symbolic dimension of Helvetic national games was used to make gymnastics "more Swiss." The main objective was to "resémantiser" ("to give a national meaning to," Espagne 2013, 1) the German-imported gymnastics (*Turnen*) through a denial of foreign influences that was often at work in the background of national identity-building in nineteenth-century Europe (Thiesse 2014). Moreover, I want to show how this appropriation of Helvetic national games by gymnasts also reveals an idealized view of the countryside by a fringe of the Swiss urban bourgeoisie. Thus, it led to the progressive institutionalization and rationalization of Schwingen and stone-throwing in the framework of gymnastics. This phenomenon wavered between a reactionary desire to safeguard a national folklore and a condescending "civilizing process" idealized by city dwellers in opposition to the peasantry. The process also refers to the theory of "sportivization" and reduction of violence conceptualized by Norbert Elias [1986] (1995).

To conduct my analysis, I relied on an extensive cross-reading of cantonal and national archives. I looked at original institutional funds, in particular those of the SFG and the AFLS, but also those of the *Société cantonale vaudoise de gymnastique* (SCVG 1858), which included committee minutes, annual activity reports, and statistical surveys. I also used the specialist newspapers of the time (*Die Schweizerische Turnzeitung* 1858; *Le Gymnaste* 1859; *La Gymnastique* 1882; *Le Gymnaste suisse* 1888), which were the official organs of the institutions mentioned above, as well as iconographic sources to illustrate the symbolism of national games, such as posters of gymnastics and Schwingen festivals.

My argument is divided into three parts. First, from a transversal temporal perspective (from the eighteenth to the very end of the nineteenth century), I will examine the basis and the manner in which the stereotypical rural representation of Swiss gymnasts was constructed. Then, I will see how the original and pastoral myth of national games made it possible to distinguish Swiss gymnastics from the German *Turnen*, particularly in the decades following the founding of the Swiss national state (between the 1850s and 1870s). Finally, I will underline how gymnasts, once established as the worthy guardians of the tradition of Helvetic national games, codified and institutionalized these practices since the late 1880s in order to safeguard and rationalize them, as well as to preserve their authority in the field of Swiss physical exercise governance, according to reactionary precepts.

### **Appropriating the Shepherd**

In eighteenth-century Europe, a new sensibility for the mountains developed according to a highly idealized image of nature. In this context, the inhabitants of the old Helvetic Confederation were identified as "shepherd people" whose life was seen as primitive and free (Braun 1988, 65). As a result of the increasing publication of alpine travel stories, of which

Rousseau's *Nouvelle Eloise* published in 1761 is the most well-known example, travelers came from all over Europe to Switzerland to find supposed "natural" people who lived in harmony with nature, echoing a process of "mystification of the peasantry" (Shanin 1990, 50–52), but also the myth of the noble savage in reference to the European colonial imaginary (Schär 2015; Hertz et al. 2018). If this image was mainly constructed by foreigners, it was quickly taken up as a specific romantic feature by Helvetic writers and scientists and sparked the development of Swiss patriotism through the "Helvetism" school of thought (Im Hof and De Capitani 1983). These indigenous elites advocated the creation of supra-cantonal intellectual and cultural networks. However, this stereotypical vision of rurality did not correspond to the reality of the Helvetic countryside of the time. Indeed, the life of mountain peasants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was very harsh. Generally speaking, work in the fields remained an arduous manual task for a long time in Switzerland where the real mechanization of agriculture only occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century (Bergier 1983).

Because they were immemorably linked to peasant imagery, as recreational practices of shepherds, Schwingen and stone-throwing became significant idealizations of the Helvetic countryside. For example, Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777) cited Schwingen (besides shooting and traditional dances) in his pastoral poem *Die Alpen* published in 1729 which stands out as an ode to Helvetic rural folklore. The Unspunnen shepherds' festivals held at the beginning of the nineteenth century (1805 and 1808) were also emblematic of the first steps in the revival of the old games. In 1805, shepherds from the Oberland competed in alphorn playing, stone-throwing, and Schwingen in Unspunnen at the foot of the Bernese Alps. The event, which brought together several thousand people, was intended to reflect the popular and rural Helvetic traditions. In fact, it was orchestrated by the patricians of the city of Bern and attracted an audience composed mainly of the urban upper-middle classes (also from neighboring Europe). Notably, through this festival, the Bernese elite also wanted to ease recent peasant revolts by mobilizing the image of bucolic and harmonious countryside customs (Gallati and Wyss 1993; Matter 2006).

However, it was not until after the creation of the Swiss Federal State in 1848 that Schwingen and stone-throwing were gradually defined as "national games" in the framework of SFG activity and aligned with modern Swiss gymnastics. Published in the newspaper *Le Gymnaste* in 1872, one article clearly highlighted the gymnast's vision of rurality, which was positive but also reflected the usual stereotypes of pastoral myth. In it, the "national gymnastics" (Eichberg 1995, 121–122) practiced by shepherds appears primitive, rough, and almost naive in contrast to the more sophisticated urban practice:

For centuries there has existed in the countryside and on our mountains a game, national gymnastics, which, in its kind and in a natural [...] way, favors the harmonic and general improvement of the body. We are talking about Schwingen, that noble duel which is so often admired on the lawns of the Emmenthal and Entlebuch, as well as on the Alps of the Oberland and in the primitive cantons [central rural Switzerland]. Persistent exercise, combined with natural vigor and agility, makes it possible to achieve perfection in this pursuit, which, together with other similar exercises (running, throwing and lifting stones, etc.), meets the physical exercise (gymnastics) needs of a vigorous and strong population. These natural games, however, which already require a certain amount of strength and agility and above all hardened bones, these games, we say, are hardly rational for a large part of the urban population. (Anonymous 1872, 2–3. Translated from French by author)

The progressive fascination of Swiss gymnasts with the rural symbolism of national games was also the expression of a certain discomfort within the SFG. In fact, the association's membership was mainly from an urban, liberal, and industrial small bourgeoisie, with an overrepresentation of retailers and qualified workers such as watchmakers and very few peasants: only 8 percent at the

beginning of the twentieth century and even fewer during the nineteenth century (SFG 1874, 1907). For comparison purposes, peasants still accounted for 40 percent of the Swiss working population during the second half of the nineteenth century (Bergier 1983).

This low presence of countryside representatives in gymnastics was partly because the main rural regions of Switzerland (Central Switzerland and Valais, in particular) had a federalist conservative Catholic culture and were therefore resistant to the Protestant liberal-radical and national ideology of the federal state (Zimmer 2003) promoted by SFG. However, the main reason for the near absence of peasants in gymnastics was the aforementioned harshness of the work in the fields and the incompatibility of the rural lifestyle with regular participation in a gymnastics club. In this respect, Eduard Bienz (1844–1892), then secretary of the SFG, made the following remark in a report published following an 1874 statistical survey on the occupations of the association's members:

First of all, we have to notice the very small number of farmers (peasants). This proves to us that gymnastics has not yet met with much sympathy among the rural population. By wielding the pickaxe and the shovel, the farmers believe they are satisfying their need for physical exercise; they do not think that by practicing the same movements over and over again, their bodies become stiff and heavy and do not know how to use their vigorous strength. Teachers and clergymen should do more in this respect; by instructing the country people, they could contribute much to making them accept the benefits of gymnastics. (Bienz 1874, 4. Translated from German by author)

Bienz's remarks contained several structuring elements of the discourse that Swiss gymnasts produced regarding the countryside. First, the eminently physical nature of work in the field was noted, while at the same time the repetition and lack of completeness of the movements that this entails was emphasized. Second, the peasants were seen as a population to be instructed, or even educated and moralized through gymnastics.

The main problem for SFG was that the association could not really claim to promote a fully patriotic project without a minimum representation of the countryside, both geographically and symbolically. With this in mind, several initiatives were launched by gymnasts to entice to the rural population, and Schwingen and stone-throwing were placed at the center of this process. For example, an article published in 1885 in the newspaper *La Gymnastique* denounced the overly elitist and theoretical nature of gymnastics within the SFG and advocated for a simplification of the practice. The authors argued in particular for a return to the roots of national games that gymnasts rapidly modernized with the addition of jumping and compulsory choreographed movements. The desire to attract the rural population through this simplification was obvious, as was the mobilization of the myth of the shepherd:

What we mean by national games are the exercises that have been practiced for centuries by our ancestors: Schwingen, free wrestling, lifting, stone-throwing. It is almost ridiculous to try to stay on this abstract ground which we have unfortunately fallen into. We have in our villages, in the mountains and in the valleys hundreds of robust and healthy young people; why don't they approach our pedantry? We believe that for what we call our national gymnastics, we need exercises that are exclusively and truly national, born of the people and revered by them. (Hintermann et al. 1885, 227. Translated from French by author)

In the same vein, the SCVG (1858) organized lessons for Schwingen instructors in the canton's rural areas at the end of the nineteenth century in order to establish gymnastics there. The approach also responded to a certain puritanism typical of the Protestant bourgeoisie of the canton of Vaud. Indeed, one of the lesson reports encouraged the organization of Schwingen festivals in the countryside in the following terms: "This would be, we believe, the best way to

develop a taste for Schwingen in our countrymen, thus removing them from unpatriotic and sometimes disastrous distractions” (SCVG 1896, 8. Translated from French by author). Another report hoped that “this lesson will be the starting point for new work and that many young people will abandon card games and cabaret evenings to practice the noble art of Schwingen” (SCVG 1894–1896, 6. Translated from French by author).

The most striking example of the investment in the countryside and its symbolism by urban gymnasts was perhaps the organization of a Schwingen festival in the famed “Swiss village” exhibition of the 1896 Geneva National Exhibition (the third of its kind), itself a symbol of the “museumization” of Swiss folklore with its real chalets (dismantled and reassembled on site), its artificial waterfall, and its extras in traditional costume (Thiesse 2001; Froidevaux 2002; Minder 2018). An article from the newspaper *Le Gymnaste suisse* clearly shows the symbolic importance of such an event for the gymnasts:

Dear Friends! In order to give our Exhibition a truly national character, the organizers not only wanted to introduce us to industrial Switzerland, its arts and products, they also wanted to introduce us to the Switzerland of the countryside and the mountains. [...] The gymnasts of Geneva, eager to have the most national of our productions on the program, requested a Schwingen festival. (Perret 1896, 36. Translated from French by author)

If the revival of national games in the gymnastics framework reflected a politics of power and legitimization (to gain members and to make the SFG grow on a national scale), it also testified to a logic of identity-building based on a paradox. Indeed, the great majority of the disciplines practiced by Swiss gymnasts were not derived from the traditional games of the old Helvetic Confederation, but rather from German gymnastics (*Turnen*), invented in Prussia at the beginning of the nineteenth century and from which the first Swiss clubs (*Turnvereine*) were directly inspired. From then on, Swiss gymnasts were confronted with the problem of having to create something national on the basis of a practice almost completely imported from abroad.

### The Helvetification of German *Turnen*

Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778–1852), also known as the “*Turnvater*,” codified the main principles of *Turnen* in the 1810s. Highly patriotic, his ideology was based on the awakening of a common national consciousness in the various German States following the traumas of the Napoleonic wars. Thus, the *Turnen* and the *Turnvereine* movement aimed to provide the German people with “a total education in the national” through physical exercise, as well as forming strong and hardened bodies for the defense of the fatherland (Thiesse 2001, 243). It promoted the values of national unity, will, freedom, and republicanism, and imposed a common uniform and knowledge of German cultural monuments among its members. When Jahn opened the first *Turnplatz* (open-air gymnasium) in Hasenheide (near Berlin) in 1811, he invented several apparatus, such as parallel bars, rings, beam, and pommel horse, which are at the root of modern gymnastics. In addition, he prescribed a whole range of so-called “traditional” exercises (*Volksthümliche Übungen*), including running, walking, jumping, lifting weights, fencing, swimming, and free wrestling (Pfister 2003).

Banned by the Prussian regime in 1819 because of its liberal tendencies, the *Turnvereine* movement became fully contentious during the Springtime of Nations of 1848 by opposing the aristocratic regimes of the German princes and kings. Following the successive failures of liberalism in the German States, repression hit the *Turner* hard, and many gymnastics teachers had to go into exile, many moving to Switzerland. The country was then a “liberal island in the middle of a reactionary Europe” (Humair 2018, 104) with the success of the first cantonal revolutions (1830s) and then with the foundation of the liberal State in 1848. It should be noted that this German political immigration was not only limited to gymnastics circles. Indeed, Switzerland



became a refuge for exiled liberal elites (Urner 1976), which generated strong tensions within reactionary Prussia and the southern German States from 1849 onward (Bonjour 1948).

Thus, several renowned German gymnastics teachers emerged as significant cultural mediators of *Turnen* in Switzerland, the most famous of whom were Adolf Spiess (1810–1858), considered the pioneer of school gymnastics in Switzerland (Horlacher 2017), Karl Völker (1796–1884), the *Turnvater* of the canton of Grisons (Krüger 2011), and Alfred Maul (1828–1907). Lesser known but equally significant, the Bavarian gymnastics teacher Ferdinand Wilhelmi (1826–1909) provides a good example of the weight of German influence in the beginnings of modern Swiss gymnastics. Wilhelmi notably founded the first gymnastics club in the town of Vevey (1855) and played a central role in the foundation of the SCVG (1858), as well as in the early development of gymnastics in French-speaking Switzerland. He also played a decisive role in the codification of gymnastics and in its militarization in the country.

In addition to the key role of political migrants, student mobility was also important in the cultural transfer of *Turnen*. Indeed, the Universities of Göttingen and Berlin were particularly attractive destinations for the young Swiss intellectual elite (Zimmer 2003), who came into contact there with the German *Turnvereine* and founded gymnastics clubs in academies and student societies once back home (Kundert and Im Hof 1969). It should also be noted that the *Turnen* system was the main pedagogical doctrine of gymnastics lessons in Swiss schools during the nineteenth century (Bussard 2007), although other competing currents—such as the Clias method and Swedish gymnastics—were also present (Czáka 2021).

It is therefore against the background of this predominant German influence that I now want to address the increasingly sustained promotion of national games within the SFG from the early 1850s, especially in the Federal Gymnastics Festivals. Although Schwingen and stone-throwing were sometimes practiced in the SFG festivals before this period, a proposal was launched during an assembly in 1853 to establish the regulation of these traditional practices which were still considered too provincial and not rationalized enough (SFG 1853). After this initial impulse, a special commission was formed the following year to reorganize the competitions in order to enhance the value of national games (SFG 1854). It is interesting to note that the illustration on the cover of the 1854 Federal Gymnastics Festival program held in Freiburg depicts the hybridization of national games and the Swiss *Turnen* of the time (see Figure 1). Indeed, the scene depicted on the document emphasizes Schwingen and stone-throwing (right and left), with traditional alpine imagery (mountain, pasture, and shepherd's hut), but there are also gymnasts practicing German *Turnen* in the mid-ground of the central display (on the apparatus: high bar and parallel bars).



Figure 1: Program Card of Federal Gymnastics Festivals of Fribourg 1854  
Source: Swiss National Library, Swiss Gymnastics Federation

The main program of the subsequent Federal Gymnastics Festivals was split into three divisions. The first was open to gymnasts practicing both artistic gymnastics (*Kunstturnen*: German gymnastics) and national games, while the second and third were respectively dedicated to artistic gymnastics and national games.

Published in 1859 in the German-speaking newspaper *Die Schweizerische Turnzeitung*, an evocative article written by Johannes Niggeler (1816–1887)—a major Swiss gymnastics teacher trained by the German Adolf Spiess and called the “Swiss *Turnvater*” in direct reference to Jahn—warmly welcomed this new structure. Indeed, the third division dedicated only to national games was then regarded as highly patriotic because it reinforced the specific national character of the SFG:

The new organization was established by a motion (Chur 1853) to establish a regulation on national exercises; at the next festival in Freiburg (1854), other motions were tabled with the aim of developing popular gymnastics in the clubs through greater participation in gymnastic festivals and to make physical exercises more national. [...] The foundation of the third division was based on the idea of giving the Swiss Gymnastics Society [SFG] a national importance by including our Schwinger and patriotic stone-throwers. (Niggeler 1859b, 57–58. Translated from German by author)

In this regard, the SFG directly participated in writing a national narrative of the young Swiss nation. For instance, a sum of 660 Swiss francs<sup>7</sup> (worth about 44,000 in 2010)<sup>8</sup> was collected in 1859 by gymnasts as part of a national subscription launched by the Swiss Society of Public Utility to buy back the Rütli Meadow, then in private hands, in order to bequeath it to the Swiss State (SFG 1858–1859). The Rütli is the mythical place where the old Helvetic confederates were said to have concluded a mutual protection alliance against foreign kingdoms at the beginning of the fourteenth century that was later promoted as the founding act of Switzerland by nineteenth-century historians (Walter 2020). It is particularly interesting to note that after the mobilization around the Rütli campaign, the Swiss gymnasts decided against participating in another subscription campaign organized by the *Deutsche Turner-Bunde* (founded in 1848) to erect a memorial to Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (who died in 1852) in Grossenhain (near Leipzig).

A dispute in *Die Schweizerische Turnzeitung*, after this refusal, brought to the fore the thorny question of the German roots of modern gymnastics in Switzerland. A first correspondence, published in 1859, supported the refusal by insisting on the excessive financial burden generated by the proposal, but also on the cosmopolitan character (“*weltbürgerliche*”) of the request, contrary to the Rütli campaign. The author then energetically refuted Jahn’s influence:

Our gymnastics in Switzerland, however, does not date from Jahn, and his activity has not influenced it in any way; we are therefore in no way directly indebted to him. [...] Our gymnastics is not the gymnastics of Germany; the Swiss gymnast will never make a pilgrimage to Jahn’s monument, [...] our gymnastics is based on the mountains we climb, on the valleys we cross, on the traditions we respect. (Niggeler 1859a, 165–166. Translated from German by author)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In the following I will refer to Swiss francs as “francs.”

<sup>8</sup> Estimation: <http://www.swistoval.ch/content/beispiele-einzelwerte.de.html>.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the almost “anti-German” viewpoint expressed here probably also refers to the tensions that have marked relations between the Swiss federal State and the reactionary German Confederation between 1848 and the end of the 1850s, notably as a result of the immigration of German liberal agitators to Switzerland and the Neuchâtel

This quote is characteristic of a process of invention of the tradition. Indeed, the traditional stereotypes of the shepherd myth were mobilized to affirm the unique character of Swiss modern gymnastics and to place its essence in a time well before the invention of *Turnen* in Prussia.

Gottfried Hiestand, then president of the SFG, denounced the lack of historical knowledge on the part of the author of this letter. Referring to Jahn as the initiator of Swiss modern gymnastics, Hiestand explicitly detailed all the facets of the cultural transfer of *Turnen*, from the role of student mobility to the immigration of pedagogues—the filiation between Spiess and Niggeler is here explicitly pointed out—as well as the knowledge transmitted by German gymnastics manuals. Hiestand went so far as to inscribe the Helvetic national games in a German tradition, but not without mobilizing the myth of the shepherd to underline the Swiss character of gymnastics:

Swiss students brought us the beginnings of gymnastics from Germany; German writings and books guided us to a correct understanding and encouraged us to truly appreciate it; it is to the German Adolf Spiess that we owe the theoretically ordered and truly school-oriented training of this branch of education, and this man's pupils are our best gymnastics teachers, like our good Niggeler. [...] This German strain has found an excellent home with us; our people have always been a gymnastic people, which is why one can still find in our mountains remnants of an ancient gymnastics, also of German origin (wrestling, stone-throwing, running, etc.) [...] And now? Should the fresh young man, who has grown up vigorously on this side of the Rhine, in the mountain air, forget his old mother Germania and turn away from her in an ungrateful challenge? (Hiestand 1859, 188–189. Translated from German by author)

As the case of this dispute illustrates, the national games thus became a central element in the building of a specific national identity of Swiss gymnasts united within the SFG from the early 1850s, even if the weight of German influence was not necessarily denied by all. This process of “resémantisation” of *Turnen* involved both the promotion of Schwingen and stone-throwing in Federal Gymnastics Festival programs and the national symbolism of these practices in SFG institutional iconography and discourse. As such, in 1861, the SFG made an addition to its statutes: among its institutional aims, the association was henceforth to “spread the taste for Schwingen and national games and to make these exercises more and more popular in [Switzerland]” (SFG 1861, 3. Translated from French by author). Nevertheless, a festive calendar and national games institutions were also gradually established from the 1880s onward. However, this process of empowerment was still tinged with both identity and power struggles.

### **Institutionalizing and Rationalizing Helvetic National Games**

The Schwingen-only festival (which did not include *Turnen*) organized by the gymnastics club of Bözingen in 1886 was probably the first of its kind since the Unspunnen celebrations held in 1805 and 1808. Characteristic of the revival of Helvetic national games, this event brought together about seventy competitors from the northern and eastern areas of Switzerland, with a large representation from the Emmenthal region (rural east of the canton of Berne), which was considered to be one of the historical cradles of national games.

Reported in the *Schweizerische Turnzeitung*, a local newspaper article underlined that the Bözingen festival brought together both gymnasts, who practiced national games within a gymnastic framework, and independent Schwinger who were not affiliated to the SFG. The latter were described as “shepherds” (*Aelpler* in Swiss German) or “Schwingers.” The

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Affair (1856–1857), which saw Swiss territorial integrity threatened by the Prussian army and which gave rise to a surge of patriotic fervor among the population and the SFG (Bonjour 1948; Humair 2018).

dichotomy between the two types of practitioners (gymnasts and shepherd-Schwingers) gave rise to two distinct categories that competed against each other during the festival:

In response to a wish of the Schwingers and gymnasts, the jury had this time organized the competition in such a way that a gymnast was pitted against a Schwinger, a novelty that proved to be very successful and satisfied both parties. The gymnasts had the opportunity to get acquainted with the way of fighting of the shepherds, who are far superior to them in terms of physical strength and endurance, and the latter had to give up some of their dream of victory again, because the flexibility and unexpected attack and movements of the gymnast resulted in a noticeable defeat of the shepherds. (Egg, Ziegler, and Zschokke 1886, 170. Translated from German by author)

If this quotation once again highlights the opposition between a rural physical exercise, thought of as primitive and rough (strength and endurance), and a more rational and urban gymnastic practice (suppleness, agility, and technique) presented as superior and more efficient, it also shows that a whole fringe of national games practitioners was not part of the SFG framework. Schwingen-only festivals multiplied from the end of the 1880s onwards, with this new Bözingen-inspired edition also held in Biel in 1888. Events were even organized again in Unspunnen from 1890. This process was in keeping with the national narrative and the establishment of the Swiss National Day (August 1) in 1891 (Zimmer 2003). As can be seen from an invitation published in *Le Gymnaste suisse*, the organizers of the 1895 Unspunnen Schwingen festival, harkening back to the 1805/1808 editions, even planned reenactments of scenes of pastoral life:

Wrestlers! You will come, as you have often done before, to exercise your strength and skill once again on the beautiful meadow of Unspunnen; [...] In order to give the festival a stamp of simplicity and originality, we have chosen Unspunnen, of historic memory, as the place of exercise, and we have introduced into the festival procession and into the program a few scenes borrowed from the life of shepherds. (Anonymous 1895a, 225. Translated from French by author)

Another sign of the empowerment process of national games at the end of the nineteenth century was the emergence of specific regional associations bringing together wrestlers from the regions where Schwingen and stone-throwing were the most established. Thus, the *Schwingerverbände Emmenthal, Oberland, Mittelland*, and the *nordost- and centralschweizerischen Schwingerverbände* were all founded during the year 1893. This geographical distribution also shows that the national games were particularly important in German-speaking Switzerland, even though French-speaking and Italian-speaking Swiss people also played them, but to a lesser extent. The multiplication of Schwingen festivals independent of Federal Gymnastics Festivals, as well as the institutionalization of the practice at regional levels, led to discussions to establish a federal association. Indeed, the idea of the AFLS (*Eidgenössische Schwingerverband*) dates back to 1894 and was made during a Schwingen festival in Zurich called *Eidgenössische Schwing- und Aelplerfest*, even before the first official “Federal” (“*Eidgenössische*”) Schwingen Festival was held in 1895.

This 1894 Schwingen event was organized by gymnasts from the “Zurich Alte Sektion,” one of the first Swiss gymnastics clubs (founded in 1820). The poster of this festival is very interesting because, on the one hand, it represents an allegory of the SFG’s political project to unify the Swiss people by bringing the countryside into gymnastics and, on the other hand, it reflects the hybridization of German *Turnen* and Helvetic national games (see Figure 2). Indeed, the picture explicitly represents the union between modern gymnastics and traditional physical exercises by depicting a shepherd-Schwinger in his costume (holding the Swiss flag) shaking hands with a

gymnast. The gymnast is recognizable by the strap around his chest, an accessory that originated directly from the German student associations and included then in the *Turnvereine*.



Figure 2: Poster of the *Eidgenössische Schwing- und Aelplerfest* Held in Zurich in 1894  
Source: AFLS 1894, Swiss Wrestling Federation

The poster of the 1894 festival also shows that gymnastics spheres were mainly bastions of masculine youth throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. As the virile model gained in importance in Swiss bourgeois society during the *Belle Epoque* (Jaun 1995)—particularly in the army (Rychner and Däniker 1995)—gymnasts became closely linked to the state from the early 1870s onwards. In this context, the SFG tried to impose itself as a support of the state for the physical and moral training of future citizen-soldiers (Mayencourt and Quin 2021), with varying degrees of success (Mayencourt 2023).<sup>10</sup>

The initiator of the AFLS was Johann Jakob Müller (1850–1931), an influential gymnastics teacher from Zurich. As we know from the minutes of a meeting held during the 1894 Zurich festival, his first intention through this national association was to better develop national games and to protect their symbolic dimension from merchandising ambitions at a time when tourism was growing (Tissot 2017) and Swiss folklore was becoming an economic product (Hertz et al. 2018). Müller also wanted to protect the name “*Eidgenössische Schwingerfest*,” at a time when Schwingen events were multiplying and some festivals bore the title “Federal” even though no national association existed:

The aim of such an association [AFLS] must be, firstly, to refresh and revitalize Schwingen, and secondly, to preserve the national character of the Schwingen festivals and to prevent such festivals from being reduced to mere spectacles and being organized solely for profit, and to prevent the name “federal” from being usurped on such occasions. (AFLS 1894, 1. Translated from German by author)

<sup>10</sup> Headed by a man, the first women’s gymnastics club was founded in Zurich only in 1893 (Herzog 1995). During this period, I have not been able to find any instances of women specifically practicing national games.

It should be noted that Müller's criticism of commercialism also refers to a time when the SFG began to take steps to limit the prizes awarded at Federal Festivals, with the same idea of preserving the symbolic ethics of gymnastics in opposition to the increasing popularity of modern English sports in Switzerland (Bussard 2007). Despite this denunciation of commodification, the Zurich gymnasts who organized the 1894 Schwingen festival donated 10 percent of their profits to support Müller's impulsion. These 200 francs (worth about 2,400 in 2010)<sup>11</sup> constituted the first fund of the AFLS.

In March 1895, an initial committee met to discuss the founding of the federal Schwingen association. This group contained two important figures of Swiss gymnastics: the instigator Johann Jakob Müller, who became the first secretary and second president (1898–1904) of the AFLS; and Erwin Zschokke (1855–1929), professor of veterinary medicine at the University of Zurich, who was the president of the SFG (1892–1894) and later became a member of the AFLS central committee (1895–1898). The views of these “pure gymnasts” are evident from the minutes of this working meeting. Indeed, Zschokke and Müller thought, in particular, about the benefits of the association in the following terms: “It could rid the old national practice of Schwingen of the dross of brutality and dangerousness and help it increasingly to become a beautiful game of skill” (AFLS 1895, 6. Translated from German by author). Thus, the desire for institutionalization was primarily the will of the urban and bourgeois gymnastics elite to rationalize Schwingen and stone-throwing according to the model of modern gymnastics—largely based on technical execution—in line with the supposition by gymnasts that they were primitive, rural, and even brutal. Drawing on Norbert Elias [1986] (1995), I can denote a desire to “sportivize” Helvetic national games—although Zschokke and Müller were most probably opposed to the ideology of modern English sports—by codifying these traditional practices and limiting their violent character.

Bringing together all the existing regional Schwingen associations, the AFLS was officially founded in August 1895 on the occasion of the first official Federal Schwingen Festival held in the city of Biel. The event, which also included stone-throwing and *Hornuss* competitions, brought together 70 pairs of wrestlers and reportedly attracted some 10,000 spectators (Anonymous 1895b). It is worth noting that an article published in July 1895 in the *Gymnaste suisse* about the forthcoming festival defines Schwingen as a “national sport”: “The noble national game [Schwingen], so sympathetic to our population, has become increasingly widespread, thanks to the regular organization of Schwingen competitions in the different regions of our country, competitions which have aroused interest in this noble national sport” (Anonymous 1895c, 231. Translated from French by author). To my knowledge, this is the earliest use of this formula (“national sport”) in Switzerland, whereas gymnasts waited until 1930 to commonly refer to gymnastics as a “sport” because of the ideological confrontation with English sports (Bussard 2007). The fact that the formula appeared in the *Gymnaste Suisse*, a newspaper published in cosmopolitan nineteenth-century Geneva (Perroux 2017), where modern sports—especially cycling (Mayencourt 2020) and football (Gogniat 2019)—spread early, is probably not insignificant.

A letter was sent in 1897 by the AFLS central committee to its members to outline the future work of the association. The document clearly highlights the desire to codify as well as to regulate the organization of festivals, in particular, to combat the spectacle and merchandising. This stance, which aimed to preserve the purity of national games by rejecting their commercialization, was also indicative of the conservative turn taken by gymnasts at the end of the nineteenth century, a broader phenomenon in Swiss society, where a new reactionary right-wing politic developed from the 1890s onwards (Jost 1992). In this respect, the republican patriotism of the SFG gradually gave way to a harder and more closed nationalism, particularly in the face of the cosmopolitan character of modern sports, and to more conservative social

<sup>11</sup> Estimation: <http://www.swistoval.ch/content/beispiele-einzelwerte.de.html>.

positions that led to conflict with gymnasts from workers movements (Marcacci 2002). As such, a mention in the letter clearly illustrates the similarities between the AFLS and the SFG:

The next tasks are: a) the establishment of regulations for the judging of competitions [of Schwingen], b) the elaboration of a guide for appropriate festive arrangements. It is also noticeable that the Schwingen association does not want to encroach on the activity of the big federal gymnastics' association [SFG], but to support it, to complete it. (Müller 1897, 22. Translated from German by author)

Indeed, AFLS and SFG were never meant to be in competition because they were led by the same gymnastics elites from the urban bourgeoisie—mainly expert gymnastics teachers at upper secondary level—driven by the same worldview, torn between modernity and conservatism. In this vein, it is worth noting that in 1900 the SFG prohibited its members from participating in Schwingen festivals where cash prizes were awarded, and did not allow its member clubs to organize such events (SFG 1900).

The symbolic dimension of Helvetic national games continued to be exploited by the SFG beyond the nineteenth century. For instance, for the grand celebration of the SFG's 75th anniversary, in 1907, a stone-thrower was chosen for the cover of the festive booklet in front of an oak tree, symbolizing the strength and the uprightness of the gymnast (see Figure 3). This specific choice was symptomatic of an identity statement: a gymnast practicing German gymnastics (e.g., on the apparatus) was not chosen because it was not considered representative of national gymnastics, while a wrestler was also not chosen because the AFLS was newly founded next to the SFG.



Figure 3: Cover of the SFG 75th Anniversary Book  
Source: Spühler, Ritter, and Schächtelin 1907, *Swiss Gymnastics Federation*

In this same festive booklet, it is interesting to note that the gymnasts clearly present themselves as the saviors of the rural tradition of the national games, which they themselves paradoxically invented. The tone of the following quote illustrates the rise of conservatism in the SFG from the late nineteenth century onwards, when modernity and cosmopolitanism were seen as threats to the established order and when the invariable, stable, and normative character of traditions—even invented ones—became a cornerstone of conservative politics (Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983] 2012):

The national games that had once given a new impetus to the shepherds' festivals in Unspunnen had to gradually give way to the growing number of foreigners. Shepherds no longer practiced them, except in a few remote areas that tourism still ignored, or in a few solitary valleys. These tough exercises in which the robust sons of the mountains had once competed were even threatened to disappear completely in the rising tide of modern life. Schwingen had followed this backward movement, but thanks to the fact that the gymnasts had adopted it in their program, it experienced an upsurge. (Spühler, Ritter, and Schächtelin 1907, 87. Translated from German by author)

## Conclusion

As specific as the study of Helvetic national games may seem, the history of the revival of these highly symbolic practices stands out as a relevant example of the constructed and nonessential character of the national narrative established in Switzerland after 1848. Moreover, their actualization and their invented tradition have crossed the decades by anchoring themselves in the contemporary collective imaginary and, as such, are still used for political purposes. Thus, a critical cultural and institutional history of Helvetic national games and Swiss modern gymnastics reveals several paradoxes which challenge the rural and traditional storybook image conveyed by the SFG and widely taken up in Swiss society. First, there was a striking discrepancy between the prevalence of the cardinal figure of the shepherd in the discourse and iconography produced by gymnasts and the low representation of peasants in the SFG membership. In the same way, the main actors of the revival, codification, and institutionalization of national games were gymnastics teachers from the urban bourgeoisie with a mythologized and condescending vision of rural life. Secondly, modern gymnastics developed in Switzerland through a strong cultural transfer from the German Confederation, whereas the SFG was quickly established as a highly patriotic association and set itself the aim of contributing to the Swiss identity-building process that followed 1848. Finally, the position of gymnastics teachers invested in national games was also highly ambivalent, quite apart from their urban profile. Indeed, on the one hand, they were mobilized to safeguard the authenticity of traditional physical exercises regarded as national customs in the face of the threat of modernity which referred both to the expansion of tourism and to the commercial sports spectacles and professional models that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century (Dauncey 2007). Nevertheless, they also codified, “civilized,” and institutionalized Schwingen, according to Elias’ description of the “sportivization” of traditional physical exercises (1986), as well as Allen Guttman’s ([1978] 2006) definitional criteria of modern sports. The rationalization and bureaucratization of national games were instigated through the creation of a common regulation for competitions in Switzerland and the foundation of specific institutional structures, such as the AFLS.

These paradoxes allow us to view the revival of national games as one means, among many, to legitimate nineteenth-century Switzerland, a small multilingual country with a composite culture, within the concert of European nations. It was also a resource of symbolic and institutional power for Swiss gymnasts and made it possible to inscribe the SFG in the *longue durée* of the Swiss national narrative by combining the urban figure of the gymnast with



the highly patriotic and traditional figure of the shepherd. Moreover, the integration of Schwingen and stone-throwing in the SFG was also a way to naturalize Swiss gymnastics by instilling it with a traditional, immemorial, and national essence in opposition to the influence of the German *Turnen*. At the institutional level, the national games were seen as a means of connecting with the rural population, who were mostly absent from gymnastics for practical and political reasons, and thus increasing the membership and national scope of the SFG. Finally, the foundation of the AFLS, in 1895, as well as the desire to codify national games, must be seen as the reactionary will of gymnasts to preserve their control and to protect the name and symbolism of “Federal Festivals” at a time when events linked to Schwingen and stone-throwing were multiplying and disrupting the strict framework of gymnastics.

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