

ISSN 1652-7224 ::: Published 16 May 2007

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Niels Bukh (1880–1950) is one of the most well known Danes; during the 1930s he was arguably the internationally most famous, and, by virtue of his politics, most notorious Danish citizen. Bukh founded the Danish school of modern gymnastics, as a latter-day Danish equivalent of the father of Swedish gymnastics Per Henrik Ling (1776–1839); however, he developed and transformed Lingian gymnastics in a way that affected even Swedish gymnastics. Bukh's team of elite gymnasts toured the world, demonstrating the Bukh system of "primitive gymnastics". This was particularly appreciated in dictatorships, and Bukh himself had a special predilection for right-wing authoritarian regimes. The Danish sport historian Hans Bonde has written a major biography of Bukh, *Gymnastics and Politics: Niels Bukh and Male Aesthetics* (Museum Tusulanum Press), which demonstrates the better-known aspects of Bukh's life and work, as well as some obscure elements – his homosexuality, his intimate contacts with and open support of the German Nazi regime and ideology. We asked Dr Wendy Varney, lecturer at the University of Wollongong for a review, and she finds the book fascinating – worth having and worth reading. Shame, though, about the absence of an index in the book, which seriously limits its use as an historical resource.

Niels Bukh – A Life of Fame and Shame

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Hans Bonde

Gymnastics and Politics: Niels Bukh and Male Aesthetics

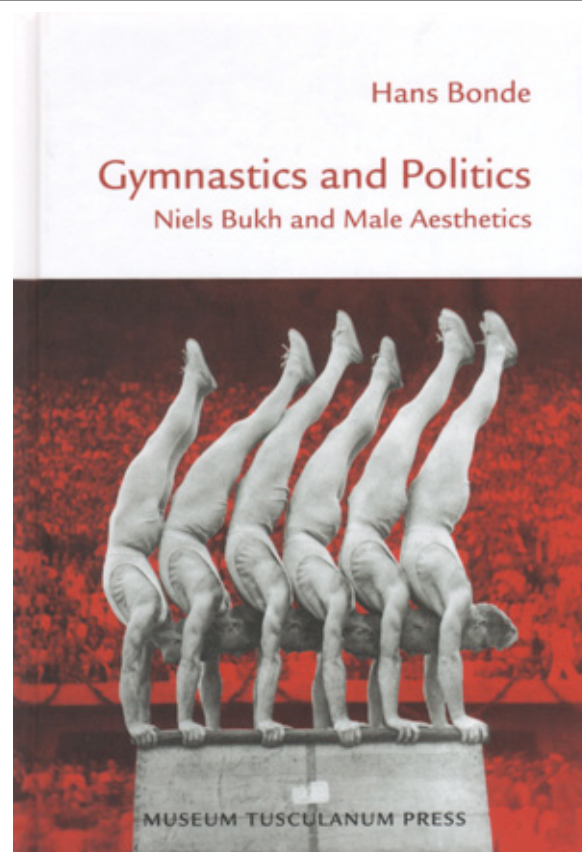
376 sidor, inb., ill + DVD.

København: Museum Tusulanum
2006

ISBN 978-87-7289-827-8

Sporting heroes have a way of becoming national heroes. From there it is all too easy for sport, nationalism and politics to mix in ways that demand greater questioning. For instance, the last several Australian Prime Ministers have basked in the glow of Australian sporting achievements, never missing an opportunity to be seen with the champions, sometimes before they have barely alighted from the podium. Moreover, the ploy appears worryingly successful, transferring sporting kudos into electoral popularity by mere association.

But the mix can be still murkier. Bonde, the author of this fascinating book on Danish gymnast Niels Bukh, tells us that it is one thing "when politicians use sport to further their political careers. It is another matter when sports figures such as Niels



Bukh use their sporting abilities in support of their political careers.” An exploration of precisely that matter is one major focus of this book, although it also deals with biographical detail, gives an appraisal of Bukh’s contribution to the development of gymnastics and ponders a number of contradictions and issues surrounding Bukh’s sexuality.

In taking on this ambitious story, Bonde opens up a plethora of questions not only about the relationship between sport and politics, but about cults, heroism, the social construction of masculinity, conformity and image. It is a book that tells much about the tensions and ideological struggles of the war period in Denmark in particular, but it also throws light on issues that are insightful across national boundaries.

Bukh was born in 1880, at a time when there were many sporting developments brought about by other social shifts. As a boy, he seemed an unlikely candidate to be a sports person of any kind. Bonde tells us that Bukh’s mother was worried by the boy’s sickliness and bodily features such as inpointing toes and an overly large head. It is one of the benefits of gymnastics, however, that each participant can find, within the sport, challenges and rewards that suit his or her own physical and emotional needs and so it proved with Bukh who became involved in gymnastic activities in early adolescence.

As an adult, Bukh instructed in gymnastics but endured a major setback to his own participation when he was not included in a team for the Olympic Games in London on the basis of his “thickset build” which did not conform with the slim figures of other team members. Interestingly, this predates much later occurrences in gymnastics, most controversially perhaps the US women’s Olympic gymnastics team of 1992, which originally included Kim Kelly, only to have her then omitted. Speculation that this was due to Kim’s shape which did not conform with the size of the other gymnasts selected on the team, appears to have been supported by reported comments by officials that they wanted the team to portray a particular image through uniformity in size and shape when they marched into the gymnasium to compete.

Bukh had already developed a pluck and determination that saw him through his setback of non-selection and urged him towards greater achievements, not the least being the development of new styles of gymnastics, one of the most important being what came to be known as “primitive gymnastics.” Bukh both built on and departed from Lingian gymnastics, which was popular in Denmark in the early 20th Century, but he also drew on several threads from other innovators, especially the French gymnastics educator Lieutenant Hébert who had his marine soldier-gymnasts perform with naked torsos and bolder movements than had previously been seen within the sport.

Bukh embraced both of these characteristics but added to them, designing highly intensive exercises to strengthen and enlarge the chests of his male gymnasts, many of whom were farm lads. He also had key exercise components that aimed at radically enhancing the suppleness of the gymnasts, using flexibility techniques by working in pairs, with each gymnast pushing or pulling in turn with flexing. This involved substantial body contact and touching that was a radical departure from other gymnastic forms. Despite the added muscularity and dynamics that Bukh also introduced, this touching and the aesthetic side to which his style gave rise caused criticism of his style as too “feminine.” Bonde points out that this was dangerous for Bukh as he was trying to conceal his homosexuality.

Yet at the Ollerup folk high school for gymnastics, set up by Bukh in the early 1920s, his sexual preferences were well known at least to those close to him. Bonde contrasts the private rooms within the school, which “bore the signs of Bukh’s homosexual aesthetic” with the exterior of the school and all that it stood for, manifesting “a heterosexual youthful and physical profile.” This simple contradiction is, in many ways, symbolic of Bukh’s life at large.

As his story continues, the contradictions and ironies become compounded. Perhaps none of these is more interesting than the question of how someone who built so much of his image around Danish nationalism could keep this image intact – though not in the eyes of everybody – once he had collaborated with the Nazi regime.

Bukh’s dalliances with dictatorships preceded his relationship with Hitler. While right-wing dictatorships seemed to appeal to him, he was much less tolerant of what he witnessed in the Soviet Union, which he visited as part of his 1931 World Tour. At that time forced collectivism was underway, with dire consequences for many rural folk, so the Soviet regime no doubt hoped to avail itself of some of the imagery that Bukh had evoked around ideals of agricultural youth working in dedication and collectively towards notions of common advancement. These images were similar to the representations of rural people drawn by artists in the Stalin era but they were far different from the tired and often emaciated Soviet farm workers whom Bukh encountered. Even prior to his visit, he had become involved with the anti-Communist movement and now he stepped up his criticism of the Soviet Union, while simultaneously voicing support for Japan which he also visited and which, according to Bonde, was among the most successful of his tours.

Bonde claims that Bukh's gymnastics had a strong influence on Japan, whose militarisation was increasing rapidly at that time, with social ramifications such as the curtailment of sports seen to be Anglo-American. Peoples' gymnastics rallies suited the government well and fitted in with its intentions. The influence of Bukh's gymnastics survived the war and, according to Bonde, even today Japanese workers and school children can be seen practising a style of gymnastics that have clearly been inspired by Bukh.

However, it was Bukh's relationship with Nazi Germany that raises the most complex issues in relation to sport, politics, cults and nationalism. By 1933 it was evident that Bukh was admiring of Hitler and he took the opportunity to visit Berlin as part of tours he was invited to undertake to Hungary and Austria. During this tour he engaged in anti-Semitic activities and comments that left no doubt that his actions, as well as his ideals, were in alignment with Nazism. The Nazi regime, encouraged and buoyed by his political leanings, brought him into its fold and used his position and status on numerous occasions. For instance, sports/political rallies such as Bukh's 1933 gymnastic display in Berlin incorporated both Danish national and German Nazi symbols to such a degree that Bonde asks readers to ponder whether these were Danish national events or rather manifestations of a Nordic-Germanic racial alliance.

Bukh's socialisation with Nazis and their use of him for propaganda purposes during and following the Berlin Olympics incensed many Labour supporters back in Denmark who saw his actions as treachery. Among those critical of Bukh was Frede Hansen, who had been among Bukh's first gymnasts. Writing in the periodical *Dansk Idræt*, Hansen claimed that Nazism was both inhuman and culturally hostile and asked what Danish youth were "doing in Naziland."

Hitler, of course, had plans for a greater German power sphere that would include the Nordic countries. Bukh must have known this but appears to have tried to interpret it as somehow being to Danish advantage. Eventually, he was decorated with the Service Cross of the Order of the German Eagle, first class, among the highest decorations bestowed by the Nazis and one which leaves us in no doubt as to whether Bukh's collaboration was serving them or the Danish people better.

Not surprisingly, the Nazi regime used Bukh, his influence at home and his embracing of all things Danish, not least the Danish flag which he had promoted on his many tours and which had helped elevate him to grand nationalist. Though his cult status remained, there were many that deeply resented his position as an apologist and as a supporter of the occupiers.

For his part, Bukh may also have used these regimes, according to Bonde who insists that, for all his complexities, the man was a pragmatist and he saw that his gymnastics would achieve a much greater profile and international acceptance by taking tours overseas and building relationships with regimes which could help promote his sport. Authoritarian regimes seemed most useful in this way.

One of the strengths of Bonde's very thorough research is that it demonstrates, with wide applicability to many other countries, eras and situations, that Bukh's support for Nazism was both direct and indirect. His supportive role by virtue of speeches expressing admiration for Hitler and his selection of blonde gymnasts with blue eyes, thereby validating the Nazi racial theory, is obvious. There was also much physical collaboration, with Nazi Olympic officials regarding him sufficiently that they visited him at his Ollerup school to issue a special invitation with regard to the upcoming Olympic Games which were already suffering an international image of being turned into a political festival for the Nazis and a chance for them to display the perceived best examples of their racial theories. Bonde wonders, as do I, whether there was also something very useful about the style of Bukh's gymnastics and the way in which he put together his displays, which gave indirect sustenance to the Nazis and their ideas. It appears to have been not just Bukh whom the Nazis favoured but his gymnastics displays which they felt contained a successful demonstration of an organism overcoming and suppressing its parts in deference to the whole, a useful symbolism for the Nazis, especially as Bukh's displays were so successfully precise and integrated.

Of course the delight in the ideological precision and uniformity of gymnastics displays is not unique to the Nazis. The Soviet bloc long made use of displays to garner approval for its leaders and to showcase the vitality, efficiency and commitment of socialist youth. Nevertheless, it appears that some specific components of Bukh's style of gymnastics, perhaps most especially the conduciveness to notions of the organism, endeared it to authoritarian regimes, beyond its usefulness for military precision and ideological conformity. This is an area of research and analysis that begs to be taken up further. It should not fall exclusively to Bonde who has already opened up rich areas for discussion.

As well as a fine story about a complex person who has played such an important role both politically and in relation

to the development of gymnastics, Bonde's book includes numerous photographs of great interest plus a bonus DVD, making it an invaluable resource for historians and all who recognise the links between sport and politics as worthy of exploration.

So if you find yourself in either of these categories – or even if you have simply had your interest aroused – the book is worth having and reading. Because of its worth as an historical resource, it is a great shame that it does not include an index. This means that fellow researchers will find it difficult to make full use of it as the source it otherwise might be. Nevertheless, *Gymnastics and Politics: Niels Bukh and Male Aesthetics* has many strengths to compensate.

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