

Aryan Heritage? Reconsidering Postural Yoga in Interwar Germany

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At first glance the history and spread of yoga in German speaking countries is fairly well documented. In transnational comparison, local discourses on yoga were heavily influenced by German Romanticism, the new science of Depth psychology, and a well-established Indological scholarship. By the turn to the twentieth century, 'yoga' became a buzzword in exclusivist bourgeois circles: in the realm of theosophy, New Thought and occult lodges. The major attraction of yoga was its promise of higher development, if not supernatural skills. However, in this period yoga practice was mostly synonymous with mental techniques and breathing exercises. Hardly any scholar of yoga's dissemination in Germany scrutinized whether and how yoga involved physical practice. Seemingly, and with one exception (Sacharow, see below), the gradual spread of (Neo) Hatha Yoga gained momentum only after 1945.

This paper focuses on the influence of the Indian āsana revival in the 1920s on the notion and practice of yoga in the German Reich. On the basis of overlooked written sources and archive material, I explore early medical research on the therapeutic application of yoga, the first guidebook available in German language for self-teaching yoga postures, and reconsider the impact of Boris Sacharow and his yoga school, operating in Berlin from 1937 to 1943. Subsequently I discuss these innovations against the light of völkisch ideology and National Socialist politics. I argue that postural yoga was an ambivalent niche phenomenon, promoted by both Jewish and explicitly fascist protagonists, in alliance with Indian nationals living in Germany.

Author: HAUSER, Beatrix (Universität Bremen)

Presenter: HAUSER, Beatrix (Universität Bremen)

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