

Institutional development of martial arts and combat sports in Poland - selected examples

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Abstract

Background: The development of martial arts is accompanied by their institutionalization. The theoretical perspective of GTFA - the General Theory of Fighting Arts and the sociology of physical culture, and the resulting conceptual language were adopted. **Problem:** An indicator of the institutionalization - the WI (*wskaźnik instytucjonalizacji*) was proposed to determine the advancement of the institutional development process in fighting arts organizations. It depends on the duration of operation of a given organization. **Method:** Two qualitative research methods were used - the method of long-term participant observation and broad discourse analysis. **Results:** The duration of operation affects the position and institutional maturity of a given organization; allows for a longer impact on the social environment. Long-term operation contributes to the stability and recognition of a given organization in the community. A minimum period of 30 years of constant activity seems to be an appropriate criterion for achieving a certain institutional maturity (institutionalization index WI 1). **Conclusions:** Combat sports organizations of European origin and those that patronize Olympic disciplines (*judo*) have been operating in Poland for the longest time. Other combat sports organizations in their institutionalization imitate the patterns and institutions adopted in these older organizations. **Key words:** fighting arts, GTFA, physical culture, institution, institutionalisation, organisation

1. Introduction

We use the terms 'institution' and 'institutional development' or 'institutionalization' here in the sense adopted in the sociology of fighting arts and the sociology of physical culture. These are, respectively, the socially accepted way of proceeding in a given matter, and the state of advancement in establishing social institutions in a given area of human reality [Cynarski 2023]. The theoretical basis (scientific framework) for this study and the adopted conceptual language is also

GTFA (the General Theory of Fighting Arts) [Cynarski 2019].

Within the framework of sports sciences/physical culture sciences, the sociology of physical culture, including the sociology of sport and the sociology of fighting arts, emphasize the importance of organizational development and the adoption of institutional decisions in domestic and international sports and other areas of physical culture. The indicated sociological subdisciplines also take into account the relationship between sports institutions/physical culture and the functioning of society. In this theoretical context, we are particularly interested in the socio-cultural aspects of the functioning of individual organizations and other institutions.

How to assess the level of advancement of the institutionalization process in particular areas of physical culture and the organization of physical culture? The author proposes the use of a series of indicators. The easiest one to define and use is the WI indicator (in Polish: *wskaźnik instytucjonalizacji*) according to the age criterion of a given organization. We assume that the existence and operation of a given organization for at least 30 years indicates that it has reached the WI level 1, and that if it is over 100 years old - it is highly advanced, with the WI 4. The institutionalization indicators would be as follows:

30+ for WI 1

50+ for WI 2

70+ for WI 3

100+ for WI 4.

The development of physical education and sports in Poland was similar to that in other European countries. Even though Polish lands were under partition for over a hundred years. At the same time, physical culture institutions and scientific reflection in this area were developed [more: Cynarski 2014].

The popularization of physical education and the rapid development of sport took place in Europe, including Poland, at the beginning of the

20th century. The reason was universal military service adopted in many countries, universal education of children and youth, as well as the awareness that the nation will be healthy and strong by increasing the level of physical culture. At the same time, scientific reflection was developed and physical culture organizations were established. Physical education was combined with patriotic education, and knowledge about valuable figures of physical culture was disseminated. For example, *jujutsu* has been written about in Poland since 1904 [cf. Kłośnik 1909; Perez-Gutierrez et al. 2021; Kisiel et al. 2022].

Let us analyze the level of institutional advancement/institutionalization of selected organizations for – combat sports of European origin; combat sports of non-European origin; martial arts that avoid sports competition. This applies to selected Polish organizations, in particular national sports associations.

2. Method

Two qualitative research methods were used: 1) the method of long-term participant observation / observer's participation in the martial arts and combat sports environment (since 1977) [Green et al. 2019] and 2) analysis of a broad discourse, which applies to both scientific literature on the subject and popularization literature [Krippendorf 2004].

The author has been an active trainer and activist of several organizations operating in Poland in the field of fighting arts for many years and still is. The study included 15 Polish organizations in the field of combat sports and martial arts, and 22 sports or martial arts disciplines under the patronage of these organizations.

3. Results

1. Combat sports of European origin

The earliest sport known and practiced in many cultures is **wrestling**. They have also been cultivated in Poland for a long time [Cynarski 2020]. In Poland - the *Polski Związek Zapaśniczy* (PZZ) / Polish Wrestling Association - was established in 1957 from the transformation of the Polish Athletic Association. While wrestling itself has been known and practiced in Poland for a long time (**WI 4**), sports institutionalization here is at the level of 50+, i.e. **WI 2**, and in 3 years it will exceed the threshold of 70+ (W I3). It is also a sport that has played a large role in popularizing physical culture in rural and poorly urbanized areas [cf. Wójcik 2021]. Basically, two styles are practiced - classical, Greco-Roman and free.

Wójcik [2021] points out that practicing wrestling has a positive effect on the personality of practicing youth, which concerns the direction of aggression and energy of these young people. This is confirmed by research on the fate and careers of former wrestlers, but it is true for various combat sports and martial arts [Warchol et al. 2021; Cynarski, Warchol 2022].

Fencing, especially with sabers, is a Polish national tradition. Thanks to this, sports fencing has enjoyed special respect in Poland for many years. Therefore, the *Polski Związek Szermierczy* (PZS) / Polish Fencing Association celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2022 [cf. Szajna, Cynarski 2018]. PZS is an organization that brings together players, coaches and activists of Polish fencing; was established on May 28, 1922 in Lviv. It has been based in Warsaw since 1945. Both the sports discipline and the level of organizational and institutional development (institutionalization) can be defined here as **WI 4** (100+). Saber, epee and foil are successfully practiced.

In turn, *palcaty* (sticks) and saber fencing (*polska szabla husarska* / Polish hussar sabre) have a centuries-old tradition in Poland and are still cultivated [cf. Cynarski 2008a, 2008b; Sawicki 2020]. It is about the over a thousand-year-old tradition of the documented history of the Polish state and its famous art of war, including the tradition of sword and saber fencing [Zabłocki 2001].

Boxing has also been practiced in Poland for a long time, which also applies to its Olympic formula. The *Polski Związek Bokserski* (PZB) / Polish Boxing Association - founded in 1923, and in 1925 became a member of the International Federation of Amateur Boxing (FIBA) [more: Kolodziej et al. 2020]. Since 1946, he has been a member of the International Amateur Boxing Association (AIBA). So in 2023, PZB celebrated its 100th anniversary. Boxing as a sport and PZB achieved the **WI 4** indicator.

It is a tough sport that teaches courage and bravery, resistance to pain, but also systematicity and perseverance. Since ancient times, it has always been a test of a warrior's character. In Poland, it is still a popular combat sport - both in the amateur, Olympic and professional versions.

2. Combat Sports of non-European origin

The longest-practiced sport from the Far East in Poland is **judo**. It is both a martial art and a popular, Olympic combat sport. Judo has been practiced in Poland since the first years after World War II. In 1957, the *Polski Związek Judo* (PZJ) - Polish Judo Association was established. PZJ has been a member of the International Judo Federation (IJF)

and the European Judo Union (EJU) since 1960. Basically, its activities focus on competitive sports [Sikorski 2009]. The level of institutionalization and the corresponding indicator are the same as in the case of the modern wrestling sport (WI 2).

Taekwondo is the second East Asian combat sport to become an Olympic discipline (because *karate* did not quite succeed). This is a version of WT (World Taekwondo), formerly: WTF. It is represented in Poland by the *Polski Związek Taekwondo Olimpijskiego* (PZTO) - Polish Olympic Taekwondo Association. In 1992, the Polish Sports Taekwondo Association was established with its headquarters in Lublin, of which PZTO is, in a sense, a continuator. It can be assumed that this is a total of over 30 years of activity and WI 1.

People practicing *taekwondo* do it for different purposes, with different motivation [Zeng *et al.* 2015]. However, the main goal in sports is the best possible sports result and this is what training in combat sports is aimed at.

Sports *karate* is developed under the patronage of the *Polski Związek Karate* (PZK) / Polish Karate Federation, established in 1980. Currently, it is divided into two large style committees - *Kyokushin* and *Shotokan*. This means over 40 years of continuous activity, which gives PZK the institutionalization index WI 1. Since karate (as a sport) has been practiced in Poland since around 1973, it has been over 50 years and WI 2. Non-contact formula (*Shotokan karate* and related), knock-down (*Kyokushin karate*), and demonstration competition of technical forms are practiced.

The first popularizers of sports *karate* in Poland were Janusz Świerczyński, the first president of PZK, and Jerzy Miłkowski, a *karate* instructor and sports referee [Miłkowski 1983, 1984-85; Świerczyński 1983]. It was a time when, after the film "Enter the Dragon" in Polish cinemas, there was a boom in *karate*. Several hundred people trained in each section.

Kendo has been practiced, like *karate*, since 1973. As a combat sport, representative of Japanese *budo*, as a set of martial arts disciplines, it is at the WI 2 level of institutionalization. However, the *Polski Związek Kendo* / Polish Kendo Federation has been operating since 2001. It is still below WI 1. The popularity of *kendo* is a function/derivative of samurai films. In a situation where classic *kenjutsu* was unavailable in Poland, it was easier to start *kendo* training. The samurai atmosphere and idea are preserved here - a kind of spirituality and ethos [Bennett 2015].

Kickboxing operates in Poland under the patronage of the *Polski Związek Kickboxingu* /

Polish Kickboxing Association, which was registered in 2001, similarly to the Polish Kendo Federation. However, kickboxing was practiced before the formal registration of a sports association and has been in operation for at least 40 years (WI 2). This especially applies to semi-contact, light-contact and full-contact formulas.

The successes of Polish players achieved at the end of the 20th century - P. Siegoczyński, M. Piotrowski, P. Saleta - contributed to the popularity of this new sport [Ufel 1991]. Then, some Polish *karatekas* and some entire clubs changed practicing *karate* to kickboxing.

Sports **jujutsu** has been developed in Poland since the late 1980s. In 1993, the *Polski Związek Ju-jitsu* (PZJJ) / Polish Ju-jitsu Association with its headquarters in Katowice was registered. After 30 years, in 2023, there was a division and the *Polski Związek Ju-Jitsu Sportowego* (PZJJS) / Polish Sports Ju-Jitsu Association based in Mysłowice was established. So it is over 30 years in total, but it is difficult to talk about the full stability of PZJJ structures and institutions [cf. Cynarski, Siekanski 2019; Kisiel *et al.* 2022] (WI 1). Both associations have been teaching fighting and duo-system competition since their very beginnings.

In this case, institutions related to sports teaching/training, matters of teaching qualifications, degrees and licenses, examiners' authorizations and their granting were borrowed from the longer operating PZJ - Polish Judo Association.

An institution functioning in many fighting arts of Japanese origin operating today (but not only) is the "Dan Commission", responsible for awarding student and master, technical and honorary degrees.

3. Asian Martial Arts

Wushu kung-fu is a traditional Chinese martial art and a path to self-perfection. This is not about *wushu* as a sport, but about various styles/varieties of martial arts of the Chinese tradition. For example, teaching in the lineage of Master J.M. Yang's (YMAA) has been developed in Poland for over 30 years [Skowron-Markowska 2017] (WI 1).

Kobudo, as a tradition of Okinawan martial arts (*Okinawa kobudo*) or the main Japanese islands (*Nihonden / Honshu kobudo*), is taught in several mediums in Poland. This is especially the *Shorin-ryu karate* organization - for *Okinawa kobudo* (Polish Shorin-Ryu Karate & Kobudo Union) and *Shibu Kobudo* in Poland (since 1993) for *Idokan kobudo* and classical *kenjutsu* [Sieber, Grzywacz 2015; Cynarski 2024]. A small group of enthusiasts have been cultivating *kobudo* for over 30 years (WI 1).

Jujutsu has been practiced in Poland since the beginning of the 20th century - mainly as a self-defense art [Pérez-Gutiérrez *et al.* 2021]. As such it deserves WI4. However, in a more institutionalized and systemic way, it is cultivated for a much shorter time. For example, within the Idokan Poland Association (IPA) - since 1993 (*Idokan Yoshin-ryu jujutsu* style) [Cynarski, Cynarska 2024] (WI 1).

Taekwon-do of the ITF / International Taekwon-do Federation organization (and style) is developed in Poland under the patronage of the *Polski Związek Taekwon-Do* (pztkd) / Polish Taekwon-Do Association and several other organizations. The registration of the Polish Taekwon-Do Association took place in 2002, so it has only been over 20 years of continuous activity of this association. However, ITF *taekwondo* itself has been practiced in Poland since the 1980s (WI 1). It is treated both as a martial art and as a competitive sport [Bujak 2012; Wasik 2014].

Most *aikido* organizations, some *karate* schools and organizations, as well as organizations focused on self-defense (*WingTsun*) or health-promoting exercises (*qigong*, *Yang taijiquan*) remain outside sports competition. *Judo* is also sometimes practiced solely for recreation [Swider 2018; Cynarski 2019; Skrzeta *et al.* 2021].

4. Impact on society

The different territorial scope of individual organizations affects the strength of social impact throughout the country. However, the importance of even small organizations for the local community cannot be underestimated. This applies to various types of fighting arts (martial arts or combat sports) [cf. Kulpinski 2020; Warchol *et al.* 2021; Wójcik 2021]. In turn, longer operation of a given organization (at least 30 years) leads to the establishment of certain customs and institutions outside the regulations, which are often imitated by later organizations [cf. Cynarski 2023]. Older Polish associations and unions have already developed a tradition of dealing with various issues within the scope of their activities.

The spectacular aspect (tournaments, shows) connects fighting arts with a wider audience. Especially presence in the media (film, television) influences the collective imagination and fashion. Therefore, some types of fighting arts are gaining in popularity, while others are losing popularity. The successes of Polish representatives also influence the popularity of given sports disciplines. This popularity may then translate back into success when more children and teenagers practice a given sport. However, despite successes in these very difficult sports disciplines, it is impossible to break through in the media, where football reigns

supreme, and for martial arts enthusiasts - mainly MMA (mixed martial arts).

During the period of lack of many goods (the time of the communist system in Poland), the poverty of a large part of the society blocked the participation of young people in some sports disciplines. In martial arts, it was clearly visible that the practice of particular types was determined by class conditions. Wrestling and boxing were mainly practiced by the lower classes, while *judo* and fencing were practiced by the upper classes, students and people with higher education. This was a certain regularity at least until 1990 [Krawczyk 1995]. Later and currently there has been no research on this topic.

Generally, a regularity can be identified regarding the institutional advancement of martial arts organizations, which applies to both national and international organizations. Long-term operation contributes to the stability and recognition of a given organization in the environment [cf. Cynarski, Walczak 2009; Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2011; Bennett 2015]. Generally speaking, various fighting arts organizations offer their high-value contribution to the physical culture of Polish society [Cynarski, Sieber, Szajna 2014], although to varying degrees, scope/scale of influence, and duration of influence on society.

4. Conclusions

Older, longer-operating organizations develop their specific institutions. The duration of operation affects the position of a given organization and allows for a longer impact on the social environment. The institutionalization rate seems to be related to the durability of its functioning. However, this requires further research (this time quantitative) to see whether there is a strong positive correlation.

Various sports associations and fighting arts organizations offer their high-value contribution to the physical culture of Polish society, although with different scale and duration of impact on society. Long-term operation contributes to the stability and recognition of a given organization in the community. A minimum period of 30 years of constant activity seems to be an appropriate criterion for achieving a certain institutional maturity (WI 1).

The longest-functioning combat sports organizations in Poland have European origins and those that patronize Olympic disciplines, such as the Polish Judo Association (PZJ). Other combat sports organizations in their institutionalization imitate the patterns and institutions adopted in these older organizations. However, in martial arts of

Asian origin, operating within smaller associations, their tradition and institutional solutions are just being created or are at various levels of the institutionalization process.

The novelty here is the proposal to determine the institutionalization indicator WI. However, the limitation of conclusions from the conducted research results from the use of qualitative methods. We don't have hard statistical results here. The matter probably requires further research, taking into account variables other than "functioning time".

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