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Introduction: The Sokol Movement between State and Society in Interwar East Central and Southeastern Europe

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Abstract

This special issue is the result of the three year-long collaboration between the contributors and a larger group of scholars on the topic of Sokol and analogous organizations and phenomena mainly in East Central Europe in the modern era. Our goal was to examine such organizations from multiple perspectives, including the history of political thought, the history of knowledge production, military history, art history, youth history, urban history, the history of religion, history of sports, as well as the history of medicine and eugenics. To that end, we organized three events whereby we identified key themes and workshopped the contributions to the prospective special issue, as well as situated our findings within broader disciplinary and theoretical frameworks.

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This special issue is the result of the three year-long collaboration between the contributors and a larger group of scholars on the topic of Sokol and analogous organizations and phenomena mainly in East Central Europe in the modern era. Our goal was to examine such organizations from multiple perspectives, including the history of political thought, the history of knowledge production, military history, art history, youth history, urban history, the history of religion, history of sports, as well as the history of medicine and eugenics. To that end, we organized three events whereby we identified key themes and workshopped the contributions to the prospective special issue, as well as situated our findings within broader disciplinary and theoretical frameworks.

The first workshop, "Sokol: Nationalism and Pan-Slavism in Modern Europe," took place online (May 14, 2021). It included two panels on different national cases (the Czech, Slovak, South Slav, Polish, Bulgarian, and Russian examples) and involved conversations on the various thematic and conceptual issues at stake in each presentation's analytical framework (history of ideas, eugenics, history of sport, and associational culture) in an attempt to formulate research questions and sketch out a common research agenda. The second workshop, "Biopolitics and Mass Gymnastics in East Central Europe" (Prague, April 28–30, 2022), was organized, hosted, and supported by the French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES) in Prague, the Czech Academy of Sciences, and Pasts, Inc.: Center for Historical Studies at Central European University. This conference brought together nearly every researcher currently dealing with Sokol or analogous and comparable phenomena in different spatial or temporal contexts. As such, this event served mainly as an opportunity to discuss and assess the works in progress and integrate mutual feedback. Finally, the third event "Sokol and the Gaelic Athletics Association: Parallel Histories, Bodies, Empires, Ideologies" took place at Maynooth University in Ireland (November 3–4, 2022). This event brought together scholars whose research focuses on two distinct regions – East Central Europe and Ireland – that share historical trajectories and associational morphologies in order to examine the potential for a broader transnational research project that embraced organizations and movements in places beyond Sokol and its East Central European context.

We identified the need to create a network of researchers and generate a dialogue on these themes because of the relative historiographical obscurity

of such East Central European organizations locally and internationally. This also meant that we sought to uncover such organizations' socio-political impact, regarding them as crucial sites of political socialization, particularly in the context of post-imperial transitions. Indeed, special attention was paid to the lands of the former German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires, keeping in mind that such organizations represented the largest and, arguably, most significant "civil society" actors in most of the successor states during the interwar period.

While organizations dedicated to mass gymnastics, the politicization of youth, and the organization of citizens' free time – such as the Olympic movement, German Turnverein, Hitler Jugend, Italian ONB (Opera Nazionale Balilla) or OND (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro), various French *mouvements d'ensemble*, the Soviet *fizkultura* movement, the Jewish Maccabi, the Catholic Orao/Orel, the Hungarian Levente mozgalom, etc. – received a significant amount of historiographic attention from various fields and perspectives, a transnational, comparative perspective on Sokol was rather virgin territory. In the same vein, we understood the research of Sokol's morphology and its role in the above processes was, indeed, one of the crucial missing links in understanding larger questions around imperial collapse as well as the history of state- and nation-building in Central and Eastern Europe beyond Slavic countries. This is particularly relevant given that Sokol and analogous organizations regularly mirrored and developed in relation to each other, pointing to broader transnational trends related to the transformation of "civil society" and political culture more broadly. Moreover, we were interested in the entanglement(s) of Sokol as an organizational framework with other contemporaneous "civil society" initiatives or social movements ranging from feminism and peasantism to temperance and anti-Bolshevism. From the other direction, we wanted to explore Sokol's and analogous associations' involvement with state institutions to understand how they complemented or negotiated each other's agendas.

Building on these questions, the issue's thematic focus addresses two issues in the different spatial and linguistic contexts represented in the contributions: 1) Sokol's position between the state and the nation in the context of post-imperial transitions, together with the subsequent creation of illiberal civil society, and 2) biopolitics in transition, whereby we traced the multiplicity of approaches to the body – literal and discursive– made by Sokol and analogous organizations through their attempts to shape modern political subjects in these markedly volatile contexts.

Regarding the first set of questions we addressed in relation to the position of Sokol in the state and society of the Habsburg successor states of East Central

Europe, we were particularly interested in the liminal space detected in recent research between state/official institutions on the one hand, and "civil society" on the other. We argue that there exists a gray area and/or transitional space between the two, which is occupied by individuals and institutions that are part of both but fully belong to neither. Our contributions thus consider Sokol a two-way "transmission belt" of official regime policy and values in the new national spaces of post-1918 East Central Europe; they also examine the extent to which Sokol and its leadership/membership "passed back" to the state their visions of political modernity and the information and ideas they gleaned from civil society and expert milieus. In this regard, we found that in the majority of cases, the interwar states supported Sokol and similar organizations in a number of ways: by soliciting their input for physical education and youth training legislation; allowing them to develop and implement a physical education curricula in public schools; awarding them royal or regime patronage and sponsorship; granting them the use of representative public buildings for their meetings or performances; promoting their activities via postal stamps; discounting their travel by train, etc. However, we found a number of instances when experts or intellectuals affiliated with Sokol produced various policy recommendations and analyses of state resources and population (particularly in terms of health, potential military strength, and economic productivity), made direct appeals to the state to change certain policies, or acted as a platform for cultural diplomacy.

There are two emphases here. The first is on the institutional architecture of Sokol, its similarities to and differences from official state institutions and its proximity and overlap with the function of said institutions. Here we are particularly interested in the relationship between Sokol and the newly formed or forming national armies and educational, health, and cultural institutions, with a consideration for how the post-1918 Sokol leadership and membership interpreted or revived Tyrš's foundational ideas about Sokol serving in the same capacity as a national army or militia, as well as molding the national body in various ways, frequently with a modernist agenda at the forefront.

The second emphasis is on the composition of Sokol both in terms of its leadership and its broader membership. We wanted to look closely at the biographies of significant individuals connected to the Sokol movement and investigate their other public roles and associational affiliations, asking whether or not there is an "archetype" of a politically and associationally active individual for whom involvement in Sokol was only one among their many roles or functions. In both cases, we considered the interwar period a dynamic rather than static era marked by the morphology of institutional forms across time and the shifting ideas and values of individual Sokolists. Thus, we argue

that Sokol can be used as an entry point for understanding larger questions and concerns about associational and political culture in interwar Eastern and Central Europe, especially the limits of the liberal experiment and sources of support and inspiration for authoritarian politics.

One of our key findings is that the model of such an "all-national association," which aimed to project a vision of broad participation and support, was adopted and appropriated by various political actors for their significantly diverging and frequently opposing political and ideological agendas both before and after imperial collapse. In most cases, paradoxically, they fashioned themselves as apolitical organizations uninvolved with – perhaps even an antidote to – party politics. Thus, these mutual mirroring behaviors and analogous developments indicate that these (ideas about) models continuously circulated and responded to the needs of national movements, but also these newly founded states and their respective regimes. What is not addressed in this issue is the continuity between the interwar and the post-1945 periods. These models and performances not only survived but were often adopted as crucial parts of state-socialist political culture in East Central Europe, and we consider this continuity as one of the most promising avenues for further research.

In post-Habsburg contexts, we found numerous structural and functional continuities with the pre-1918 period despite the way Sokol, for instance in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, attempted to generate that "breaking point" and represent the newly founded states as more democratic and anti-imperialist in nature through their memorialization and commemoration practices. Special attention was paid to phenomena and strategies of national homogenization such as internal colonization and "molding the national body" through "moral education," physical exercise, and eugenics. This observation is closely related to the second key issue addressed in this special issue.

"[I]t was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death," Michel Foucault notes, "that gave power its access even to the body" (Foucault 1978: 142). In order to grasp this process, where "biological existence is reflected in political existence," Foucault coined the term biopolitics (Foucault 1978: 143). The Sokol movement took charge of the lives of its members, including in the biological sense. At rallies, Sokol showcased healthy, white, able-bodied, and typically male individuals; claimed to strengthen their bodies through gymnastic exercises; and encouraged their reproduction. Moreover, Sokol

sought to shape an organic national community out of these bodies with the assistance of various experts who cooperated with Sokol, primarily medical doctors. In many cases, these doctors became officials within the movement. It comes as a surprise, then, that the Sokol movement has rarely been analyzed through the lens of biopolitics, a theme taken up by the contributions in this issue.

We aim to initiate a debate about the interplay and even synergy between Sokol mass gymnastics and biopolitics in East Central Europe. Of course, we do not claim to have all the answers. Instead, we embrace Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose's strategy of "modest empiricism," which makes us "attentive to peculiarities, to small differences, to the moments when shifts in truth, authority, spatiality or ethics make a difference" (Rabinow and Rose 2006: 205). Furthermore, we share a common interest with Rabinow and Rose in exploring key principles that characterize biopolitics, namely the "truth discourses" related to human nature, the experts and authorities considered credible when addressing this subject, and the interventions aimed at shaping individual and collective bodies either directly or through environmental influences (Rabinow and Rose 2006: 195).[1] Ultimately, such a thorough examination of Sokol mass gymnastics can become a starting point for a broader consideration of the relationship between voluntary associations and biopolitics in the region.

"Foucault more than anyone taught us to distrust the state and institutions," declared Kaspar Villadsen somewhat hyperbolically, posing the thought-provoking question: "Can he help us take the same critical perspective on social movements emerging 'from below'"? (Villadsen 2016: 22). In problematizing this matter, he diverges from Foucauldians like Rabinow and Rose, who asserted that such non-state actors inherently act as checks on the state and moderate its actions, guiding it to more liberal outcomes. Our historical research on voluntary associations like Sokol that were dedicated to mass gymnastics aligns more with the former view. Sokol not only embraced a distinctly biopolitical agenda; through its extensive network of branches and transnational connections, it also had ample opportunities to inscribe these aims on the bodies of its members. Furthermore, Sokol exemplifies the ways voluntary associations can play a remarkably ambiguous role even in liberal democracies. They can infiltrate state institutions, demand increased state intervention, and advocate for a shift toward a more authoritarian form of governance and the radicalization of biopolitics.

1 While we recognize the centrality of "modes of subjectification" for our analyses, wherein individuals act on their own initiative under the influence of these discourses and interventions, we do not yet have sufficient ego-documents that would allow us to explore this question.

In the introduction to a recent groundbreaking volume on biopolitics in twentieth-century East Central Europe, Joachim von Puttkamer and Immo Rebitschek observe that during the interwar period, the region can be understood as a post-imperial space even in terms of the maintenance and expansion of life through biopolitics (Puttkamer and Rebitschek 2022: 2–3). The foci of this special issue resonate with this observation. We do not limit our analysis to the complex relationship between Sokol and analogous organizations within their respective, often imperial, contexts before the First World War. Indeed, the articles here also address the multifaceted biopolitical discourses within Sokol and their function(s) in a post-imperial setting. This perspective enables us to examine how broader political projects and ideological agendas were locally negotiated and implemented within this distinct context. By employing post-imperial transitions as our main analytical framework and aligning with the growing scholarship that views the self-styled nation-states of interwar East Central Europe as resembling small empires, we delve into the crucial shifts and continuities in Sokol's biopolitics, particularly in relation to its associational culture, intellectual production, and practices (Judson 2016: 451; Egry 2021). To comprehend the genealogies and dynamics of increasingly radical biopolitics in the interwar period, it may be necessary to take a detour back to the late imperial context.

Furthermore, the transformative role of modern mass gymnastics as a form of bodily performance and participation is also essential here, as it expands the notion of biopolitics beyond its traditional focus on governance, demonstrating instead its stakes in the public sphere and "civil society" more broadly. Its performative aspect, whether in the context of gymnastic performances or Sokol's aesthetic output through art and architecture, served to perform democracy and unity among the state citizens in the interwar years and to stabilize their new national-cultural canons. In some cases, this meant homogenizing the national culture reproduced within the organization, while in others it meant cataloguing, incorporating, and synthetizing very heterogeneous cultural heritages and managing this diversity. The boundaries between biology, culture, and society were frequently conceptualized as fluid in these endeavors.

Biopolitics encompasses a wide range of discourses, actors, and practices, extending beyond eugenics, although the latter represents its darkest and most emblematic iteration. That being said, our research on biopolitics within Sokol has revealed that this body of knowledge not only existed within Sokol associations but thrived there from the early twentieth century onward. Significantly, Sokol facilitated the circulation and popularization of eugenic ideas within its respective imagined national communities as well as across national

boundaries. Sokol played a significant role in promoting eugenic thinking and practices in East Central Europe, emerging as one of the most significant non-state settings for such activities (Turda 2015). In this regard, it resembles other mass gymnastics associations such as the Turnverein (Mayer 2008).

However, it is important to note that historians of eugenics widely acknowledge that eugenics cannot be confined to Nazi race hygiene. Eugenics encompassed various political and epistemic positions. These positions ranged from optimistic and progressivist blueprints linked to the idea of the inheritance of acquired characteristics all the way to radical visions of national biological purification that emphasized "race" as a timeless and determining substance (Meloni 2016). Our research suggests that there was no single or cohesive eugenic project within Sokol, but rather the coexistence of or competition between multiple variants of eugenics. Yet it is important to note that there was also a tendency toward the radicalization of eugenics within Sokol, particularly by the end of the interwar period, which resulted in a shrinking space for liberal or socialist eugenic arguments.

We commissioned each contribution with these central ideas and themes in mind. And we used our workshop sessions to elaborate how, collectively, these pieces answered key questions on state/society relations and the post-1918 transition. We asked our contributors to keep in mind the central themes of our special issue and the ways their own study related to the history of Sokol in the interwar period more generally.

The biopolitical dimension of Sokol is the central concern of the article by Lucija Balikić and Vojtěch Pojar. The authors examine the corpus of medical and eugenicist knowledge produced by the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak Sokol movements just before and immediately after the First World War. The authors show how Sokol thinking about individual bodies – their malleability and, above all, their potential to be shaped and improved by the scientific application of such ideas – was a direct form of scientific thinking and served as an applicable metaphor for the national community itself. Sokol's biopolitics in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia applied both to the individual bodies of their members and to the broader "body politic" of the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav national communities. The authors advance an original theoretical concept to describe this process, "plastic nationhood," wherein communities could be molded (closer) to perfection through the distinct activities and eugenicist thinking pursued by Sokolists. They use the dynamics of the "politics of plastic nationhood" to describe the contestations and negotiations around the idea of corporeal plasticity. This is an apposite theory for Sokol not only because it provided a rationale for the intense focus on the body and its perfection through physical exercise and gymnastic routines but also because it allowed

for larger questions of nationhood and community to remain at least partially open-ended. This, in turn, retained the potential for higher or more evolved forms of community, such as Pan-Slavism, or even closer forms of cooperation between the Czechoslovak and the Yugoslav Sokols (which were, not by accident, the two closest branches of Sokol throughout the interwar period, just as their predecessors had been prior to the First World War).

Formal questions of a very different kind are taken up in Vladana Putnik Prica's article. Prica analyzes the architectural styles used for Sokol halls and stadia built in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia during the interwar period. The author shows how functional concerns (the buildings had a purpose, or rather purposes, after all) combined with architectural stylings that placed Sokol's traditional fascination with Greco-Roman classicism alongside the historical diversity of the South Slav state itself. The architectural styles of these Sokol buildings were diverse, displaying distinct regional variations depending on the part of Yugoslavia in which they were located. But these buildings were often also a conscious effort to bring together the many traditions and historical legacies of the South Slav state, i.e., the very "diversity" state builders regarded as one of the country's notional strengths. Sokol architecture was related to the performative spectacle of Sokol *Slets* and public events, which were intended as visual representations of Sokol's values and ideas. But unlike these performances, Putnik Prica shows, Sokol halls and stadia were always understood to be more lasting artefacts, a chance to pass down Sokol's imagined vision of a classical past and a Yugoslav present and future. It can be noted here, too, that the Yugoslav Sokol itself was undoubtedly the heir to a more complex associational legacy than, for example, that of Czechoslovakia. The Yugoslav Sokol Association brought together the separate South Slav Sokol associations of the Habsburg lands and the association from the Kingdom of Serbia. Its union in the interwar period, although achieved quickly (in 1919), was not without difficulties (e.g., the breaking away of the Croatian Sokol, 1919–1920). The historiography of interwar East Central Europe is sometimes too quick to present Yugoslavia as an exceptionally diverse state in an era of nation-states, but at least as far as Sokol is concerned, diverse legacies and traditions continued to exist and were important. This diversity is also reflected in the diversity of the architectural styles of Sokol halls.

John Paul Newman's article on interwar paradoxes of the Czechoslovak Sokol Association is more concerned with the historical lenses through which Sokol viewed itself, and through which we as historians and scholars of Sokol also view the movement. Newman addresses the preponderance of Sokol historiography precisely in the period on which this special issue is focused. The interwar period was for many of the national Sokol associations a "golden

age" of expansion unencumbered by the presence of Habsburg authority and often actively encouraged to a greater or lesser extent by the leaders of the new states (the idea of a Sokol "golden age" is also addressed also by Putnik Prica in her piece). A corollary of this was the considerable proliferation of interwar historiography that, while informative and useful, also tended to reflect the triumphalism of the interwar associations: the idea that empire had been defeated, the nation(s) liberated, and that Sokol had played a leading role in this process. Newman's article shows how this interpretation is reproduced in the re-narration of Sokol's Habsburg past and its role in the fighting in Slovakia in 1919 (an episode which, as Newman shows, is only now getting serious attention from scholars of Central Europe). Newman argues that perceptions of Sokol in the interwar period need to be read "against the grain" in order to be read correctly.

Ivaylo Nachev's study of the Bulgarian Sokol association Yunak (Hero) points to a very different problem: the Bulgarian association has received minimal attention from historians. As Nachev shows in compelling fashion, this paucity exists despite the fact that the Bulgarian movement was large and had branches across the entire country. There are many reasons for this neglect, including the directions taken by Bulgarian history since the interwar period, or perhaps the tendency of interwar historiography to focus on the more political and obviously nationalist (and of course more notorious) movements and associations of the time. There is also the matter of the uneven prewar development of Sokol. Nachev's piece is a reminder that Sokol was rooted first and foremost in the context of the late-Habsburg empire, a point made also in Newman's piece. Yunak was a relative latecomer, which may be a possible reason for its relative obscurity in historical writing on Sokol and interwar Bulgaria broadly. There is no lack of sources, however, and Nachev uses them to reconstruct in detail the history of an association that was extremely active both in the national and international context. On this last point, Yunak's post-1918 trajectory makes for an interesting comparison with the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav cases, at least on the international level. There, Yunak found itself attached to a defeated revisionist state, unlike its Czechoslovak and Yugoslav counterparts.

Finally, Fabio Giomi's comprehensive analysis of the Croatian Catholic gymnastic association Orao (Eagle) expands our study of Sokol in the interwar period in so far as it shows the organizational and associational alternatives to the model described in the other contributions. Giomi's starting point is relevant to the history of Sokol: that of mimicry and mirroring, a process that, of course, accounts for the origins of the Sokol movement in Prague in the 1860s (which itself began as a copy of the German gymnastics association

Turnverein). But mirroring does not involve directly copying; just as Sokol inverted and re-invented many of Turnverein's ideas, Orao used the model of the associational organization and mobilization through gymnastics to promote and disseminate its own values and politics. Giomi's article is a reminder that Sokol, despite its *soi disant* claims to be an association of mass mobilization par excellence in the interwar period, was far from the only example of such an organization. Giomi's article discusses Orao, but political associations of the Left (social democratic and communist associations, for example) and the Right existed too, and they were part of the broader context in which Sokol developed.

This last point is a reminder that this cluster of articles is far from a comprehensive portrait of Sokol in the interwar period. More research is needed on the Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian branches of Sokol, for example. Sokol's relations with party politics, illiberal regimes (touched on in Putnik Prica's piece), or other political changes in the interwar period are also topics that warrant further investigation. Studies that focus not on the corporate identities of the Sokol associations themselves but rather on the leaders and members and their individual and/or collective trajectories might also yield significant results. What type of person became an active and involved Sokolist? What happened if and when one left the association? What if we were to move beyond the interwar period? What was the fate of Sokolists during the years of Axis occupation, collaboration, resistance? And how was Sokol re-formed and re-worked in emigration during the Cold War years? All these questions are alluded to or implied in this special thematic section, and we hope the articles here will spark further research on this important and under-researched part of East-Central European history.

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