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Paradoxes of the Czechoslovak Sokol Association in the Interwar Period

John Paul Newman
History, Centre for European and Eurasian Studies, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland
johnpaul.newman@mu.ie

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Abstract

The article addresses some of the paradoxes of the interwar Czechoslovak Sokol Association. It shows how after 1918 Sokol historiography experienced a boom following national independence: a proliferation of accounts of the Sokol movement's history to date told in largest part by the leadership of the association itself. These accounts re-narrated the history of the movement so that it became well-adjusted to the new culture of victory of the interwar state, positing throughout a separation between nation and empire and a struggle in which the former, aided by Sokol mobilization, was sure to emerge victorious. The article asks that we read this historiography 'against the grain', showing that the actual relationship of Sokol to late-Habsburg civil society was protean and shifting, and only re-cast as unswervingly adversarial in the post-1918 period. The second part of the article looks at the participation of Sokol members and leadership in the war in Slovakia (1919), presented in interwar historiography and commemoration as a culminating moment in Sokol's participation in the national liberation of Czechs and Slovaks. In fact, there is a compelling case to be made that Sokol's role in fighting and violence at this time also shows the ongoing contestation and conflict associated with the creation of Czechoslovakia. The article shows that re-narrating the history of the Habsburg period and the war itself to emphasize the voluntarist contribution of groups such as Sokol was an important part of establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of the interwar state.

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The Czechoslovak Sokol Association (*Československá obec sokolská*) of the interwar period is often regarded by historians and enthusiasts alike as a pillar of voluntarist and patriotic mobilisation on the part of Czechoslovak society, a fundamental and essential component of the cultural and political architecture of the interwar state (Waldauf 2007: 47; Waic 2012: 234–235; Čechurová, Ševidý 2018: 357). Sokol historiography has depicted this era of Sokol's history as a golden age, one that was preceded by a long struggle for independence from the Habsburg empire and then cut short by the communists' banning of the association in 1948 (see Roubal 2019: 102–106). This idealisation of Sokol is due in no small part to the contemporary historiographical and commemorative boom of works on and interest in Sokol in the interwar period (see below). These presented an image of Sokol's past and present that was well-adjusted to the state-forming culture of the Czechoslovak state (Dimond 2007: 189). The corollaries with the history of the interwar state of Czechoslovakia (until 1938, the so-called "First Republic"), are obvious and – given that the Czechoslovak Sokol Association was so closely affixed to the interwar state and its institutions – unsurprising.

There are many impressive aspects of the association as it existed during the interwar period. The number of Sokol members increased exponentially – although the membership was admittedly concentrated in the Czech lands (Sokol membership stood at 194,322 in 1913; in 1937, it was 818,188. See Waic 2018); its leadership established a state-wide organisation (although again with an imbalance that favoured the Czech lands); the movement boasted impressive national and local Sokol buildings designed by highly regarded architects, most strikingly the massive training and parade stadium in Strahov (according to historian Petr Roubal, "a physical expression of the symbiosis of Sokol and the State" [2019: 80]); and the grandiose pageantry of its regular gatherings – especially the massive "*Slets*" ("Gatherings": multi-day parades held every six years) – earned the association international renown and respect. And yet, Sokol's interwar achievements have tended to overshadow other more ambiguous parts of the association's history. Like the Czechoslovak state itself during this period, the history of the Sokol movement in the interwar period is more complicated than idealised interpretations admit. Further research into Sokol can problematise the narrative of triumph that has marked the association's history during this era, and it can problematise some of the triumphalist narratives regarding the First Republic itself.

This article analyses some of the apparent paradoxes of Sokol history in the interwar period. The first is the movement's important and entangled history as part of late-Habsburg civil society. Throughout the interwar period, Sokol chroniclers, who were also typically regional or national leaders of the association, emphasised the history of the movement – their history – as a struggle for national emancipation culminating in the First World War and the establishment of the Czechoslovak state, with national independence and sovereignty as the lodestar towards which Sokol had long guided the nation (see, e.g., Weigner and Jandásek 1930: 3–11). But this narrative was itself a reflection of the post-1918 Czechoslovak "culture of victory," of which Sokol was an integral part. Sokol's history before the First World War was protean and adaptable rather than fixed. Its evolution in late-Habsburg society was shaped by numerous factors: initially the perceived linguistic and ethnic divide between Czech and German associational life in Prague in the 1860s; later, relations with the Habsburg state itself and its rising suspicion of Czech political nationalism (particularly at the turn of the twentieth century; key studies are Waic 2013 and, in English, Nolte 2002). The Czech Sokol also became a kind of "franchisor" for other Sokol branches, originally (and typically most successfully) amongst Slavic peoples elsewhere in the Habsburg empire, but also eventually in lands beyond the empire's borders. In the interwar period, as we shall see, many elements of this "pre-history" of the Czechoslovak Sokol Association were elided or ignored (e.g., the often complicated and shifting relationship with the Habsburg state) in favour of others (the supposed latitudinal and anti-imperial pan-Slavism of the Sokol movement).

To understand Sokol's organisational roots and its successful co-operation with the institutions and society of the interwar state, we need to understand not only the patriotic state-forming efforts of the interwar period – of which Sokol was undoubtedly an important part – but also the nature of Habsburg civil society in the late imperial period. This involves reading much of the interwar historiography against the grain. To do so is to show how Sokol became embedded in the institutional architecture and patriotic culture of the interwar state in large part through the re-telling of its own history and that of the "Czechoslovak nation" before 1918. Re-framing and re-focussing historical reality was an important element of state-building in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the successor states of Central and Eastern Europe in the interwar period (as the other contributions to this special issue show).

The second paradox is related to the conflict and violence that accompanied the birth of the Czechoslovak state during and after the end of the First World War. Czechoslovakia has typically been exempted from the new scholarship on post-war violence throughout Europe. This is partially because the scholarship

emphasises the role of defeat in war as a spur to renewed fighting in the post-war period (Gerwarth 2017), a spur that "victorious" Czechoslovakia did not have. Only recently have historians shown that the formation of Czechoslovakia also entailed violent contestation in many parts of the new state's territories (Konrad and Kučera 2022; Hutečka 2021; Beneš 2019). Sokol leaders and members are implicated in this fighting. For many Sokol volunteers, this was a chance to enact patriotic support for the new state either through ideological conviction or practical expediency. The interwar historiography praised this episode as evidence of Sokol's role in the creation of the new state and the security of its borders, going so far as to depict it as the cumulative moment of national liberation that had been sought by Sokol since its formation (see below). To an extent, the former premise is true. But again, this story can be read against the grain: violence and conflict at this time also shows the limits of Sokol's story of unity and widespread support for their association and their ideas, just as Czechoslovak institutions and associations wielding violence after 1918 (often against people who were now citizens of independent Czechoslovakia) undermines the image of state-forming as an entirely emancipatory and voluntary act. This is an image that needs to be undermined to understand properly the transition from empire to nation-state and Sokol's role in that transition. Contestation and violence within Czechoslovakia are also an essential part of this history and the broader history of the interwar state.

The first part of this article explores the historical roots of Sokol's formation and evolution in the context of the late Habsburg empire and the associational life and civil society during this period. It draws on both recent historiography of the association as well as (more critically) works about Sokol published during the interwar period, teasing out the ambiguities and complexities of this pre-war period in contrast to the straightforward patriotic and anti-imperial tone in which this history was told after 1918. The second part of the article focuses on Sokol and its role in the violence and fighting after 1918, especially during the Hungarian invasion of Slovakia in 1919, again using interwar historiography as well as contemporary accounts and sources from the conflict to show that Sokol's story of patriotic voluntarism must be viewed alongside the contestation and resistance the state and its proponents faced at this time. The third and final section looks forward to the first decade of the Czechoslovak state's existence. It briefly explains how the Czechoslovak Sokol Association re-narrated these parts of its history through commemoration and memorialisation, and how its historical roots in the Bohemian lands and in the late Habsburg period, coupled with its history of violence beyond those lands, help us understand the limits of Sokol's supposed mass mobilisation and support in the interwar period. The intention throughout is not to entirely

negate Sokol's support and appeal in the new state and its important role in its foundation but rather to show that this was but one element in a more complex and ambiguous historical setting.

The Habsburg Period

The Sokol movement began in Prague in 1862. The association's founder Miroslav Tyrš was a student of philosophy with an interest in physical education and the associational organisation of the Czech inhabitants of Prague (Nolte 2002: 25–30; Waic 2013: 17–19). From the beginning, Tyrš envisaged Sokol as both a means of promoting the benefits of exercise and coordinated physical activity and as an instrument of communal organisation and association of the Czech population of Prague. These goals were connected in Tyrš's mind: synchronised and repetitive physical training would condition individuals towards collective and communal unity. Tyrš's initiative was reactive rather than *sui generis*. He conceived of Sokol as a Czech alternative to the already established German gymnastics association the Turnverein, which was also active and prominent in Prague and throughout the historic Czech lands in the middle of the nineteenth century.

In its initial guise, Sokol closely resembled Turnverein both in the gymnastics it practiced and in its aspirations as an instrument of communal association for the population (Roubal 2019: 49–51. The notional similarities were challenged by Sokolists in the interwar period. See Mácha 1922). As the association evolved and expanded over time, its gymnastic routines and exercises became more innovative and original, creating a programme of physical training that would be duplicated in or disseminated to other parts of Europe. Tyrš's own biography was suggestive of the conscious processes of emulation, adaptation, and separation from which his Sokol association had emerged. He had been born to a German father and had changed his name from Friedrich Emmanuel Tirsch at a relatively young age, having become assimilated into the Czech community while growing up in Bohemia (Havránková 1996: 12–13; Nolte 2002: 25–27).

Sokol historian Marek Waic has claimed that Sokol members were drawn to the association primarily for national and communal reasons over those of physical training (Waic 1996: 67). For Tyrš, the principles of synchronised collective physical training and social organisation were always entwined and, therefore, also impossible to disentangle. Interwar historiography understandably emphasised this political component over the gymnastic since it befitted the Czechoslovak Sokol Association's role in the state-forming institutional architecture and values of the time. The article on Sokol published

in the inaugural *Yearbook of the Czechoslovak Republic* is representative in this sense, praising Tyrš and the founders of Sokol for their vision of national emancipation, their "victory" now realised with the founding of the Czechoslovak state (Masák 1922). It (Sokol's role in national emancipation) was, thus, often overstated by interested parties. Nevertheless, it does seem that at least for the Czech Sokol in the pre-war period, communal organisation and mobilisation took precedence over physical education, especially as the association became more closely linked with Czech political nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century (see below).

From the earliest days of Sokol, Tyrš envisaged a military component of the movement to accompany and complement its gymnastic component. For Tyrš, this military aspect of Sokol organisation would be multi-faceted. On the one hand, it would provide the basis for a civic (or even national) armed militia that could be used for defensive and offensive purposes (Havlíček 1923). But additionally, the training and drilling of Sokol members in prototype military units would also intensify and promote Sokol's goals of physical education and, more importantly, collective mobilisation and action (as explained in Soukup 1936). As with Sokol's notional "national" community, Sokol's putative militarism was not initially antagonistic to empire. Quite the contrary: Sokol leaders attempted to organise defensive militias in Prague during the Austro-Prussian war, an initiative rejected by the Habsburg authorities and, therefore, unrealised (Nolte 2002: 75–77).

Sokol did not fulfil its military aspirations within the lifetime and borders of the Habsburg empire. But an indication of how Sokol's military organisation might have looked in practice can be seen beyond the borders of the empire. The Czech Sokol and its leadership were able to cultivate its militarism in the Russian empire, where a handful of Czech Sokolists travelled to establish branches of the movement with a view to expanding deeper into Slavic lands (see below). Here, as Irina Sirotkina has shown, Sokolists were used in an official capacity to help with the physical training and drilling of soldiers in the imperial army, a role to which they had aspired at home (Sirotkina 2014). After 1918, this concept of a military dimension of Sokol became connected institutionally and ideologically to the national army of the Czechoslovak state (Klinger 1933). By this time, political circumstances had completely changed. But the principle of enacting Sokol's values and ideas through military training and activity had been present in the movement from its earliest days.

This kind of activity was grounds for the Habsburg authorities to treat the Sokol with suspicion; so, too, were the Czech Sokol Association's apparent ties with national politics in Bohemia in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Programmatically, the Czech Sokol Association disavowed any political party

affiliation at the associational level (Jandásek 1934: 5–7), a position that was re-affirmed and maintained in the interwar period (Štoll 1932). Such an affiliation was seen as a potential narrowing of the more general programme and appeal of Sokol (although this "apolitical" stance was not to be confused with political indifference; see Jandásek 1934: 8). Sokol intended their notional community to be broader and more encompassing than any single political party programme. It was not that the association ruled out party affiliation for its members or its leaders; rather, it eschewed committing the association wholesale to the support of a political party or programme. Yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, "Young Czech" politicians featured prominently in the leadership of Sokol in the Czech lands (Tyrš, Jan Podlipaný, Josef Scheiner; see Waic 1996: 25). Habsburg authorities were largely correct to extend the suspicions they had about the loyalty of the Czech political nationalists to the leadership and the organisation of Sokol itself. It also put the association's militarist aspirations in a different light. Such aspirations suggested Sokol was a potential militia-wing of an increasingly assertive and confrontational political party. Claire Morelon has shown how such military organisations in Central Europe contributed to the undermining of the notional *belle epoque* in the years before the First World War (Morelon 2020). The military aspect of Sokol, although barely present in practice before 1914 – at least within the Habsburg empire, added another unsettling dimension to this potential nationalist mobilisation.

The Sokol movement's expansion was a cause for concern on the part of the Habsburgs too, eventually if not immediately. In the decades after its founding, Sokol opened branches in other parts of Bohemia (Nolte 2002: 69–71); it also expanded beyond the Czech lands, initially to Slovenia (Ljubljana in 1863), to Galicia (Lviv, in 1867), and to Croatia (Zagreb in 1874). The branches established in the Czech lands were duplicates of the original Prague branches. The same Sokol leaders ("elders") were responsible for their establishment and the same ethos of collective physical culture and training and social mobilisation was followed in all these branches. In this sense, Sokol in the Czech lands could be legitimately compared to a corporative franchise, one in which the initial idea, born in the first branch, was disseminated and replicated through the work of stake-holders (senior Sokol leaders) who remained connected to the original branch, not straying far from the original idea of the association as outlined by Tyrš himself.

A prominent example of this kind of Sokol "franchisor' was Josef Jiří Švec, a schoolteacher from Třebíč who became an active Sokol branch leader in the first decade of the twentieth century. Švec travelled to the Russian empire (in 1911) to establish a Sokol branch on the Czech model and to train Russian

gymnasts. He joined the volunteer pro-Entente military battalions at the start of the war and fought with what became the "Czechoslovak legions," dying (by suicide) in October 1918. In the interwar period, Švec's story came to be seen as emblematic of the entwined patriotism and sacrifice of Sokol-legionnaires, not least because it became the subject of a stage play, *Colonel Švec*, written by legionary author Rudolf Medek (first staged in 1928). But it was also representative of how Sokol expanded out of the Czech lands, both through replication of its associational structures and practices as well as through the mobility and efforts of its leaders.

Within the Habsburg empire, the branches beyond the Czech lands were also "mirrors" of the original Sokol concept, albeit mirrors that reflected their Prague predecessor as if through a glass darkly. Ljubljana and Lviv were both intercommunal spaces in which Sokol offered an opportunity for a Slavic population to assert a collective identity and organisation against other ethnic groups (on, e.g., the Slovene Sokol, see Stergar 2007). Zagreb was less so and, of course, was part of the Hungarian kingdom, where restrictions on associational life were greater (the South Slav Sokols were unified at a *Slet* in Zagreb on June 18, 1914, just days before the outbreak of the First World War – and the Habsburg authorities prevented delegates from Serbia from attending; Gangl 1929). But Sokol's interest in Slavic organisation here offered a means to connect the Catholic and Orthodox communities of the Hungarian kingdom. Each new branch evolved according to local conditions and the influence of local leadership. This said, no total deviation from the original Sokol branch in Prague ever occurred, and the Czech branches did not tend to incorporate new ideas or modify their own principles with consideration for developments beyond the Bohemian core.

There are parallels between the Sokol associations in Austria-Hungary and the networks of (Habsburg) patriotic associational and civil society initiatives that emerged in the Habsburg lands, especially in Cisleithania, around the same time. In a detailed study, Laurence Cole has shown that the local structure of Habsburg society allowed for such associations to thrive and that, in turn, those associations articulated a patriotic dynastic culture that was an important part of late-Habsburg "civil society" (Cole 2014). These associations, which often forged connections between the institutions of the state (especially the army) and the people, typically reflected the triumphalist commemorative culture of the post-1848 re-assertation of imperial values and identity (Cole 2014: 1–2). Many of these associations were, in fact, formed by veterans of the Habsburg 1848–1849 campaigns.

Sokol and its network of associations were located in the same context of civil society mobilisation and, in this sense at least, the movement was

undoubtedly a phenomenon of late Habsburg society. But Sokol did not share the patriotic dynasticism of the associations studied by Cole. Sokol, as we have seen, was born of the German-Czech associational divide in Prague and Bohemia. As the movement grew and expanded beyond Bohemia, this principle morphed into a kind of pan-Slavism, a schema so protean and malleable that it could be endorsed throughout the network of Sokol branches across the empire whilst allowing for variations to remain. Thus, the Croatian Sokol in Zagreb or the Polish Sokol in Lviv could simultaneously nurture local and regional identities and remain under the pan-Slavic umbrella together with the rest of the Sokol movement. Here, the origins of the movement as a Slavic "mirror" of the Turnverein of the mid-nineteenth century were still apparent. Sokol's pan-Slavic international organisation was in large part the work of Josef Scheiner, a leading member of the Prague Sokol and the editor of the association's journal *Sokol* (from 1887), who had also written a biography of Tyrš (in 1884) and an early history of the association (1887). Scheiner was instrumental in establishing the Slavic Sokol Association, which held its first *Slet* in Prague in 1912 (Krejčí 1932: 19). This part of the Sokol programme became more developed in the years immediately prior to the First World War.

The differences between the dynastic associational culture of veteran associations, volunteer fire-brigades, and so on, on the one hand, and Sokol, on the other, is clear if one takes the same approach to studying Sokol in the late Habsburg period as historians have to pro-dynastic associations, that is, by looking at their pageantry and the visual representations of their ideas. Images and language produced by pro-dynastic associations featured Emperor Franz Josef first and foremost, along with the regalia of the dynasty, the Habsburg coat-of-arms, and in many cases Field Marshal Count Joseph Radetzky, the military hero of the 1848–1849 revolutions (Cole 2014: 67–68). Sokol sources instead feature idealised Greco-Roman images of masculinity (and far more infrequently female forms) and images of the *sokol* (falcon) itself. The Sokol imaginary resided in the classical period first and foremost, with increasing hints of pre-modern Slavic and national motifs towards the end of the nineteenth century (as featured in the Sokol journal *Sokol: Časopis zájmům tělocvičným věnovaný*, published from 1871 onwards). This was not necessarily intended as a riposte to the empire itself, but it was a vision of community clearly not located in the same ideals and ideas of post-1848 Habsburg society as those featured in the patriotic dynastic associations. In the interwar period, these classical motifs were supplemented with those taken from Bohemian/Czech history: most notably and frequently images of Jan Hus and the Hussite movement, and especially the Taborite general (and national icon in the interwar state)

Jan Žižka. These new motifs were typically linked, in turn, to the history of the Czechoslovak legions in the First World War (see, e.g., Kudela 1923).

The similarities in form and differences in content are even more visible in the next "mirroring" of the movement, wherein Sokol branches formed beyond the borders of the Habsburg empire, especially in places like Serbia (1892), the Ottoman empire (the Bulgarian Sokol association "Yunak," formed in Salonika in 1908; see the contribution by Ivaylo Nachev in this issue), and the Russian empire (formed by Czech emigres in Tiflis/Tbilisi in 1880; prominent members included Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekov). These branches never achieved the size and scale of those in the Habsburg empire, or at least in the Cisleithanian territories of the Habsburg empire, leading to an asymmetrical associational structure that remained visible even after the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918. A composite map depicting the scale and concentration of Sokol's transnational membership and associations would markedly favour former Austrian lands, followed by those in the Hungarian kingdom (with some important exceptions, e.g., the well-organised and well-supported Serbian/Yugoslav Sokols in Vojvodina).

The example of Sokol associations in the interwar kingdom of Yugoslavia is thus a telling one. As we have seen, the earliest branches outside the Czech lands emerged in Ljubljana (1863) and then in Zagreb (1874, expanding into Zadar in 1885, Vukovar in 1886, and Pula in 1897). Later, Sokol branches emerged in the Serbian kingdom (in Belgrade in 1891). Sokol membership was higher and Sokol organisation more concentrated in the Habsburg South Slav lands, just as it was in the Habsburg lands more generally in the decades before the First World War. This remained true in the first post-war decade too. The "Yugoslav Sokol" was formed at the beginning of 1919 and held its first meeting in Novi Sad. At an international level, the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak associations soon merged (in 1921). It was at a Sokol meeting in Prague that the remains of Gavrilo Princip – the Bosnian schoolboy who assassinated Franz Ferdinand and was now lauded as a hero by many (including Sokol) in Yugoslavia and who had died in Habsburg captivity in Theresinstadt fortress, Bohemia (now Czechoslovakia) – were ceremoniously returned and re-interred in Yugoslavia (Gengl 1929; the key study remains Žutić 1991). The Yugoslav Sokol was a patriotic state-forming association with roots and dominance in the Habsburg lands, making it fairly uncharacteristic of the patriotic Yugoslav associations of the interwar period (which tended to hail from Serbia; see Newman 2015). At the end of the 1920s, when King Aleksandar attempted to re-make Sokol into a fully state-affiliated arm of his dictatorship, Sokol membership appears to have dropped off precipitously (Troch 2019: 63), suggesting, perhaps, a sense

amongst the membership that the long-held traditions of the pre-war Sokol had been violated by this new turn.

In interwar Czechoslovakia, this imbalance matched the preponderance of Czechs and Czech branches in the Czechoslovak Sokol Association. As we shall see below, the Czechoslovak Sokol Association of the interwar period, despite expansions into Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, remained predominantly a "Czech" association in terms of its membership and the geographical concentration of active branches. Even in its newly formed branches outside the Czech lands, Sokol leaders tended to be Czechs who had migrated for the purpose of establishing a Sokol presence in their new homeland. This then was a layered phenomenon: on the one hand, it was an example of an attempt to establish a state-forming and patriotic associational life in areas where it was deemed lacking and an illustration of the spread of the new "Czechoslovak" state ideology outwards from the Czech lands. At the same time, this can be interpreted as a continuation of the pre-war model of "franchising" the Czech Sokol movement, a practice that, as we have seen, was already well established. It was the coalescence of these two factors, the new patriotism and the older tradition of Sokol expansion, that aligned the Czecho slovak Sokol Association with the national and political elites of the new state. It also aligned with the more general paternalistic and "Czecho-centric" character of many patriotic initiatives in the interwar period.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Sokol's expansion beyond the borders of the empire suggested a kind of extra-imperial counter-community. Pan-Slavic aspirations and organisation offered an alternate expanded community both within the borders of the Habsburg empire and now also beyond them. Sokol's pan-Slavism was often necessarily protean and vague in form. This was partly because – as the political history of East Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows – any attempt to fix and clearly delineate a pan-Slavic programme fell afoul of the actual differences between the various Slavic peoples (a telling illustration was offered by the Slavic Congress in Prague in 1848, where delegates of the various nations often had to speak German to one another in order to be understood). But the pan-Slavic associational Sokol network at the beginning of the twentieth century now reached beyond the borders of the empire itself and into those of putative rivals and enemies of the Habsburgs (e.g., Serbia, Russia). This, coupled with the absence of patriotic imperial displays, understandably created suspicion towards Sokol on the part of the Habsburg authorities (see Vyšný 1977).

It is difficult to properly summarise the real state of Sokol/Habsburg relations in the period between its establishment to the outbreak of the First World War. The post-1918 claim that the Czech Sokol had been antagonistic to

the Habsburg empire from its inception is, of course, overstated. That claim was essentially a product of the triumphalist national-liberation culture of victory of interwar Czechoslovakia, and, as we have seen, interpretations of the association's history prior to 1918 are infused with this anti-Habsburg dimension. But things did, in fact, change in the context of the First World War; Sokol naturally was greeted with intense suspicion by the Habsburg authorities from the outset of the war, in the Czech lands and elsewhere.

The outbreak of war distilled the fears of the Habsburg authorities about the potentially subversive nature of the movement. Under duress and nervous about questions of loyalty and support during the initial mobilisation, readily stereotyped categories of nationality and ethnicity were placed in loyal or disloyal "boxes" (based on previous bureaucratic practice; see Stergar and Scheer 2018), and Sokol fell into the latter. There was a part of the Sokol leadership and membership that saw national patriotism as an imperative when the war began. For this reason, significant parts of Sokol leadership made the outright shift to radical opposition to the Habsburg war and support for the clandestine domestic and open *émigré* struggle to achieve a solution to the national question outside the borders of the empire. Sokol leader Josef Scheiner, who joined the Maffie during the First World War, and Sokolist/Young Czech leader Karel Kramář were part of this oppositional group. Indeed, Scheiner claimed in 1930 that he had pledged to fight the Habsburg empire to the death: "As for myself, I have resolved to fight the monarchy to the death. The Austrian empire must be destroyed at all costs" (cited in Krejčí 1932: 24). The wording he used owed something to the kind of zero-sum thinking that linked the victory of the Czechoslovak nation to the defeat of the Habsburg empire that existed in the interwar period. Scheiner did take considerable risks, as did other members of the Sokol leadership. Even so, there is no evidence of Sokol acting as a mass movement of Czech society against empire and in support of the national movement. Participation in Sokol activity before the war did not translate as seamlessly into active resistance to the war after 1914 as interwar Sokol leaders claimed.

Post-World War One Conflict

The comparatively sudden collapse of Habsburg authority and the national revolutions at war's end in the lands that became Czechoslovakia created the circumstances in which Sokol became a mass national and patriotic movement. It also meant that Sokol's organisation and activity could unfold unimpeded – in fact supported – by the state in which it operated. This meant

an opportunity to increase, now with state support, the activity of Sokol in lands were the movement was rather small, a development that Sokol leadership conceived as part of the state-forming work of which they were an important element in the interwar period. It also meant an opportunity to expand and deepen the actual activities of Sokol itself, realising tasks and goals that had been elaborated by Tyrš and the early leaders of Sokol, but which had been impossible to achieve in the context of state-society relations in the Habsburg period. As elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, the political and military collapse of the Habsburg empire had also produced a political and military vacuum into which poured several violent actors (Judson 2016: 437–441). If the vaccuum was quickly filled by the ad-hoc national councils that appeared throughout the capitals cities of the Habsburg empire in its final days, the military situation was far more perilous and far more difficult to rein in. This was an opportunity for Sokol leaders and members to simultaneously prove their loyalty to the state and to Masaryk (now emerging as the *spiritus movens* of the national revolution) *and* enact the military component of the Sokol programme that had until then remained largely theoretical (at least in the Czech lands).

Other factors were at work too. Large parts of society had remained silent until the very last days of the First World War, and large parts had actively participated in the Habsburg war itself (far more, in fact, than had volunteered and fought within the legionary movement). As Jiří Hutečka has shown, the post-1918 fighting became a chance for many people to launder their wartime records of service to the Habsburg empire – or at the very least, hide their non-participation in the national-liberation struggle (Hutečka, 2021). This was true of former Habsburg soldiers who could "remobilise" in the service of the new leaders of the nascent state; it was also true of Sokol members. Here, the patriotic activism of Sokol leaders such as Josef Scheiner, who actively recruited Sokol members to defend the interests of the new state (Waic 2018: 44), merged with the many people who now saw it as politic to place themselves at the service of the new national state. The military conflicts after 1918 presented a chance for Sokol to erase the ambiguities of its Habsburg past and to inscribe the movement into the narrative of patriotic support for the Czechoslovak state. And, of course, it must be said that there were also many within the Sokol movement at the end of the war who welcomed the creation of the new state of Czechoslovakia, who rightly saw its borders and its legitimacy under serious threat during its difficult birth, and who responded to the call to ensure its security and even survival.

After the war, Sokol served as a kind of auxiliary military force that could shore up, at least in part, the military deficit that the new Czechoslovak

authorities faced in the immediate post-war period (Lasovská 1928). In this sense, they were like the veterans of the Czechoslovak legionary movement who were gradually returning to the new state in the period after 1918. And indeed, Sokol leaders in the interwar period would emphasise the ideological links between the Sokol and legionary movements, typically connecting them through Tyrš's ideas about military organisation (see, e.g., Kudela 1923, 1926, 1927; and Jandásek 1923). Josef Jiří Švec, the pre-war Sokol leader who had volunteered to fight for the *Entente* in Russia, was an archetype of this Sokol-legionnaire volunteer, but there were other examples, and this fusion became an avatar of patriotic sacrifice and voluntarism in the interwar republic. This was typically explained as a realisation of Tyrš's ideas on military organisation and sometimes also linked back to the medieval Hussite tradition (see Kudela 1923). These movements were similar also to the paramilitary forces active throughout Europe in this immediate post-war period (Gerwarth and Horne 2012). These groups have been analysed in detail elsewhere, usually with an emphasis on the experience of defeat in the First World War as a factor in continued armed mobilisation. But in the case of Sokol and associated forces, it was rather the desire to secure the gains, the "victory" of the new state, that created a spur towards continued fighting. The security threats faced by the new rulers of Czechoslovakia after 1918 coalesced with the longer-term programme and ideas of Sokol. For Sokol, the crystalising moment, both in practice and in subsequent memory, was the Hungarian Red Army's invasion of Slovakia in May 1919. The invasion was an attempt by the newly installed leader of the Hungarian Republic of Councils Béla Kun to reverse some of the territorial losses the Hungarian nation had suffered after the end of the war. The hope was that the invading armies would find some support not only amongst the Magyar minority in Slovakia but also amongst left-wing Slovaks. The larger strategic goal was to form a territorial link with the Bolshevik forces in the Russian empire (Rychlík 2012: 75). It was in this conflict that Sokol was able to enact its military and political commitment to the new state, put into practice ideas and ideals that had largely been abstractions before 1918, and re-write its history as a *pre-history* of struggle for the realisation of the Czechoslovak state.

A small force of Sokolists was sent into the region and participated in the conflict alongside legionary veterans who had returned from the fronts of the First World War and the nascent national army itself, a composite force of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers/officers fighting alongside legionary veterans (Waic 2018: 52). Sokol itself organised the mobilisation of its members (on a voluntary basis) to serve in Slovakia, although this was initially carried out with the support of the Ministry of National Defence (ATVS 50/5/117). As with other paramilitary forces active in Europe during this period, questions

of morale, motivation, behaviour, and association with regular military forces remain open. The reasons Sokol members took up arms in Slovakia remain relatively unclear, based as they still are on sources produced *ex post facto* (memoirs and other accounts) that are better understood as part of the movement's re-telling of its history to suit the contemporary national and political climate. These sources, both published and unpublished, claimed that participation in the fighting in Slovakia was an expression of Sokol patriotism and voluntarism (see, e.g., ATVS 50/5/145–146). Many likely saw the conflict in Slovakia as a straightforward matter of security and defence of their lands from outside threat. Or at least, this was the reason for fighting offered in veterans' memoirs of this episode (Loubal 1928).

Discipline, behaviour, and the attitude towards violence on the part of Sokolists also remains a difficult matter to accurately assess as is common for most of the auxiliary and paramilitary groups active in Europe after the First World War. Jiří Hutečka (2021) and Ota Konrad and Rudolf Kučera (2022) have written about the violence that attended the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the establishment of the Czechoslovak state at the end of the First World War, showing that former legionnaires and Sokols involved in military action at this time were also involved in acts of violence and criminality against civilians, minorities, the Jewish population, and perceived political opponents of the new national state. Antisemitic rhetoric and representations of the local population and the Hungarian invading army, related to their supposed support for Bolshevism, was also certainly present (ATVS 50/5/117), although it cannot be said to have been a *defining* attitude of Sokol, which is different from such groups active elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe at this time (Gerwarth 2012). As is often the case, the relationship between regular and irregular military forces and their role in violence against civilians also remains unclear. In the Baltic, the Balkans, and indeed other parts of Europe, paramilitary organisations fought alongside regular armies. Their role in violence was often notorious, but whether this was sanctioned by state military institutions or whether this was a matter of poor discipline and a lack of proper command and control protocols is open for debate. The leadership occasionally complained about Sokol volunteers' inexperience, lack of proper training, and lack of equipment, as well as instances of outright theft (ATVS 50/5/129). Minorities were sometimes regarded as disloyal or even treacherous to the new state, in line with the security crises Czechoslovakia confronted (e.g., Germans in Náchod, ATVS 50/5/123).

For some in Sokol, notably the leadership of the movement, the war in Slovakia was a chance to demonstrate the organisation's commitment to anticommunism in the name of the state. The Hungarian Red Army's invasion

of Slovakia threatened not just the borders of the newly formed state but also the political and patriotic principles on which the state was based. These were the principles Sokol leadership had espoused before the war, and those which would become the fundaments of the movement in the interwar period. For Sokol, then, the conflict in Slovakia assumed the character of a political and international crusade, and it was in these terms that their call to volunteer was couched (ATVS 50/5/117).

For many others, though, this renewed period of fighting after 1918 was surely a chance to re-cast individual biographies and indeed the collective story of the Czech lands – from empire to nation. As we have seen, the history of Sokol in the Habsburg period was a complicated and entangled one. This was true also of Czech society and the Czech lands during the First World War. These parts had been mobilised into the Habsburg war effort. For much of the war, many men had served in the Habsburg army, if not with enthusiasm, then at the very least with commitment and dedication (Lein 2014). Sacrifices had been made by Czech society on the home front too. Until the very last stages of the war, anti-imperial nationalist resistance of the kind espoused openly in emigration by Masaryk and clandestinely by groups such as the *Maffie* remained the preserve of a minority of politically active people. It was the final months of the war and the collapse of the Habsburg military together with the cultural mobilisation that completely re-forged Sokol's position. Its patriotic and national credentials pre-dated the war, to be sure, but they were hardly active and significant matters until the very last days.

There were similar dynamics in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe: the lands of successor states such as Poland and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes included large numbers of people who had fought on the "wrong side" during the war years (Newman 2015). But with the strictures of empire gone after 1918, and the continued security concerns faced by the new state thereafter, opportunities arose for many people to demonstrate commitment and loyalty by fighting for the new state. At the individual level, then, the campaign in Slovakia offered an opportunity to re-write personal histories and "prove" loyalty to the new state. This cannot, of course, be entirely separated from the desire to ensure the borders of the new state and its security. Many people who continued fighting after 1918, switching uniforms from the Habsburg army to those of the new national state (in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere) undoubtedly did so because they continued to think first and foremost of the safety and security of their immediate community and homes.

Sokol recruitment and fighting at this stage was likely a combination of all the factors cited above: a drive organised by men like Scheiner and others who had been at what was now the forefront of the fight for national liberation

against empire. But theirs was a call answered not just by unwavering anti-imperialists and patriots but also by those who understood the new times and wanted to make sure they stayed on the right side of them, as well as those who simply saw the seriousness of the threats that the new state was facing.

Institutionally, this became a defining moment for Sokol. If individuals could re-narrate their biographies through participation in the military struggle at war's end, the same was true to a large extent for Sokol. As we have seen, the history of the movement already featured significant moments of confrontation with the Habsburg authorities, increasing in the years leading up to the First World War and in a sense culminating with their disbandment in the war years. As the new state sought a pre-history that could explain its national emancipation in 1918, movements like Sokol were perfect examples of patriotic Czech/Czechoslovak organisation and mobilisation before the creation of the state. The wartime struggle – epitomised by Masaryk, the legionary movement, and by Sokol itself – contributed to this kind of national story. It was not even that this was entirely a fabrication, since there were undoubtedly many in the Sokol leadership and membership that thought in these terms. It was more that this version of Sokol and national history elided the more ambiguous elements of the association's history and its complex relationship with the Habsburg authorities. Sokol's story post-1918 was strictly Manichean, posing its own "national" history as the essential adversary and ultimate victor over empire. The same was true of many state institutions and official narratives in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere.

The Slovak campaign had additional important dimensions. Slovakia and its integration into Czechoslovakia represented both opportunity and challenge. It was an opportunity because it gave Sokol a chance to expand and enlarge its associational network and its work into the Slovak lands after 1918 as well as promote its programme unimpeded by imperial rule. This was, of course, part of the patriotic state-forming "national work" to which Sokol was committed. It was a challenge because in Slovakia, Sokol's roots were shallower than they were in the Czech lands, a difficulty acknowledged by the Sokol leadership and explained in highly teleological terms. Slovakia, unlike the Czech lands, had been under Hungarian rule, the strictures of which had prevented the natural development of national life in the country (Pauliny 1928: 3–4; Kraus 1934: 10–11). Consequently, Sokol's job in Slovakia would be to accelerate the national development of these territories and their population and to guide Slovakia towards a position of parity with the remainder of the country (i.e., with the Czech lands). Sokol's national programme and its local organisation could achieve this goal, just as it had in the Czech lands before the war. Opportunity in this sense went hand in hand with the challenges of state-forming. In 1919,

this made the war in Slovakia an added impetus for many Sokol leaders and members for here was an opportunity to fight the communist threat, establish a Sokol presence in Slovakia through force of arms, and defend the newly unified state from external threats.

There was a paternalist presumption in the language and attitude of the Czechoslovak Sokol towards Slovakia in the interwar period, a sense that these lands carried a deficit vis-à-vis the Czech centre, a deficit caused by a historical departure that could be rectified through strenuous voluntarist work of the kind Sokol was involved in. There are also suggestive points of comparison with other territories in the new nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe deemed culturally, economically, or politically "peripheral" by the national capitals. Kathryn Ciancia has shown, for example, how Volhynia was similarly perceived by Polish nationalists and patriots as a region of both opportunity and challenge, one in which cultural and national work was a necessary remedy to the evident shortcomings of the lands (Ciancia 2021). This adds weight to Pieter Judson's insight that the new states of East Central Europe resembled "little empires" as much as they did nation-states (Judson 2016: 451). Those attitudes were more plainly visible in Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, the de facto economic and territorial periphery of the new Czechoslovak state (Rychlík and Rychlíková 2016). In Slovakia, Sokol attitudes were, in fact, a combination of the longer-term traditions of "franchise" expansion coupled with a Czech-centric understanding of the new "Czechoslovak" national culture, one in which state-forming principles emanated outwards from the Czech lands and were, if not imposed, then certainly introduced into the non-Czech lands, typically by Czechs themselves. The new Czechoslovak Sokol Association was, thus, simultaneously a continuation of the nineteenth-century Sokol expansion that had originated in the late-Habsburg empire *and* an example of the post-1918 Czechoslovak state-forming culture.

Interwar Memorialisation

After 1918, the Czechoslovak Sokol became and remained closely aligned with the state-forming culture of interwar Czechoslovakia, adopting the Masarykian principles of the new state, and attempting to disseminate those principles across the territory of the country through programmatic and national doctrine and through organisation and mobilisation at the local and regional levels (Dimond 2007; see also Křovák 1927). The Czechoslovak Sokol Association's attempts to mobilise the population of the new state met with notable (but

also qualified) success, and it became an important sponsor of mass political and social mobilisation throughout the interwar period, boasting important structural and personnel ties to national institutions and being embedded in large parts of Czechoslovak society (Čechurová and Šedivý 2018: 351). The Czechoslovak Sokol Association, thus, belongs in the intermediate space of semi-official and semi-private associational initiatives that historians are beginning to identify as an important arena of political and national life in the interwar successor states of the East Central Europe (see, e.g., the Yugoslav example in Giomi and Petrungaro 2019).

Most importantly, the leaders of the Czechoslovak Sokol Association in the interwar period were able to promote the idea that they and their organisation's membership had been at the heart of the national-liberation struggle against the Habsburg empire and the Central Powers, aligned with émigré and domestic resistance groups and active participants in it – with particular emphasis on the military struggle. That put the association at the centre of the commemorative "culture of victory" of the First Republic, a culture that was inscribed in the programmatic statements of the association, performed in the public displays of gymnastics at the association's *Slets*, and commemorated in its publications. Indeed, the increased activity and organisation of the Czechoslovak Sokol in the interwar period also extended to its published outputs, wherein the association's leaders and members were able to narrate the history of their movement so that it could fit seamlessly into the larger teleology of the Czechoslovak state's birth through national struggle. Characteristic of this interpretation was Scheiner's 1931 speech at Lucerna hall in Prague (at the Club of the National Democrats), in which he praised Sokol for its role in the liberation of Czechoslovakia and linked its spirit of national struggle somewhat anachronistically back to the spirit of the 1848 revolution in Prague (Scheiner 1934)

This was the period – as noted in the article's introduction – of a massive boom in Sokol activities, publications, commemorations. This growth was, of course, in part because the removal of the Habsburg empire also removed the fetters that had previously hampered Sokol's organisation. Thus, the proliferation of Sokol branches throughout the country in the interwar period, as well as the association's international organisation, was a partial reflection of Sokol's organisational capacities, which were now operating to optimal extent and with the support of the state. The close alignment of the Czechoslovak Sokol Association with the institutions and leaders of the state translated into significant logistical and material support, allowing for the construction of new Sokol halls throughout the country, typically in the functionalist style. The flagship national projects were the Tyršov dům at Mala Strana in

Prague (opened in 1925) and the Great Strahov stadium on Petřín hill (whose renovation was completed in 1932). These large-scale architectural projects were the physical manifestation of both the Czechoslovak Sokol Association's ambitions for mass mobilisation and its patronage by the state. Indeed, the political and military leadership of the interwar republic were also typically prominent members of the association. This included Masaryk himself, whose ideas and biography (especially his émigré work during the First World War) made him an inspirational archetype of Sokol's ideals (Křovák 1927).

The interwar period also created an opportunity for Sokol to narrate its own history, and it did so through the hyperproduction of publications describing in detail the histories of the movement at the national and local levels. Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s, practically every single existing branch of Sokol produced a commemorative history that told of the branch's formation, its expansion and evolution, its role in the establishment of the state, and its activities since "liberation" in 1918. These histories represent a minor genre of writing about Sokol in their own right, emphasising as they did the milestones of the movement's pre-war organisation and expansion, meticulously recording membership figures and the names of "elders" and prominent leaders. In this way, the Czechoslovak Sokol Association was established through its commemorative publications as a historical "anchor" for its existence in the interwar state. And these histories were characteristically presentist, with one eye on the present and future tasks of state-forming, tasks in which Sokol was to play a prominent role, as we have seen.

In parts of the state where the Sokol tradition had shallower roots, such as Slovakia (or Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia), different emphases were placed on the past and present of the association. In Slovakia, the pre-war organisational deficit was typically explained as a consequence of the limited opportunities for national and Czechoslovak mobilisation in the Hungarian Kingdom (Pauliny 1928: 3–4). This, then, also justified the greater need for Sokol presence and mobilisation in these lands in the interwar period. Now, in the new state, Sokol voluntarism could bridge the existing gap between the Czech lands and the rest of the country caused by different historical experiences of the pre-war period. It was, as we have seen, in line with the paternalist attitude of many Czechs towards Slovakia in the interwar period. Sokol's role in defending Slovakia from the Hungarian invasion in 1919 was also commemorated with particular emphasis in Slovak Sokol branches and their publications. Most of these branches were newly formed after 1918, and they typically bore the imprint of the Czechoslovak state-building project. A case in point: the flagship branch in Nitra was housed in the "Masaryk National House" (Klaus 1928).

Arguably, with the immediate threats to the state's borders and security subsiding after 1920, the Czechoslovak Sokol Association's role shifted from contributing to the "culture of victory" in the "greater war" to matters of state and societal legitimacy throughout the interwar period. This was a role played willingly and with considerable enthusiasm by Sokol in the 1920s and 1930s. Sokol narrated its story in its published works, but also re-enacted it through its public displays in the interwar period. The years of conflict were presented as something of a culmination. The First World War and its aftermath became the foundational "epic" of the creation of the Czechoslovak state. It was here that its values and identity were forged. The struggle against the Habsburg empire, which ended in the absolute victory of the Czechoslovak nation, was enacted by legionnaires, Sokol, and by Masaryk and the new state elites from 1914 onwards. Their stories, which were mass produced and replicated in the interwar state, gave Czechoslovak society models of anti-imperialism and the long struggle for national emancipation. Sokol had fulfilled its destiny, but it was a destiny manufactured through the circumstances in which the Czechoslovak state was created in the immediate post-war period, and only thereafter was it cast backwards and re-inscribed as a primordial element of the association.

Nevertheless, Sokol and its membership became an important pillar of the new state's political and national legitimacy in the interwar period, offering a key example of a voluntarist association and activity that was emulated by many of the state's citizens, and indeed by a new generation as the new state entered its second decade of existence. In the 1930s, new security and legitimacy threats emerged, including, fatally, those posed by Nazi Germany. These were threats against which Sokol and its leadership wished to remain vigilant, and when a new war came to Czechoslovakia in 1939, it is worth noting that Sokol members played a pivotal role in the clandestine anti-Axis resistance under occupation. Their important and honourable work in shoring up the security and legitimacy of the interwar state and of defending it under occupation warrants a separate study.

Conclusion

Sokol's self-ascribed role in the national-liberation struggle of the war years and as a pillar of the First Republic's state and society could be described as embellished reality. Typically, Sokol's story insisted upon a *tabula rasa* in 1918 and an absolute and non-negotiable separation between the imperial and national states; a move meant to imply that the state was both peaceable *and* a

product of the legitimate will of the vast majority of its citizens. But whilst the association's membership and network of local branches did indeed proliferate after the end of the First World War, it is also true that in its inception, the Sokol movement's organisational structure was, to a considerable extent, located in the tradition of the civil and semi-private associational life of the late Habsburg state. And whilst it was also true that Sokol had a mass following and membership in the interwar period, considerably larger than it had before the First World War, the distribution of Sokol membership and local chapters was concentrated largely in the Czech lands, with considerably less activity and interest in other parts of the new state.

None of this entirely negates the post-1918 association's claims that it enjoyed broad appeal, was a nationalist organisation, and that it had participated in the anti-Habsburg struggle before and during the First World War. But it does qualify these claims and show that state/society relations and the post-imperial transition were more far more complicated and ambiguous than the straightforward way they were often articulated. In line with the patriotic narratives of Czechoslovakia and the other victor states of East Central Europe, Sokol presented 1918 as the culmination of a long struggle for national liberation, a struggle in which Sokol had played a central role and was involved from the very beginning. But that narrative does not really hold true any further back than the final year of the war and the subsequent conflicts in the immediate post-war period. This was the moment when Sokol became an active participant in the establishment and defence of the new state. The groundwork for Sokol's successes in organisation and mobilisation had been laid in the Habsburg period, but its adversarial stance towards empire is not wholly evident. This, too, accounts for the Sokol leadership's enthusiastic participation in the war in Slovakia in 1919 as it gave the organisation a chance to prove its importance in the patriotic struggle for Czechoslovakia and to prepare for the impending work of state building, especially in Slovakia itself. These were the moments that defined Sokol's place at the heart of civil and official society in the interwar republic.

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