**Cultivating the ‘aristocracy of the spirit’: the Sokol movement in late imperial Russia**

‘“All for one – and one for all!” The festivities of these days have shown to us first hand how this motto has become part of the flesh and blood of the Czechs, an indestructible bond between them’. Such were the evocative terms with which legal scholar, liberal politician and Sokol activist V. D. Kuz’min-Karavaev described the Czech Sokol (Falcon) in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.[[1]](#endnote-1) The Sokol was a nationalist gymnastic organization founded in Prague in 1862 by Dr. Miroslav Tyrš. It was a highly significant form of social organization that spread throughout Europe; in Claire Nolte’s words, the Sokol ‘played a central role in transforming Czech nationalism into a mass movement’.[[2]](#endnote-2) By 1900 dozens of branches had been established across Europe and in North America, together comprising tens of thousands of members.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Nolte has surmised, to founders like Tyrš and Josef Scheiner the Sokol represented an ideal of ‘training for the nation’.[[4]](#endnote-4) The Sokol drew on practices pioneered by the German gymnastics (Turnverein) movement in the mid-nineteenth century, but used these to reach a wide demographic. Sokol clubs merged nationalist values with interests in gymnastics and health, with activists perceiving the groups to have a function of training the national community.

The Sokol in the Czech lands reached vast proportions. By the 1930s, Sokol clubs had a huge membership, numbering in the hundreds of thousands: a true attestation of their social dynamism and popular relevance. Before this however, Sokol clubs had spread to other parts of Europe, and had also appeared in the Russian Empire. But the extent of their influence in the Russian Empire appears at first glance to be small, and there is no more than fleeting reference to the Sokol phenomenon here in the general literature on the movement.[[5]](#endnote-5) What does appear tends to downplay its significance. Scholar of the Czech lands Paul Vyšný remarked that the Sokol in Russia made surprisingly little headway given the status of Russia among the ranks of Slavic states – though a large nation, its Sokol movement was relatively small.[[6]](#endnote-6) As a result the Sokol movement in Russia has not received detailed or sustained scholarly attention.

On the contrary, we can see that Russia occupied an important position in what activists considered to be the international mission of the Sokol. Shortly after the Czech movement had been founded Tyrš speculated on the possibility of a much larger Pan-Slavic Sokol movement that would include many Russian members. This interest was only natural given Russia’s status as the leading Slavic nation in terms of size and geopolitical influence. In 1867, a mere five years after the formation of the Czech Sokol, a group of activists made a pilgrimage to Moscow to encourage support for a Russian Sokol movement. During 1870 in Mirhošt in Western Ukraine a Czech community founded two Sokol clubs, including one devoted to equestrianism.[[7]](#endnote-7) However, activity was very slow for a few decades afterwards. What changed this were internal developments in Russia that provided public space for Sokol formation, the key event being the revolution of 1905. Sergei Witte, Russia’s Prime Minister, issued the October Manifesto that year which promised a series of concessions.[[8]](#endnote-8) Among these were new laws of religious toleration, the restriction of the previously ‘indivisible’ powers of the autocrat, and lifting the ban on political group formation. During the nineteenth century suspicions of autonomous group formation on the part of the third section, the political police, had stopped the formation of a large Russian Sokol movement. Like the situation in the Czech lands, the liberalization of public life facilitated a larger Sokol movement: clubs spread across the land when given a greater degree of freedom.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Thereafter a much more rapid development of the Russian movement can be observed. By late 1909 total membership of the Russian movement numbered around 6,000-7,000, with dozens of clubs across different regions of the empire.[[10]](#endnote-10) The Union of Russian Sokols was established in 1910; according to one estimate, by the end of the year the Union encompassed 28 different groups from across the Russian Empire.[[11]](#endnote-11) By 1912-13 branches had been established in towns and cities including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Odessa, Ekaterinodar, Nizhnii-Novgorod, Syvechka, Kazan, Khabarovsk, Kursk, Tula, Orel, Astrakhan’, Tiflis and Warsaw.[[12]](#endnote-12) In spite of being separated by hundreds of miles groups frequently communicated with each other, as reported in the organization’s journal Sokol (published 1910-14).[[13]](#endnote-13) A retrospective in the Soviet journal Chasovoi on the development of Russian youth organizations estimated that there were 36 Sokol groups with 5,000 members by 1 January 1914.[[14]](#endnote-14) A report from the journal Vestnik Russkogo sokol’stvo from January 1914 claimed that there were 58 Sokol branches in Russia, with a total membership of 7,000-8,000.[[15]](#endnote-15) Moreover Russian Sokol societies organized large domestic congresses: the first Congress of the Union of Russian Sokol met in Moscow in 1911, and a large gathering of Russian groups took place in Kiev during 1913.[[16]](#endnote-16) Clubs were also active in the international congresses of the Sokol movement. Though small in contrast to the Sokol in the Czech lands that numbered around 150,000 by 1912, this was nevertheless a sizeable number of people. Specific data on who joined is unavailable, but extant evidence gives the distinct impression that many activists were students and professionals who lived in urban parts of the Russian Empire.

What was, then, driving this activity? Freedom to organize was now available to an unprecedented extent, but to understand how and why the Sokol became more popular, a close consideration of the logic behind the movement needs to be undertaken. On this point the literature is rich and gives panoply of insights. A report on 2 May 1909 in the main hall of the gentry Assembly in St. Petersburg, delivered to an expectant delegation numbering scores of activists, gives a clear indication of what motivated them. The four central preoccupations were: improving levels of physical fitness in members; strengthening and re-enforcing ‘willpower’; developing bonds between members, and inculcating concepts of self-sacrifice and service to the nation.[[17]](#endnote-17) The First Congress of the Union of Russian Sokols set forth the following four points as stated by the leading member of the St. Petersburg-based Sokol I, the physician Dr. L. P. Nikitin, in April 1911:

1. The highest aim of the Sokol movement is the idea of Slavic brotherhood and striving for the physical, moral and spiritual improvement of the people in the contemporary age.
2. The Sokol must be composed from and unite all different peoples in the Russian Empire, for the good and well being of Russia as a great Slavic state.
3. Respect for the principle of democracy and a love for one’s neighbour, understanding of citizenship, the general will of society and, of course, altruism are all basic principles of the Sokol.
4. The Sokol also aims for progress in terms of the spirit of the people and will remain a cultural institution, devoid of all political associations.[[18]](#endnote-18)

This article will examine these central principles, drawing on unexamined journals and pamphlets, not least the Sokol’s own literature. It will assess how Sokol clubs reflected growing interests in gymnastics and conceptions of anti-sport exercise; the strength of nationalism in late imperial Russia; and, finally, the international aspect: the pan-Slavic ideology espoused by many activists had implications outside of Russia’s borders, and impacted on the transnational mission of the Federation of Slavic Sokols (established in 1910). The analysis focuses on 1909-14, the peak years of development and group activity. For the Czech Sokol, the basic principles laid down by founders were followed by all of their successors before 1914. In contrast, no one person emerged as leader of the Russian movement.[[19]](#endnote-19) The Russian Sokol, hitherto unexamined, represents an excellent case study of mass activism in late imperial Russia: gymnastic festivals and social organization were ways of enthusing the national community with a spirit of civic patriotism.[[20]](#endnote-20)

*The Sokol’s mission*

Taking first the claims for ‘physical, moral and spiritual improvement’, the search to create a healthier nation was a major prerogative of the Russian groups, one that had been adopted from branches in the Czech lands. Worldwide public interest in sport and physical culture was growing at the start of the twentieth century. With greater amounts of leisure time at their disposal, sports became increasingly popular hobbies, especially amongst the urban middle classes. A large number of sports clubs had sprung up in urban Russia, including for football, tennis, cycling, weightlifting, running and a large number of other pursuits.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Sokol clubs also provided an alternative space for physical recreation: activists often made reference to sporting activities in their journals. In particular, they admired the aesthetic qualities of mass sporting activities. Sports were in one sense to be admired – they provided a forum for fitness and the popularity of sports should be observed; activists were not blind to their appeal, and saw elements of the sporting message could be utilized. But Sokol clubs had a different emphasis. Like the Czech groups, callisthenic activities and nationalist values merged to create organizations that provided an opportunity for the entire community to take part in ritualized gymnastic activities making a social and moral statement. Literature is full of examples of this mission statement: Nikitin, writing in the organization’s main journal, argued that gymnastics enhanced morality, spirituality and physical development in members. Sport, in contrast, he viewed as an intrinsically combative affair that would create group disharmony. In contrast gymnastics instilled discipline and order, uniting members around collective principles and forging a group mentality. This did not mean sports should be ignored: realizing the popularity of mass athletics and internationalization, Nikitin cited the example of the Olympic games in Rome as one model.[[22]](#endnote-22) He thought that activities merging physical recreation with nationalist ideals should be applied to a contemporary context.[[23]](#endnote-23)

But callisthenics were invested with a distinct purpose of making better citizens. Conceptions of anti-sport exercise were central to the movement, and harmonious development through gymnastics was stressed alongside the potential physiological and psychological enhancement of members. Kuz’min-Karavaev agreed that Sokol clubs saw the ideal Russian ‘citizen’ as enlightened, both intellectually and spiritually.[[24]](#endnote-24) Another leader, Georgii Nikoladze, spoke of creating an ‘aristocracy of the spirit’ in its members, meaning the creation of an elevated psychological state due to members’ emphasis on gymnastics, physical health and culture.[[25]](#endnote-25) Ritualized public activities were the primary mechanism through which to forge group solidarity and attract new members: in staging parades, choirs and marches, Russian clubs adopted the practices of the German gymnastic leagues formed in the mid-nineteenth century such as the Turnverein, and were a close reflection of their counterparts in the Czech lands. These ideas were not in themselves particularly original, but had been adopted from other lands and adapted to the Russian context.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The emphasis on adopting gymnastic exercises that controlled all movements, focusing on speed, co-ordination and harmony was one adopted from the Czech forebears of the movement. The range of movements and processes this vision encompassed was quite broad, including basic, everyday exercises and more intricate gymnastic activities.[[27]](#endnote-27) In one article on breathing published in the journal Sokol in mid-1914, including extensive supplementary illustrations and instructions, it is apparent Sokol organizers were particularly concerned about the development of nervousness and neuroses in Russia’s students. To restore what was seen as the ‘correct’ levels of calm, members needed to get back to basics – controlling their physicality, and, in particular, controlling the body. In this regard, the Russian Sokol reflected a wider European interest in discipline, rationality and the ordering of public life. The Russian Sokol also drew inspiration from elsewhere, particularly Swedish gymnastic movements such as the Ling school which emphasized breathing.[[28]](#endnote-28)

As well as this focus on individual health, Sokol clubs in Russia, like those in other Slavic states, wanted to use ritualized gymnastic activities to enthuse the entire community. Sokol leaders such as Ruben Mirimanian desired to intellectually and culturally develop the Russian citizen, but emphasized this was not merely a case of individual self-improvement.[[29]](#endnote-29) To create such a citizen, Sokol clubs involved their members in collective physical training exercises. N. Izmailov, a member of Sokol I in St. Petersburg, claimed the Sokol was for ‘the development of all sides of our members, for the strengthening of all of our people’.[[30]](#endnote-30) To such leaders the pursuit of an enlightened, healthy citizenry formed part of a search for national restoration.[[31]](#endnote-31) Mirimanian emphasized the movement’s purpose for ‘giving to the motherland strong citizens with a healthy spirit’, meaning the physical training the movement provided was in pursuit of a greater ideal of strengthening the Russian nation.[[32]](#endnote-32) This is what inspired leading activists to form clubs, who wanted a ‘healthy spirit in a healthy body’.[[33]](#endnote-33)

 In order to attract what would become thousands of members to the movement, there would need to be a sense of urgency and moral purpose. In the Russian context, the frenzied pace of modernity as seen from comparatively late but rapid urbanization, the appearance of radical political groups, and the debate over cultural Westernization had vexed many observers. Like a number of thinkers in fin-de-siècle Russia, Sokol activists pointed to decadence and a lack of morality as being widespread, with ritualized gymnastics their preferred antidote to this modern sickness.[[34]](#endnote-34) Members thought that academic education had been over-emphasized in Russian schools in contrast to physical fitness, with this oversight leaving many students nervous and unable to concentrate on their studies. One editorial in Sokol wanted an increased emphasis on physical education to combat a neurosis epidemic in Russia’s students.[[35]](#endnote-35) It claimed:

In our society, we now hear many speeches criticizing defence of this weakness, and the separation, in both our middle and higher schools, of physical development from other types of training right at the outset of one’s education. All of these are based on the idea that nervousness and physical illness have, in recent times, resulted in cases of suicide – physical development and rational gymnastic exercises are closely related. Many voices now loudly proclaim, “our children are our future!” and “healthy children are a healthy people”. We are pleased to hear similar speeches! But, even so, what we need to do right now in society is to raise the level of development of both physical education and will.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Many Sokol activists were worried by the rise of what they perceived as an epidemic of neuroses and illnesses amongst Russian youth. A prominent motif was the idea of contagion. To give a few illustrative examples, one activist, Ia. V. Vagner, in his report on the ‘aims of the Sokol’ utilized sickness metaphors, commenting on the spread of illnesses amongst Russians, such as nervous illnesses, but also tuberculosis and other epidemics. He claimed this had led to an alarming rate of physical decline in Russian youth. Stress was one outcome, but the most urgent problem was youth suicide; activists like Vagner claimed a suicide wave resulted due to the lack of physical training offered in Russian schools.[[37]](#endnote-37) The discipline and order that Sokol clubs invested in their members was therefore an urgent requirement. One representative article in Sokol written under a pseudonym ‘De Ka’ claimed what was needed was a more holistic educational environment that took into account physical, intellectual and spiritual development. Dissatisfaction with Russian education policies stimulated the growth of the movement; particularly, activists were inspired by an idea that Sokol clubs were an alternative to an inert educational establishment: groups were seen as a possible corrective that could lead to a stronger, more alert nation, with fewer suicides and pathologies.[[38]](#endnote-38)

 This interest in the development of Russian youth – indeed, a desire to urgently protect it – shows that students and younger people were an important part of the social base of the Russian Sokol, and a group that clubs sought to appeal to.[[39]](#endnote-39) But who were the Sokol activists? It is difficult to be specific, as membership lists are unavailable for Russian Sokol clubs (unlike for the Czech movement). The social origins of leaders, as opposed to activists, are easier to identify: they tended to be from the professional middle classes, and included doctors, lawyers and politicians.[[40]](#endnote-40) Literature such as newspapers and journals is one source of evidence, though it is overall impressionistic. Young people were often mentioned – Sokol clubs were often established at or near schools, for instance, in Kursk – and we can be sure that many came from the urban middle classes.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Social unity included both sexes, and Russian Sokol clubs sought to include women as a central part of the movement. Unlike the Czech Sokol, which barred women from club membership until 1892, women were allowed to become full-fledged members of the Russian Sokol from the unofficial creation of the movement in 1899-1900. L. P. Nikitin spoke of fostering qualities of ‘will’ in both men and women for the St. Petersburg branches.[[42]](#endnote-42) Mirimanian agreed, claiming that the Sokol would draw together both ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’.[[43]](#endnote-43) This was reflected in the practices of the movement – the Russian delegation to the 1912 slet(congress) held in Prague included both men and women. The role afforded to women in the Czech Sokol was apparent in the activities of women in the Russian movement too.[[44]](#endnote-44) Women were heavily involved in the activity of provincial branches of the movement within the Russian Empire, which opened up dozens of women-only sections throughout the 1910s in order to achieve the goal of uniting men and women under the banner of Sokol nationalism. Gymnastic activities were also aimed at women and based around established local traditions, as in the cases of the women’s dances at the Orel branch. The influence of the Czech movement was once more prevalent: the polka, which had originated in Bohemia in the mid-nineteenth century, was one of the main forms of recreation in this women’s Sokol.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Women undertook many of the same activities as male branches, such as gymnastic activities, parades and choirs; one example was the Kursk group, which appeared to contain a score of female members.[[46]](#endnote-46) Yet representation did not mean equality: there was a clear contrast between what leader envisaged as implicitly feminized activities, such as delivering textiles and shoes to members at the 1912 slet, with the debates occurring amongst the all-male leadership involving pressing social and political issues of the day.[[47]](#endnote-47) Volunteer work and charity organizations were considered to be the preserve of female members of the movement and, though women became involved in a variety of local activities, these reflected the genteel role thought befitting of the middle-class women who represented the membership of the clubs. Conversely women were less prominent amongst the highest echelons of the movement, with the leaders of the major clubs all men – as demonstrated by quotes from leaders selected for this analysis.[[48]](#endnote-48) Thus, women were included yet marginalized, conducting activities invested with importance but not linked to the most urgent contemporary problems. Female involvement was considered important, yet desires for equality were not prevalent.

*Domestic development*

The Sokol’s nationalism was a key element of the clubs and needs to come under scrutiny. In the Russian Sokol, a nationalist appeal of ‘love for motherland’ was stressed alongside attachment to the community.[[49]](#endnote-49) Some described Russia as a great nation and this emotive view of Russian history was deeply prevalent: Sokol clubs in Russia, like those in the Czech lands, were attracted to romantic myths of heroism, in this case events such as the Patriotic War against Napoleon in 1812 as well as of individual feats like those of the frontier explorer Vladimir Skobelev, who opened up vistas into large parts of Asia.[[50]](#endnote-50) This romantic passion can be seen in the words of Kuz’min-Karavaev, who strongly believed the Sokol mission was one in service of the nation. He added that a ‘will for the movement’ needed to be developed (the term ‘will’ appears frequently: Arthur Schopenhauer was one influence), and, like many Russian nationalists in the period, he spoke out against Russia’s bureaucracy and what he saw as its corrupting influences.[[51]](#endnote-51)

A curious aspect of Russian nationalism, noted by Geoffrey Hosking, was that though there was a Russian Empire there was no Russian nation, with national consciousness in large parts of the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional empire weakly developed.[[52]](#endnote-52) Hence, a mass nationalist movement faced special challenges in Russia, sparking a series of debates about the future direction of the nation. Nationalism and politics were closely intertwined; a range of heuristic approaches was used to support the view that Sokol clubs were fundamentally not political. The First Congress of the Union of Russian Sokols, meeting in Moscow in April 1911, claimed that the Sokol was ‘a […] cultural institution, and felt horror towards all political thoughts’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Russian clubs claimed that Tyrš brought a democratic and liberal spirit to the Czech Sokol, and leaders spoke out against what they described as ‘extreme’ politics from both the left and the right.[[54]](#endnote-54) It is significant that the leaders of the Russian Sokol, like those in the Czech lands, often had liberal, nationalist politics. Kuz’min-Karavaev, active in the Constitutional Democrat (Kadet) party until 1917, was one such figure; Nikitin was another. Professional people, these leaders were strongly opposed to left-wing organization, and outright rejected socialism and socialist doctrines. More delicate was their relationship with contemporary nationalisms, though some activists described the Sokol as rejecting ‘extreme’ (meaning unacceptable or unpopular) nationalist ideas. Instead, they sought to appropriate nationalism into the liberal and democratic political structure which had been followed by many leading figures in nineteenth-century nationalism such as Guiseppe Garibaldi.

As seen from the above aims, whether Sokol clubs were cultural or political was a pressing question. It is of course possible to be both but the primary emphasis mattered in this context: political groups were illegal in Russia before 1905, and, for several decades following the appearance of the two Sokol clubs in 1870, the development of the Russian Sokol was prohibited due to such associations. Though Sokol clubs were not insurrectionist organizations, their presence as non-dynastic nationalist groups with a collectivist ideology stressing unity between members made them suspect to the tsarist state.[[55]](#endnote-55) Furthermore, there was a contention amongst members about what the precise purpose of Sokol clubs actually was. A typical argument was that Sokol clubs were themselves ‘apolitical’, a common rhetorical device of conservative organizations throughout history.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Putting it bluntly, Mirimanian wrote ‘here in the Sokol we do not know politics! These people [nationalists] are ready to recruit from all over the land, from those who have not recognized their warlike ideas. But these are not made up from foreigners, or Poles, nor even from Russians, but only from ultra-Slavic chauvinists’.[[57]](#endnote-57) There were of course many views within the movement; citing another activist, Georgii Nikoladze, whose tract on the ‘idea of the Russian Sokol’ he criticized as excessively nationalistic, Mirimanian claimed that chauvinists had hijacked the Sokol movement; instead, the movement needed to promote a message of peace and solidarity amongst all Slavic nations.[[58]](#endnote-58) Mirimanian claimed that politics and chauvinism compromised such aims and had no place in the Sokol movement, adding that such views did not represent the true aims of Sokol members. In addition, he claimed that the most important watchword for the movement was ‘brotherhood’.[[59]](#endnote-59) The ideal citizen, he added, would not be a Slavic chauvinist, a tendency that was fundamentally destructive.[[60]](#endnote-60) Other leaders concurred with this assessment: Kuz’min-Karavaev observing the Sokol’s activity claimed that ‘Russian nationalism has been discredited. It has been through many unclean hands’.[[61]](#endnote-61)

 N. Izmailov based at the Sokol I group in St. Petersburg concurred that Sokol groups had been infiltrated by Russian chauvinists who held unacceptable ideas such as the ‘obscene’ formulation that ‘the Russian Sokol was only for Russians!’ Izmailov criticized these ‘extreme’ activists, and claimed that they should break away from the main body of the movement and create their own groups under the guise of a ‘party of a purely Russian Sokol’. It was claimed these people were out of step with the ultimate aim of the movement, which was to spread unity beyond national borders and unite all Slavic peoples, whether ‘true Russians’ or not.[[62]](#endnote-62) Specifically criticizing the political manifestations of nationalism, he added ‘we do not recognize the nationalism and national culture which brings to the Sokol politics and politicians who bring discordant notes – these have no place in the Sokol’.[[63]](#endnote-63) The suggestion that Sokol were necessarily ‘apolitical’ can though be treated with a degree of caution – one of the main aims of Sokol groups within Russia, their commitment to Pan-Slavism, was closely tied to political concerns. The ‘apolitical’ nature of clubs was though continually pushed forward as a theme, possibly with the aim of making Sokol groups less suspect for the state and more appealing to join for potential members, many of who were not possibly not strongly political.

Even so, the Sokol’s appearance elsewhere in Europe inspired some on Russia’s radical right. Vladimir Purishkevich, the leader of the far right organization the Union of the Archangel Mikhail (UAM), drew inspiration from the Czech Sokol and Miroslav Tyrš. One 1912 issue of the UAM’s monthly journal, Priamoi put’, dedicated part of its student section to ‘school Sokol activities’, and came accompanied with photos that shown the engagement of youth members in ritualized gymnastics – a clear indicator of the group’s desire to emulate the Sokol.[[64]](#endnote-64) But the founders of Russian groups were quick to distance themselves from the radical right and portray groups as ‘above politics’. One activist, S. O. Konichek, described the distinction between the Sokol and politics as follows. Key to his view was Slavic unity:

Right-wing newspapers (Realm, Bell, Russian Flag and others) are not lovers of the Sokol, it is ‘red’ to them, but for left [newspapers] (Speech, Russian Messenger and others) they see it as a ‘dark’ group like all other nationalists. All of these groups are opposed (though for different reasons) to the all-Slavic idea, and have not come to understand the point of the Sokol movement: they have not come to appreciate its truth. This is what makes us different to our enemies.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Suspicion of organized politics was a continuous feature of Sokol discourse and a number of prominent members stated that ‘chauvinistic’ nationalism was to be opposed. Ruben Mirimanian rejected Russian ultra-nationalism as an unacceptable outcome of Pan-Slavic idealism. Mirimanian was in a difficult position: how to espouse Pan-Slavic aims and decry what he saw as the unacceptable extremism that followed this variant of nationalism.

The importance of unity between Slavs, a key idea, can be illustrated by reference to the problem of Ukrainian nationalism which vexed many members. The emergence of a more organized ‘little Russian’ lobby in the Ukrainian territories towards the end of the nineteenth century worried those who sought to strengthen the Russian imperial project.[[66]](#endnote-66) Fearful of nationalist separatism within the empire, including also Polish nationalism, Sokol members were concerned that Russia and Ukraine might split. They wanted to see all Slavic peoples united and the Russian Empire strengthened. Kuz’min-Karavaev claimed that unity on the Russian borderlands was in the balance.[[67]](#endnote-67) S. O. Konichek added:

In the Slavic Sokol today, the Russian Sokol plays a very important role. The Russian language can be used by Slavs as the language of Pan-Slavism, and this is extremely important due to contemporary agitation which today comes from the little Russian population and especially the “Ukrainian” language’.

Like many Russian nationalists, Konichek rejected the civic definition of Russian (Rossiiskoi), or Russian by nationality, in favour of an ethnic definition of Russianness, or Russian by ethnicity (Russkii).[[68]](#endnote-68) Even so, Mirimanian called for unity, desiring to ‘unite brothers and sisters under one banner, for the defence of the autocracy’.[[69]](#endnote-69) In uniting all Slavic peoples, Mirimanian realized ideas would need to cross national borders. Nikolai Izmailov, another leader of the Sokol I group in St. Petersburg, claimed that the Sokol wanted to unify Slavic peoples from all over the world, that its ideas were of ‘all world significance’, and cultural unity was to be pursued on behalf of all peoples in the Russian Empire as well as the Russians.[[70]](#endnote-70)

 The complex relationship to nationalism and nationalist politics had important implications for the Sokol’s domestic activity. Though wishing to preserve the unity of the empire, leaders tended to adopt an enlightened nationalism different from the autocratic absolutism of the Russian state. This can at least partially explain why the Sokol did not gain the support of the Russian establishment. The Sokol relied on internal resources to strengthen and reinforce the movement: it did not receive funding from the Russian state. Indeed members talked about ‘democracy’, though this was in all probability a call for collectivism and mass involvement rather than a genuine desire for more representative institutions and support for a legislature. Clubs did not work under the auspices of the state, but sought to develop their own activity outside of the empire’s schools, with leading activists convinced that creating autonomous nationalist groups was the best way of prompting a national restoration.

Certainly, the Sokol was never subversive, and clubs stressed their dedication to tsar and fatherland as well as improving public health. For instance, the presence of Sokol members at a march on 27 August 1913 in St. Petersburg held in honour of Nicholas II for the Romanov tercentenary showed their obedience to the autocracy and contemporary Russian government.[[71]](#endnote-71) However, though no longer opposing the Sokol after 1907, the Ministry of Education appeared to remain ambivalent about its existence. Russia’s Minister for Education from 1910-14 Lev Kasso surmised that the movement was not one that could be appropriated within the educational establishment during the period. Though it was not politically radical, it is crucial to note that the Sokol was not officially approved at any stage during the late imperial period.[[72]](#endnote-72) The reasons for this are readily apparent: the collectivist (and non-state sanctioned) practices of the movement, with scores of young gymnasts involved in synchronized rituals, led the politically conservative observer V. Klimenko to remark on the ‘socialist’ nature of the Russian Sokol, and even claim that Miroslav Tyrš was the ‘father of Russian revolutionaries’.[[73]](#endnote-73)

*International activity*

Like Sokol clubs elsewhere, Russian groups were inspired by international developments. One external influence was England, praised as a model to follow in Sokol. The English public school system, including schools like Eton, was cited for its emphasis on a well-rounded education, including physical education and intellectual development: one citation claimed ‘a healthy spirit is paralleled by a healthy body’.[[74]](#endnote-74) Other countries cited were Germany, home of the Turnverein and its own Sokol groups. Further influences were to be found in Austria and Japan, which had their own nationalist clubs that stressed order, discipline and dedication to the homeland.[[75]](#endnote-75) L. P. Nikitin added how the Russian Sokol had drawn inspiration from a variety of groups, including those in the United States, which had a lively and well-established Sokol movement by the time serious activity emerged in Russia.[[76]](#endnote-76)

The most obvious sustained influence remained the Czech movement, which functioned as the most pertinent reminder of the Pan-Slavic unity that the movement hoped to instill in members. Kuz’min-Karavaev’s views of the Czech movement as the model to follow,explored in writings such asSokol’stvo i ideia Slavianskogo edineniia (Sokol and the Idea of Slavic Unity, 1912) was widely circulated within Russian clubs.[[77]](#endnote-77) Pan-Slavism, which had been a key feature of the Czech Sokol, had attracted Russians before the establishment of the Russian Sokol. Creation of a ‘Slavic brotherhood’ was a central aim of Sokol groups; connections between Russian and Czech activists after 1901 show their internationalism.[[78]](#endnote-78)

For Ruben Mirimanian, a leader and organizer of the central council of one of the largest Sokol clubs, Sokol I in St. Petersburg, the Czech origins of the group and its ideology were particularly vital to the movement’s rationale. He drew inspiration from Miroslav Tyrš and his work in the Czech lands since 1862. Ideologies espousing national unity, inspired by the processes of state-building that had swept through the European continent in the nineteenth century, formed a guide for Mirimanian’s work in organizing and developing the activity of the Sokol club in the capital. He especially praised the Czech Sokol’s desire to bring order and discipline to youth in that land, and added that such trends needed to be adapted to the Russian context.[[79]](#endnote-79) The good work of the Sokol had been apparent throughout history, as seen in the Czech lands, and also in Bulgaria and in Prussia.[[80]](#endnote-80) Another activist, Georgii Nikoladze, expounded on how the Russian Sokol’s growth as a movement building on principles of freedom, strength and unity could demonstrate the greatness of the Russian nation: this ‘unity’ should be pursued between Russian peoples of the empire and other Slavic states. Such views had credence in the membership: for members, their activities formed part of a movement emphasizing a connection between an assertive Pan-Slavic nationalism and rigorous physical training.[[81]](#endnote-81)

 In the early twentieth century activists travelled between states to engage in the ritual callisthenic activities that were the trademark of the Sokol movement and formed a centerpiece of their international congresses. Russian activists had participated in the gymnastic festivals of the Czech groups from 1882.[[82]](#endnote-82) But at first the extent of their involvement was relatively slight. At the Fourth slet held in Prague in 1901, there were said to be 1,200 in attendance from a number of Slavic nations. Among these were a mere 18 Russian activists, though these included Aleksandr F. Rittikh, the Pan-Slavist publicist. Rittikh’s appearance and status as an eminent theorist of Pan-Slavism drew excited comment from other Pan-Slavist thinkers and activists present, and was taken to be a sign that Russian Pan-Slavism was making an appearance, however belatedly, within the Sokol movement.[[83]](#endnote-83)

After this awakening in the early twentieth century debates about national identity between different Slavic nations became increasingly prominent. The Russian movement reflected the larger Czech Sokol which had assumed an overtly Pan-Slavic stance after 1905, encouraged by the development of the movement within the Russian Empire. Indeed ‘Neo-Slavism’ became a central feature of the Czech Sokol after 1907. As Claire Nolte surmised, ‘these Slavic gymnastic efforts acquired a new ideological direction with the appearance, following the Russian Revolution of 1905, of “Neo-Slavism”, a reformulation of old-style Pan-Slavism with its overtones of tsarist imperialism into a new program that emphasized cultural cooperation among the Slavic nations’.[[84]](#endnote-84) This was reflected in the increased activity of the Russian Sokol. 20,000 were said to be attending the Fifth slet in 1907, with hundreds of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs and smaller numbers of Russians, Bulgarians and Poles (the latter in a non-official capacity) present.[[85]](#endnote-85)

Russian activity in the Federation of Slavic Sokols, inaugurated in 1908 at a meeting in Vienna, shows that Pan-Slavism became a major focal point of activity for several Sokol movements across a variety of countries. The 1908 Neo-Slav Congress in Prague wished to promote Slavic solidarity, with one member of the Russian delegation claiming ‘the Sokol is the medicine that Russia needs the most!’ The Russian enthusiasm for this venture was in part a result of the efforts of Czech leaders such as Josef Scheiner to launch the movement in the Russian Empire.[[86]](#endnote-86) Additionally it should be noted that there were also a relatively large number of Czech Sokol trainers working in Sokol clubs in the Russian Empire during the pre-war period: at least 200, who had some influence on the Sokol’s activities. Taking one example, Frant Erben, inspector of the Sokol commune in the Czech lands, arrived in St. Petersburg in August 1909 to organize an officer’s gymnastic-fencing school.[[87]](#endnote-87) The Czech trainers did not appear to lead the movement abroad, but were valued by the Russians and provided vital intelligence and guidance as the movement emerged there.

Russia’s contribution to Pan-Slavism resulted from to its size and power in contrast to other Slavic nations. The Federation of Slavic Sokols, which considered Russia to be the strongest Slavic nation, decided to hold a grand slet in Prague during 1912 which would cement ties between branches of the movement in different countries. Generally, relations between Russian leaders and those from Serbian and Czech groups appeared cordial. In contrast the potential inclusion of the Union of Russian Sokols incensed Polish members of the Sokol, who wanted the leaders of the Russian Sokol to allow clubs in Russian Poland. So great was the desire from the Federation of Slavic Sokols to include Russian activists that Josef Scheiner, the leader of the Czech Sokol, travelled to Russia himself to invite their leaders to the slet. Though the Polish Sokol boycotted the event in protest, around 750 Russians (one-tenth of the entire membership) were present alongside members of the Serbian and Czech Sokols.[[88]](#endnote-88) In spite of the controversy that their inclusion created, Russian activists were greatly enthused by such efforts and thanked the Czech example for enhancing their own domestic activity. One activist I. A. Lens claimed:

The Czech Sokol then came to us in Russia, and they quickly spread. Now every major town in our land has a Sokol. They appeared in our schools under the guise of Sokol gymnastics, which of course aim for the physical as well as moral improvement of our youth, and the strengthening of their discipline, order, purity, will and patriotism […] now in their own lands, the Czech Sokol may look backwards throughout the last half century, and their tireless cultural work that raised the spirit of the people, which in the present day appears as a more cultured land, the capital of which, Prague, now undoubtedly has started to play the role for young Slavs that Moscow does for those from the North.[[89]](#endnote-89)

Another lengthy report carried in the official journal covered the visit of a delegation from Astrakhan’ that went to the slet in Prague. The slet involved a delegation of 200 members from the Russian Sokol, and also present were 250 Sokoloks (falconets), the most junior members of the Russian association, students drawn from the empire’s schools. Many of Sokol’s female members were also involved. They partook in the parades and singing at the slet, and brought with them a number of gifts that female Sokol members had made in Russia.[[90]](#endnote-90) This interest was reciprocated: the Czech Sokol was interested in the Russian presence, and their own journals covered the appearance of the Union of Russian Sokols at the slet, accompanied by a variety of illustrations, comment articles and commentaries from prominent members of the Russian Sokol such as Nikolai Manochin.[[91]](#endnote-91)

But as long as Russia controlled Poland such aspirations for Slavic solidarity were undermined. The dream of the Federation of Slavic Sokols to unite peoples from different Slavic nations was dashed, with many Poles opposing the presence of Russian activists, which led to their walk out from the 1912 congress. In Russia the movement peaked in the years immediately before the First World War, with domestic resurgence occurring alongside troubled efforts to create a greater international framework. Considering domestic development and increasing numbers, the inspiration derived from clubs in the Czech lands and more amenable domestic conditions for the creation of new groups can help to explain this.

*Conclusions*

The story of the Russian Sokol is an international and national case study in the relationship between physical culture and social activism. By 1914 the Sokol movement had emerged as a lively form of social and cultural organization in Russia.[[92]](#endnote-92) Ritual gymnastics appealed to a portion society including those interested in fortifying a nationalist vision; others sought comradeship and unity within the clubs. Activists looked to elsewhere in Europe, especially the Czech lands, when considering how to build a coherent national project in a state committed to a dynastic and familial brand of nationalism. Therefore, like many other groups in Russia’s nascent civil society, clubs played a key role in disseminating new concepts of identity.[[93]](#endnote-93) The Sokol contribution was the ideal of an idealized ‘citizen’ – an enlightened individual, physically and mentally enhanced.[[94]](#endnote-94)

In spite of the contributions of major figures such as Kuz’min-Karavaev and Rubin Mirimanian, the Russian groups lacked a Tyrš – a figure of significant stature who could unite the movement. In addition, the movement also faced problems created by Russian’s own social context, including the distinction between loyalty to the nation or the state, the tricky definition of the national community, and the meaning of Pan-Slavism. It is also important to note internal divisions on whether the groups should be used to strengthen Russian autocracy. In contrast to some within the movement, Nikoladze saw the strengthening of the Russian autocratic state as an aim of the Russian Sokol movement and believed that clubs should be used to bolster state power.[[95]](#endnote-95) Others disagreed and thought that the Sokol should create a new form of nationalism existing outside the Russian autocracy. Mirimanian, Kuz’min-Karavaev and activists such as Izmailov saw that the Sokol’s main aim was a transnational one to unite all Slavic people, not just Russians. Russia’s status as a leading power, the still uncertain foundations of domestic politics and legality, the reticence of the educational establishment to support the clubs and a weakly developed civic consciousness all provided obstacles to a larger, more socially influential and intellectually coherent Sokol movement. Though by 1907 social conditions for the groups had become more favourable, they were never ideal.

In certain respects Sokol were a precursor to the scout movement, which drew inspiration from Robert Baden-Powell and was established in Russia during the late imperial period. Like the scouts, Sokol clubs sought to inculcate concepts of discipline and responsibility in their members, as well as service for one’s country. Other contemporary examples included the play regiments for youth (Poteshnye), which had a membership of nearly 100,000 and, unlike the Sokol, attracted the favour of Nicholas II. The contrast is useful as it highlights the distance between the Sokol clubs and the favoured societies of the tsarist state. The Poteshnye were seen as safe grounds on which to develop a love of one’s fatherland and respect for the tsar – in contrast to the Sokol, Nicholas II was a primary object of veneration for the play regiments. For the Sokol, prayers to the tsar could be (and were) offered, but the main dedications usually went to members’ health, rather than to the autocrat.[[96]](#endnote-96)

Concepts of nationhood developed apace in Russia during the late imperial period, and the appearance of Sokol clubs was one variety of this. There was no unified version of nationalism – nor could there be – so several different variants came to the fore. The rise of the Sokol shows the close entanglement between nationalism and physical culture and its growing influence amongst Russia’s small but emerging middle classes that sought to dedicate their leisure time to activities seeking to infuse members with a sense of morality through the adoption of ritual gymnastics as a vehicle for nationalist ideas. Though they provided a welcome forum for practicing ritual callisthenics, Sokol clubs also show the contingency of processes of nationalizing Russians in this period, and some problems to overcome in order to create a viable Russian identity in an increasingly political and unstable age.

1. I am grateful to Professor Claire Nolte for discussion and correspondence whilst I conducted research on the Russian Sokol movement, and to Dr. Joan Tumblety and Professor Peter Waldron who also read earlier drafts of this article. I would like to thank my fellow panelists Paul Drobie and Tereza Konývková and the audience at the 48th Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies for their insights and allowing me to test out some of the ideas developed in this paper.

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3. In addition to Nolte’s monograph, see her articles “‘Every Czech a Sokol!”: Feminism and Nationalism in the Czech Sokol Movement’, Austrian History Yearbook, 24, 1993, pp. 79-100; ‘All for one! One for all! The Federation of Slavic Sokols and the Failure of Neo-Slavism’, in Pieter M. Judson and Marshal L. Rozenblit (eds.), Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe, Oxford and New York, 2005, pp. 126-40; ‘Our Brothers Across the Ocean: The Czech Sokol in America to 1914’, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 26, 2009, 14, pp. 1963-82; older but still useful are Derek Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History, Princeton, NJ, 1998; Ladislav Jandácek, ‘The Sokol Movement in Czechoslovakia’, The Slavonic and East European Review, 11, 1932, 31, pp. 65-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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5. Though there is now a substantial body of work on sporting organizations in late imperial Russia, there is almost nothing on the Russian Sokol, which, understandably, is only mentioned in passing in the work of Nolte. The Russian Sokol is briefly discussed in David R. Jones, ‘Forerunners of the Komsomol: Scouting in Imperial Russia’, in David Schimmelpenninck Van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (eds.), Reforming the Tsar’s Army. Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 64-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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9. Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands*, pp. 60-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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12. Sokol, 1, 1912-13, pp. 17-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
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17. See an anonymous contemporary report Rossiia i sokol’stvo. Doklad chitannyi na sokol’skom prazdnik, 2 Maia 1909 g., v zale dvorianskogo sobraniia v Petrograd, St. Petersburg, 1909, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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19. I am grateful to Professor Nolte for discussion of this point, and alerting me to this important information. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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24. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Mirimanian, *Russkoe sokol’stvo,* p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Sokol, 4-5, 1914, pp. 29-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid.,pp. 29-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid.,p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Izmailov, *Po povodu stat’i “Russkoe Sokol’stvo i ego zadachi*, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Mirimanian, *Russkoe sokol’stvo,* p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
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38. Sokol, 1, 1912-13, pp. 6-12. ‘Fizicheskoe vospitanie shkolnoi molodezhi’. “DeKa”; spirituality is an emphasis in the report of I. P. Kozlovskii, ‘Otnoshenie Russkogo obshchestva k voprosu fizicheskogo razvitiia v raznyia epokhi Russkoi istorii’, in Posadskii (ed.), *Sokol’skiia prazdvestna* uchashchikhsia, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Sokol, 4-5, 1914, p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Sokol, 4-5, 1914, p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Nikitin, *Sokol’tsvo i fizicheskoe vospitanie*, p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Mirimanian, *Russkoe sokol’stvo,* p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Nolte, ‘Feminism and Nationalism’, pp. 83-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
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48. Sokol, 1, 1912-13, pp. 6-12. ‘Fizicheskoe vospitanie shkolnoi molodezhi’. “DeKa”. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Kozlovskii, ‘Otnoshenie Russkogo obshchestva’, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, pp. 14, 16; an excellent analysis of the wider influence of Vladimir Skobelev in late imperial culture is Hans Rogger, ‘The Skobelev Phenomenon: the Hero and His Worship’, Oxford Slavonic Papers, 1976, pp. 46-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
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54. Ibid., pp. 9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. S. O. Konichek, Sokol’stvo, Moscow, 1911, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Kozlovskii, ‘Otnoshenie Russkogo obshchestva’, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Mirimanian, *Russkoe sokol’stvo i ego zadachi*, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Izmailov, *Po povodu stat’i “Russkoe Sokol’stvo i ego zadachi*, pp. 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
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67. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, pp. 10, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
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71. Sokol, 1, 1912-13, pp. 3-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Jones, ‘Forerunners of the Komsomol’, pp. 64-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
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74. Sokol, 1-2, 1914, pp. 5-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Sokol, 1, 1912-13, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
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77. Kuz’min-Karavaev, *Sokol’stvo i ideia slavianskogo edineniia*, pp. 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Vyšný, *Neo-Slavism and the Czechs*, p. 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
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80. Ibid., p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. See for instance the report on the Sokol in Warsaw, ‘Organizatsiia sokol’skikh prazdnestv [lektsii professorov universiteta’, in Posadskii (ed.), *Sokol’skiia prazdvestna uchashchikhsia,* pp. 6-7; Vyšný, *Neo-Slavism and the Czechs*, pp. 21-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
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84. Nolte, ‘Federation of Slavic Sokols’, p. 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. *Rossiia i sokol’stvo*, p. 7; Nolte, ‘Federation of Slavic Sokols’, pp. 129-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
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90. Sokol, 3, 1912-13, p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
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