


# Depoliticizing the Modern Nation

## Discourses of Organic Nationhood and Political Socialization in the Interwar Yugoslav Sokol

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**Abstract.** Taking the case of the interwar Yugoslav Sokol (*Sokol Kraljevine Jugoslavije*), this article examines the complex relationship between the discourses of organic nationhood and political socialization in what was the largest voluntary association in the country. While Sokol typically projected a vision of itself as an apolitical entity—as it claimed to represent the organic national body—this article will explore the dynamics, as well as contradictions, between such discourses and the socio-political reality they aimed to describe and eventually alter in their pursuit of improving the ‘national body.’

In conversation with scholarship on the conceptual history of modern East Central European nationalisms, including the social history of ideas and movements and political socialization more specifically, this article provides insight into the contextual, conceptual history of nationhood by focusing on selected thinkers engaged in Sokol, against the backdrop of particular mass practices and modes of political socialization in the organization. The tension between the involvement of the masses in the allegedly apolitical formations and the reality of subjecting them to political socialization *en masse* provides the central axis around which the argument is organized. The article concludes that their concept of nationhood was intimately intertwined with that of democracy and simultaneously posited against (party) politics and statism. Moreover, it demonstrates that Sokol was rooted in notions of civilizational hierarchies and directly linked to producing modern political subjects for the new Yugoslav state by means of the gymnastic and educational practices they promoted and conducted.

**Keywords:** interwar Yugoslavia, political socialization, conceptual history, East Central Europe, nationalism studies, Sokol

## Introduction

Taking the case of the interwar Yugoslav Sokol (*Sokol Kraljevine Jugoslavije*),<sup>1</sup> this article examines the complex relationship between the positivist discourses of organic nationhood and political socialization in what was the largest voluntary association<sup>2</sup> in the country. In other words, it explores the usage of what they saw as positive knowledge for scientifically justifying both the existence of the Yugoslav nation as such<sup>3</sup> and supporting their claims concerning its organic—meaning natural, horizontal, classless—character.<sup>4</sup>

Under the former Austro–Hungarian Empire, from roughly the turn of the century, South Slavic Sokol associations had a broadly neo-Slavic, often anti-dualist and, in certain cases, anti-state character, but still comprised mostly urban elites and middle classes, who aimed to spread their liberal national ideas to the broader population and were mostly engaged in urban symbolic politics. In contrast to Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, and other Slavic Sokol associations in the Dual Monarchy, the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the subsequent Balkan Wars, played a significant role in radicalizing their discourses and activities.

In the interwar period, however, once their main prewar goal of the political unification of South Slavs was achieved, even if in a different form than most of them had envisioned, other issues came to the fore—the most prominent one being the tension between the synthetic understanding of the given national community (espoused by the integral Yugoslavist ideology) and the one based on titular nationalities (those being Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs) cohabiting a common country. During the volatile 1920s, there arose the particular issue of the status of the Croatian Sokol and its refusal to join the Yugoslav Sokol association, which largely

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- 1 *Sokol/Sokil* (the latter being Ukrainian but in all Slavic languages meaning ‘falcon’) was a massive Slavic voluntary gymnastics association which was founded in Bohemia in the early 1860s in a liberal national key. It later spread to most Slavic-populated provinces of Austria–Hungary, as well as the kingdoms of Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, the Russian Empire, and the USA. In the interwar period, it proliferated in most of their successor states but was banned in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, and, after World War II, in most Slavic countries, despite many of them (particularly Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) adopting significant portions of their respective political cultures and symbolic representations from Sokol’s repertoire. Mostly known for its collective callisthenic performances (slets), Sokol also had a militaristic, as well as a strong medical (eugenic) component. See: Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech lands*; Roubal, *Spartakiad*.
  - 2 Troch, “Interwar Yugoslav state-building,” 60; Zec, “The Sokol Movement,” 48; Giomi and Petrunaro, “Voluntary associations, state and gender,” 1–18.
  - 3 For more on positivist traditions and the debates around them, particularly in the Habsburg context, see: Feichtinger, Fillafer and Surman, *The Worlds of Positivism*.
  - 4 For a more detailed overview of East Central European organicist traditions, see: Trencsényi et al., eds, *A History of Modern Political Thought*.

echoed the other political debates of the day, namely that of the legal subjecthood of Croats in the newly founded state. Besides, before the introduction of the Royal Dictatorship in 1929, Sokol was technically just one of many voluntary associations, albeit one with a very strong and distinguishable tradition.

It was only after 1929 that it was essentially co-opted by the state, as all Sokol associations were merged into a single one, put under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Physical Education, and prescribed a more plastic ideological canon that was to serve the function of state-legitimation and representation in cultural diplomacy more broadly. After the assassination of King Aleksandar Karađorđević in 1934, these organizations gradually lost their privileged position and, even if mostly informally, fell out of state favor, thus becoming targets for the rising ethnonationalist forces prior to the breakout of World War II.

While Sokol typically projected a vision of itself as an apolitical entity—as it claimed to represent the organic national body—this article focuses on the dynamics, as well as contradictions, between such discourses and the socio-political reality it aimed to describe and eventually alter, in the pursuit of improving the ‘national body.’ In other words, I aim to provide an insight into the contextual, conceptual history of nationhood by focusing on selected political thinkers engaged in Sokol within the context of particular mass practices and modes of political socialization in the organization, focusing on those that promoted the adoption of certain modes of political thinking.

As opposed to the well-established historiography on ‘national mobilization’ and ‘nation-building,’<sup>5</sup> both of which indicate a developmental phase of modern nationalisms in conjunction with the rise of mass politics, the concept of ‘political socialization’ is broader and potentially more productive. It shifts the focus away from the agents and subjects of disseminating national ideas to the complex social processes of negotiating political ideas. Similarly to approaches such as the study of intellectual milieus<sup>6</sup> or the social history of ideas,<sup>7</sup> and—influenced by Cold War dynamics and contexts within sociology—even Soviet-style ‘political technology,’<sup>8</sup> the notion of ‘political socialization’<sup>9</sup> pays particular attention to social fabrics and contexts which shape historical actors’ understanding of political ideas and guides their political behavior.

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5 For the most recent monograph on the region in this perspective, see: Conelly, *From Peoples into Nations*.

6 Coen, *Vienna in the Age of Uncertainty*.

7 Darnton, “In Search of the Enlightenment,” 113–32.

8 Völgyes, “Political Socialization in Eastern Europe,” 261–77.

9 Hyman, *Political Socialization*.

In conversation with scholarship on the conceptual history of modern East Central European nationalisms<sup>10</sup> and the social history of ideas and movements,<sup>11</sup> this article provides an analytic synthesis of the conceptual transformations ongoing in the social setting of interwar *Sokols*. The tension between the involvement of the masses in the allegedly apolitical formations and the reality of the *en masse* political socialization taking place therein, as originally noted by Karl Mannheim,<sup>12</sup> provides the central axis around which the main argument of this paper is organized. The article, thus, aims to demonstrate that the Sokol concept of nationhood was intimately intertwined with that of democracy and simultaneously posited against (party) politics and statism. Moreover, it demonstrates that this understanding of nationhood was rooted in notions of civilizational hierarchies and directly linked to producing modern political subjects for the new Yugoslav state by means of the gymnastic and educational practices they promoted and conducted therein.

In terms of historical scholarship on political socialization in East Central Europe, the massive gymnastic associations, such as Sokol, represent one of the more neglected cases. At the same time, these associations emerged as crucial 'sites' of political socialization not only due to their immense size (they often represented the largest voluntary associations in ECE countries) but also because their membership was engaged in activities that were designed to promote the symbolic performance of their idea of nationhood, as well as provide political socialization in accordance with a specific world view. These associations<sup>13</sup> were often led and even designed by local intellectuals who projected their visions of political modernity and, consequently, nationhood onto their often socially diverse membership. Thus, studying such massive associations through the lens of 'political socialization' and in combination with Koselleckian conceptual history provides a nuanced and productive analytic framework for studying how the intellectual informed the social and vice versa in the dynamic post-imperial contexts which emerged in the wake of World War I.

## Positivism and the organic understanding of nationhood

In many of these cases, the conceptualization of nationhood as advanced by engaged intellectuals rested on positivist claims, not least because these Sokol activists had

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10 Trencsényi et al., eds, *A History of Modern Political Thought*.

11 Reichardt, "Fascist Communities of Action and Violence," 51–73.

12 Mannheim, *Man and Society*.

13 Such as *Deutsches Turnverein* in German-speaking lands and places with sizable German populations, *Ballila* for the Italian youth in Fascist Italy, the *Levente* movement in Hungary, etc.

backgrounds in disciplines concerned with typologizing human nature and culture, e.g., biology, anthropology, medicine, ethnography, the nascent discipline of physical education, etc.<sup>14</sup> In other words, these typically urban, middle-class male intellectuals educated in the former imperial capitals used the language of scientific authority and their personal credibility to support or refute particular national claims and ideas—which became particularly pertinent after the break-up of European continental empires following World War I. The newly established states sought political legitimacy both internally and in the international arena, and the existence of this demand also influenced the proliferation of patriotic associations and the claims intellectuals belonging to them tended to espouse.

In addition to the prevalence of support for certain national ideas with recourse to positivist logic or theory, an additional characteristic of the post-war milieu impacted the organizations' outlook. Many of the new titular nations of the victorious states incorporated extensive lower social strata in comparison to the composition of the former imperial 'oppressors' (e.g., Germans, Hungarians, and Russians, perceived as made up of the higher social classes and particularly the nobility), as a result of which the concept of class gradually became ethnicized as early as the late nineteenth century. Importantly, this catalyzed the discourse about uniting all members of a previously 'oppressed' national culture (e.g., Czech, Polish, Yugoslav) within a given national state. Such an arrangement was seen as a much more democratic and horizontal model than an imperial structure where members of one national culture dominate the elite while another community could be dominant amongst the masses.<sup>15</sup>

The imperial experience explains why having an ethnically and culturally homogenous national state was, particularly in this region, conceptually closely linked to democracy. In this context, the notion of the 'oppressed nation' dominated the narratives of the (post-)imperial experience. Many of these national identities were, therefore, constructed not only in opposition to the imperial state apparatus that was suppressing them but also against the dominant national culture within that apparatus. Sokol members had a particular stake in this since they posited themselves as key actors in the anti-imperialist struggle within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as being the heirs to the anti-Ottoman uprisings in Serbia and Montenegro. Altogether, these experiences permitted the creation of a narrative about the anti-imperialist and freedom-loving national character of the Yugoslav people.<sup>16</sup>

14 Pojar, "Resisting Nazi Racism in Post-Habsburg Spaces," 97–120.

15 Hroch, "National Romanticism," 19.

16 For one of the clearest examples of such narratives in which the two empires are equated, see: Žakula, *Sokolska buna na bečke dahije*.

Since these ‘new nations’—and this pertains particularly to the Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, and Polish cases—saw themselves as inherently more democratic, class differences were seen or expected to be overwritten by promoting a homogenous national culture within a mostly homogenous nation-state. Combining this framing of nationhood as a simultaneously modern, democratic, and superseding class with the aforementioned positivist epistemological frameworks resulted in these intellectuals espousing an organic view of the nation and imbuing associational activities and discourses with it. Put another way; they tasked themselves with providing scientific authority to support the aforementioned romanticist national goals.

For instance, Sokol thinkers such as the Novi Sad-based physician and publicist Nikola Mrvoš<sup>17</sup> or the prolific Belgrade-based polymath Milorad Dragić<sup>18</sup> were particularly inspired by the Sokol founder, philosopher Miroslav Tyrš, the Yugoslav geographer Jovan Cvijić, but also by the sociological work of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, which they often used to support their theses on the scientific provability of Yugoslav nationality, primarily relying on linguistic, ethnological and anthropological arguments. It was particularly the Masarykian notion of ‘small work’ that was seen as the crux of Sokol’s evolutionary approach to (its role in) societal development, as opposed to the ‘revolutionary’ forces of both the political Left and the Right. These and similar claims made their way into the conceptual delineation of nationhood in the associational periodicals relatively early on, as can be seen from the following statement undersigned by ‘P+G,’ which most probably refers to the frequent contributors to the Ljubljana Sokol journal, Slovenian intellectual and businessman Pavel Pestotnik and Slovenian pedagogue and Sokol leader Engelbert Gangl:

“Nationality and nation stand as wider social forms above the concept of political party and social class (*stalež*). Claims by political parties and social classes must never stand opposed to the generally recognized ethical principles of humanity and to the healthy, self-preserving principles of real nationality. Let us never forget that we are in a defensive mode. We, Slovenes do not attack, and our holy and natural duty is to defend our land, language, and property, to fight for the conditions in which we are able to economically and culturally progress. Only a powerful and independent nation possesses economically independent social classes. For Slovenian workers, with bad education and contingent German influence, are prone to neglecting the principle of national feeling...”<sup>19</sup>

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17 Mrvoš, “Tyrš – filozof,” 5–8.

18 Dragić, “Jugoslovenska ideja kod Dra Jovana Cvijića,” 7–11.

19 P+G, “Sokolstvo in delavska telovadna društva,” 6.

Additionally, ‘nationhood’ appears as a central notion uniting core social values while buttressed by scientific rationality:

“...we see that today leading socialists and the most renowned global experts, such as Masaryk and Gumpłowicz, recognize nationality as a culturally and socially creative force, and that the solving of the national question is of paramount importance for solving social problems, as well. Since Sokolism is an institution which doesn’t recognize differences in name and class, it has the power and strength to gather all the members of our nation to whom liberty, progress, and independence are not just empty phrases, but who use them to build their own existence. [...] Labor, free-thinking in its inclinations, and yearning for independence, is a member of Sokolism for precisely these reasons, as is any other class whose members do not renounce brotherhood and equality. Those who deny this do harm to the workers and do not understand the core of the Sokol idea.”

Due to the prevalent positivist stance of these thinkers who understood nation as a natural category ranked above most others (primarily class, but also religion and gender), the debate around nationhood could be framed as not being political in its essence. After all, if the existence and characteristics of a given nation could be determined scientifically, such as those of the Yugoslav nation (in contrast to ‘tribal’ and ‘artificially superimposed’ collectivities, such as the ‘Serbian,’ ‘Croatian’ or ‘Slovenian’ nation), there would remain no need for ‘politicizing’ the debate, which these interlocutors sought to position as scholarly or based on expertise. Additionally, the fact that Yugoslavs had been given (or had won) their own state also meant that they had joined the international community of the ‘cultured,’ meaning civilized, nations. The latter notion and its connection to democratic statehood was explored by the Skopje-based ‘elder’ (*starješina*) of the Kragujevac Sokol ‘parish’ (*župa*) Milivoj Pavlović. In a contribution to a Sokol periodical dedicated to scientific and pedagogical topics, Pavlović argued that:

“...[o]nly free nations can make genuine contributions and [enjoy] the ripe fruits of their development. The civic equality before the law and, more broadly, in social life, enables this connection and ensures its success. [...] [T]he equality guaranteed by the foundational laws of the state today represents a great basis for further cultural development; thus, our Sokol should not lead the struggle in the direction in which it did in the states which consisted of privileged classes, aristocratic and others [LB: this is a reference to Sokol’s work in the Austro–Hungarian Empire]; Sokol will lead towards equality by mending the social differences [...] The same needs, the same interests, the same way of life, the same customs—all this

binds the members of a nation into one large whole, enables the independence of a given national state and justifies its national-cultural individuality. The tasks of a nation, understood in this way, enable the process of the competition (*utakmice*) in the life of humanity. Sokolism is also a Slavic movement—not because it thinks that it should separate Slavs from the general drive towards the cultural progress of humanity, but because Slavs make up a narrower unit racially, linguistically, ethnographically, historically and with regard to their contemporary interests. Our age excludes small and fragmented nations; a large process of material culture inevitably contributes to creating larger complexes of national masses through various alliances; and nations should not hastily reproach one another if this is attempted directly and without first bringing closer those who manifest kinship through their race and interests.”<sup>20</sup>

While the nation-state model was indeed reflective of this understanding of political modernity, Sokol thinkers also sought unmediated access to the ‘national body’ through the organization. They often voiced the feeling that the nation still required some ‘gardening’ and culturing, which was to be done mainly through physical education.

### **Civilizational hierarchies and modernity: creating citizens for the ‘New Age’**

The associational practices Sokol thinkers designed, organized, and perfected throughout the first half of the twentieth century typically aimed at improving not only physically but, by extension, also intellectually the ‘national body.’ Their discourses were deeply embedded in claims about civilizational hierarchies—namely, differentiating between ‘primitive’ and ‘cultured’ nations and/or peoples. In this context, they presented as imperative that the associations, working in concert, raise the cultural level of the Yugoslav nation through their activities and programs. As their discourses on nationhood were becoming increasingly biologized and psychologized, particularly in the 1920s and early 1930s, this endeavor was also seen, particularly by physicians engaged in Sokol, as supporting ‘guided evolution’ through eugenic initiatives in Sokol that could then be transferred to the level of the state.<sup>21</sup> Underpinning these ambitions was a monistic body-mind approach to physical education, which assumed such activity to have hereditary consequences. This positioned Sokol as a kind of ‘gardener’ of the modern Yugoslav nation, a metaphor that became a commonplace in associational

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20 Pavlović, “Sokolstvo kao živa sila u narodu,” 368.

21 Balikić and Pojar, “»Politics of Plastic Nationhood«,” 155–79.

periodicals. In these outlets, it became commonplace to find statements claiming that “[i]t is a fact [...] that the physical education of the modern world/people (*modernog sveta*) has a unique educational goal: to create a person fit for life, a person aware of their duties towards their family, nation and state.”<sup>22</sup>

The purported civilizatory role of Sokol with regard to its own membership was exceptionally clearly articulated by Lazar Car (1860–1942), a notable Zagreb-based zoologist, science popularizer, and Sokol activist, who was also one of the founders of the Institute for Comparative Anatomy, in 1926:

“The realization of one’s own backwardness and the acknowledgment of authority, those are the foremost conditions for any sort of progress. It is precisely this which is increasingly missing nowadays, to a horrifying extent. The state is also in the wrong here, in its overly scholarly regard for the national education. The virtues of our nation are being over-accentuated, instead of familiarizing our nation with the fact that it is far behind others in terms of culture and civilization. We [LB: Sokols] aren’t against the democratic principle. It is being realized and it wouldn’t be possible to resist it anymore. It is justified and surely represents some more advanced degree of humanity’s development. But, since every kind of progress also comes with certain disadvantages, we need, if we want to stabilize and perfect it, correct the existing shortcomings [...] This particular task, instead of the formerly privileged class, [has fallen] on us, the free, cultural (better to say civilizing) societies.”<sup>23</sup>

This excerpt also reveals an interesting tension between the model of the nationally homogenous, and thus democratic, national state and the perceived level of backwardness of Yugoslavia’s population. The role of Sokol is here explicitly defined as that of a civilizer of the nation, which will raise the community to a level of progress adequate for properly managing the institutional framework of political modernity.

Political socialization within Sokol was seen as conducive to this goal, as members were expected to learn to discipline themselves and embrace political modernity, learn about the scientific basis of nationality, and undergo physical education which was to influence and improve their psychological characteristics as well. In turn, all of the above would ensure the viability of the national state, founded on the conceptual framework of political modernity, in the face of a potentially corruptible public and political life.<sup>24</sup>

22 Polić, “Temeljna načela telesnog uzgoja,” 374.

23 Car, “Još jedna zadaća Sokolstva,” 48–9.

24 One of the most elaborate examples of this theory can be seen in Murnik, *Kultura in telovadba*, passim.

### (Party) politics as crisis

Yugoslavia's post-war political regime (particularly the first constitution and the choice of monarchy instead of a republic), as well as the outcomes of several early electoral cycles, failed to fulfill the expectations of most Yugoslavist intellectuals and resulted instead in a bitter competition between parties whose programs represented radically opposing grievances concerning the constitutional structure of the state.

Compounded by hardly reconcilable and immensely diverse heritages of political and legal cultures sustained by numerous local and regional elites, this struggle eventually culminated in a number of political assassinations, the most important of which was that of Stjepan Radić in June 1928. This incident resulted in the aforementioned introduction of the Royal Dictatorship in January 1929, which effectively abolished all party politics.<sup>25</sup> Parties did not reappear as major drivers of politics until after the King's assassination in 1934. The volatile environment and the turbulent political developments stood in stark contrast with Sokol's vision and practices that were meant to strengthen and improve the organic Yugoslav nation. For this reason, in addition to their intense dislike of late Habsburg nationality politics, most Sokol thinkers also became wary of party politics as such, and, incrementally, went on to adopt a radically critical stance towards politics at large. Although articulated before Radić's assassination and the consequent culmination of the crisis of party politics, Ivan Majstrović, a prominent Split-based lawyer, argued in front of the Adriatic Sokols in 1926 that:

“The indiscipline of the wide national masses, which is reflected in the large number of political streams and directions; disavowal of any authority except that which appeals to the lower instincts of the national crowd by using primitive demagogical methods; the fragmentation of national energies in minute party struggles; prioritizing personal gain and ambition over state interests and goals—those are all the greatest vices that Slavic nations suffer from and on which the non-Slavic world pronounced judgment on a long time ago, showing that they [Slavs] do not have a developed state-centric consciousness nor clear regard for the conditions of state organization...”<sup>26</sup>

Beyond thematizing the mismatch between the modern nation-state model and the ‘primitive’ character of party politics in Yugoslavia, some Sokols deployed a more profound and holistic argument for why politics, more broadly, in fact, constituted a crisis for the development and the state of the ‘national body’:

25 Djokic, *Elus ive compromise*.

26 Majstrović, “Prigodom VII Sokolskog župskog sleta u Splitu,” 51–2.

“We can see from experience [...] how political organizations enthusiastically grab the impressionable young souls [...] in order to mold them according to their own interests, neglecting the fact that they deprive the developing beings of the rare and beautiful characteristics of personal liberty: to independently create and build up their own worldviews, free of all types of lived experience, particularly the superimposed and scholastic ones. [...] That is why physical education must encompass everyone, first and foremost the physically weak ones; this can be seen from the modern goal of physical education, the eugenic goal, the hygienic-educational, ethical, aesthetic, practical, national-economic and national-defense one.”<sup>27</sup>

Beyond criticizing domestic conditions with regard to the development of political modernity, Yugoslav Sokol thinkers were outspoken in their reflections on the rise of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in neighboring countries, particularly in fascist Italy. Italian developments involved high stakes for these intellectuals, partly because of the Yugoslav–Italian border disputes and partly because of the continuous contacts they maintained with the former Sokol societies in the Eastern Adriatic and which found themselves on the other side of the border. In most of their interwar associational periodicals, Sokol thinkers analyzed news pieces about physical education initiatives in such contexts, comparing foreign examples to their own methods, goals, and achievements, with special regard for the links between political socialization and biological, psychological, and social outcomes of the typically state-run, authoritarian organizations they were surveying. In his attempt to define Sokol’s stance towards and ideological differences from fascism, national socialism, and communism, Aleksandar Tabaković, a Novi Sad-based lawyer and publicist, argued that in Italy:

“All the efforts are concentrated with an aim to mold the children’s souls in the fascist manner. The party program represents a holy dogma which no one is allowed to question, the party leadership is infallible and all critique is banned. On top of all that there is also a system of mutual secret surveillance which additionally morally wrecks them. This is a way to destroy all mental and personal independence. [...] The result of that fascist education, solely by the nature of things, can only be obedient praetorians, ruthless stivers (*štreberi*), political mandarins or blinded fanatics. Mussolini and his current associates the consequent culmination of the crisis come to power in this way [...] it is not [the] least likely that they would have achieved all this had they been raised by the artificial system that they are now imposing onto their successors.”<sup>28</sup>

27 Weigner, “Odnos Sokolstva prema vaspitanju dece,” 29.

28 Tabaković, “Sokolstvo i duhovna strujanja sadašnjice,” 202.

While most Sokol thinkers agreed on the need for ‘harmonious development’ and the inextricable connection between intense physical education, national character, and, consequently, political modernity (or lack thereof)—many came to gradually adopt diverging stances on the political subjectivity of the members of the ‘national body’ in question, with new voices of the late 1930s contesting citizens’ agency in the realization of this development. During the early 1920s, the ‘natural method’ of Georges Hébert,<sup>29</sup> Rudolf Bode’s early expressive gymnastics, and Lamarckian eugenics represented the dominant tendencies and theoretical models, which were incorporated into Sokol practices to shape the ‘national body’ with an emphasis on participation. From the mid-1930s onwards, Sokol thinkers such as the notable Slovenian anthropologist Božo Škerlj and the Belgrade-based young gymnastics expert Branko Polić turned their attention towards studying and managing human instincts, urges, and physical metrics—hence aiming to engineer a homogeneous population and react to the increasingly more critical political situation at home and abroad.<sup>30</sup> This is well exemplified by the case of the Serbian eugenicist pedagogue Vićentije Rakić, whose work on the developmental psychology and neurology of exercise was often praised at length in Sokol periodicals. The latter drew a clear connection between the physiological effects of physical exercise and the enlargement of human intellectual capacities, the ability to perform labor, and the level of cultural development. Beyond praise, his arguments were used to demonstrate that physical education alone had the ability to ‘mold the national body’ into a desired shape, without the educational initiatives organized thus far, which would have given agency to the membership as well.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Claims and observations made by Sokol-affiliated intellectuals concerning organic nationhood and their reflections on political socialization in interwar Yugoslavia permit a number of important considerations, revealed by the analysis of these texts and utterances.

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29 The ‘natural method’ (*la méthode naturelle*), as articulated by the French ‘physical culturist’ Georges Hébert, relied on a holistic understanding of physical education and gymnastics in particular, where it was also seen as conducive to character- and morale-building. Moreover, it stressed graduality, moderateness of exercise (in contrast to extreme exercise), adaptation to the individual’s physical abilities, and the use of natural resources instead of man-made environments and equipment. For more, see: Delaplace, *George Hébert*; Grelley, “Contrepoint – Georges Hébert et la méthode naturelle,” 361–69.

30 This was also applied, in an exemplary manner, to the young heir apparent, King Petar II Karađorđević, whose physical and mental development was duly recorded and analyzed in Sokol periodicals, see: Dragić, “Kralj Petar kao Soko,” 71–6.

31 Gačić, “Telesno vaspitanje,” 423–30.

1. The positivist understanding of nationhood endorsed by these authors was rooted in notions of civilizational hierarchies and directly linked to producing modern political subjects for the new Yugoslav state.
2. The gymnastic and educational practices they promoted and conducted within Sokol were expected to incrementally raise the cultural/civilizational level of the national collective and produce a shared Yugoslav consciousness.
3. Their concept of nationhood was intertwined with a notion of democracy and, while simultaneously being directed against (party) politics and statism, a deep-seated dislike rooted in the experience of late Habsburg nationality politics and the rise of authoritarian regimes in their immediate neighborhood in the interwar era.

Taken together, these points demonstrate that the insistence on the part of Sokol intellectuals and leaders concerning the objective quality of nationhood, as well as the activities conducted in the association serving to ‘mold’ the ‘national body’ physically and intellectually, were conceived as existing outside the realm of politics. Political modernity and integral Yugoslavism as its corollary correspondingly tended to be positioned as grounded in expertise and part of a civilizing project. This is why these concepts and the field they marked out were seen as providing a fertile ground for political socialization towards modern nationhood. This was placed into sharp relief by juxtaposing it with the ‘primitive’ political culture of the local elites and identified the political cohesion of a given country as only being achievable as a result of the long-term acculturation of the widest masses. Throughout the interwar period, Sokol thinkers attempted to depoliticize nationhood as a category by providing it with epistemic authority, both through their scientific research and publications, but also through the practices conducted in Sokol that were to demonstrate their validity and ‘raise’ (*uzgojiti*) Yugoslavs worthy of the political modernity which they had been awarded by the Great Powers during the making of the Versailles order.

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