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## THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE "SOKO" (FALCON) SOCIETY IN NIŠ FROM 1907 TO 1914

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**Abstract:** The paper presents the genesis of the Falcon movement in Niš at the beginning of the 20th century. At the beginning, a brief overview of the origins of the Falcon ideology and the development of the Falcon movement during the second half of the 19th century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire is given, as well as the development of the first sports organizations in Serbia. Then, the emergence of the first sports, primarily gymnastic associations in Niš in the period from 1897 to 1907 is presented. Special attention is paid to the Civic Gymnastics Society "Dušan Silni" (later renamed the Knights' Society "Dušan Silni"), which had a key influence on the introduction of the Sokol model of sports organization in Niš. Then, the activities of the first Niš Sokol organization, the Gymnastics Society "Soko", founded in 1907, as well as the Sokol Society "Dušan Silni" founded in 1910, will be presented, with a special focus on their origins, composition and activities. It is important to emphasize that the Sokol movement was strongly ideologically oriented and politically colored, as it arose at a time of the rise of national romanticism, which is why it will also be viewed in a broader, geopolitical context.

**Key words:** Sokol Society, Niš, gymnastics, Civic Gymnastics Society "Dušan Silni", Gymnastics Society "Soko", Sokol Society "Dušan Silni"

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## Introduction

The emergence of the Sokol movement in Niš represents part of the chronology of significant events in the history of the Sokol organization in Serbia. It should be emphasized that almost the entire sports activity in our regions, from the end of the 19th century until 1941, took place precisely within the framework of Sokol societies. Accordingly, the influence of Sokolism was strongly felt on the political and cultural level. Sokolism, as a Pan-Slavic, cultural, and national liberation movement, was founded in the Czech lands in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš. In an effort to encompass broader social strata, the Sokols operated under the slogans of the French Revolution: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," gathering members regardless of faith, class, or nationality (Šešum, 2014, 22). The Slavic peoples within the Austro-Hungarian Empire lacked opportunities for political, cultural, and economic affirmation, so the leaders of the Sokol movement decided to work through sports on connecting the Slavic nations in order to prepare them for the struggle to achieve "territorial and spiritual freedom" (Žutić, 1991, 5). Among the Serbs as well, the first Sokol organizations appeared precisely in the territory of Austria-Hungary. Following the May Coup of 1903, there was increased activity among Serbian youth in Austria-Hungary. The new foreign policy orientation of Serbia, the collapse of Count Károlyi's regime in Croatia, the crisis of the regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina after Kállay's death, as well as the strengthening of the anti-Austrian movement in Dalmatia, influenced the emergence of a new national fervor (Brozović, 1934, 209-211). In this context, the appearance of the Sokol movement among the Serbs should also be viewed. Serbian Sokolism in Austria-Hungary was perceived as a liberal national liberation movement that concealed its true goal—liberation and unification of all Serbian lands—behind physical exercise, while following the idea of Pan-Slavism (Žutić, 1991, 51). The ideological creators and leaders of the Serbian Sokol movement were Dr. Laza Popović and Milan Teodorović, who founded the society "Srpski Soko" in Sremski Karlovci on January 19, 1904 (Dimić, Milošević, Šešum, 2014, 19-24; Šešum, 2014, 54).

The tradition of sports organization in the Principality of Serbia dates back to the mid-19th century. Painter Stevan Todorović founded the First Serbian Society for Gymnastics and Wrestling in 1857 with students of the Painting School, which was active until 1864. The establishment of the Belgrade Society for Gymnastics and Wrestling in 1882 marked the beginning of the continuous development of physical exercise in the Kingdom of Serbia. In 1891, the society fully adopted the Sokol exercise system and changed its name to the Belgrade Gymnastic Society "Soko" (Niške novine, 1934, 2, 4; Ilić, Mijatović, 1994, 79). However, supporters of the old method of work founded the Civil Gymnastic Society "Dušan Silni" in 1892, which in 1907 changed its name to the Chivalric Society "Dušan Silni." A significant event in the development of Sokolism in

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the Kingdom of Serbia was the year 1910, when the societies "Soko" and "Dušan Silni" merged into the Union of Sokol Societies "Dušan Silni" (Rašić, 1910, 15-16; Vasić, 1939, 36; Vukašinović, 2016, 25). It is considered that the occasion for this unification was the Annexation Crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## **Establishment of the First Gymnastic Organizations in Niš**

At the end of the 19th century, the development of sports organization began in Niš as well. The first organized sports collectives were from individual sports, primarily the first shooting association founded in 1881 and the Morava Riding Circle "Prince Mihailo" founded in 1890. The first gymnastic society in Niš was a branch of the Civil Gymnastic Society "Dušan Silni," established in 1897. The members of the board of this branch were: Sreten Stanić – Cukić, Mika Todorović, Miodrag Čavdarević Mika, and others. Particularly prominent in the work was Dobrivoje Đ. Mihajlović – Takić (Privredni list, 1926, 1; Grupa autora, 1984, 537).

Thanks to the first Niš gymnastics and wrestling teacher, Kosta Jovanović, the branch began its work and held its first public manifestation on July 19, 1897 (Ilić, 1998, 11). However, already in 1899, the society ceased operations, only to resume work in 1904 thanks to gymnastics and wrestling teacher Rajko Karaklajić. He managed to enroll a larger number of students from Niš schools, especially commercial youth, whom he then systematically trained in physical exercises. The exercise hall, a kind of physical culture hall, was located in the building of the old Elementary School near the Cathedral Church, and exercises were also held on public city grounds. Already in 1905, the society began providing gymnastics lessons for elementary school students (Grupa autora, 1984, 537). In the same year, gymnastics was introduced as a regular subject in the Niš Grammar School (Grupa autora, 2015, 62).

The work of this society was extremely beneficial and had a stimulating effect on the establishment of similar societies throughout southern Serbia. The society participated in the First Croatian Sokol Rally in August 1906 (Gavrilović, Mijatović, 2024, 269). When in 1907 the Civil Gymnastic Society "Dušan Silni" was renamed the Chivalric Society "Dušan Silni," it opened the possibility for all citizens of Niš who met certain conditions to join. Prospective members had to be Serbian citizens, enjoy civil honor, and be of a prescribed age. The majority of the membership consisted of students from Niš schools, while the higher bourgeoisie approached the society with some skepticism (Savić, 2015, 104).

## **Establishment and Activities of the Gymnastic Society "Soko"**

A group of members from the "Dušan Silni" society separated with the intention of forming a gymnastic society that would operate in the Sokol spirit and according to Sokol ideology (Grupa autora, 2015, 377). On their initiative, preparations began for the establishment of a Sokol society in Niš. It is assumed that the initiators of this society's founding were: Major Dušan Cvetković, Captain Mihajlo Valjarević, and Dimitrije Tasić, Lieutenants Aleksandar Mitić, Dušan Putniković, and Radojica Teodosijević (Savić, 2015, 104).

The initiators sent a letter on April 9, 1907, to the head of the Gymnastic Society "Soko" in Belgrade, informing him that a Gymnastic Society had been founded in Niš in March of the same year and requesting approval for the society to bear the name "Soko." Along with the mentioned letter, they also requested regulations on work and organization, and on May 28, approval for the establishment of the Sokol society arrived. The Gymnastic Society "Soko" thus received moral support and was officially constituted in the following composition: head – Major Dušan Cvetković, deputy head – pharmacist Pera Arandjelović, secretary – Captain Mihajlo Valjarević, treasurer Dimitrije Tadić (Ilić, 1998, 16-17). Some sources suggest that in Niš that year, in addition to the Gymnastic Society "Soko," the Sokol Society "Sinđelić" was also active, about whose work we have no information (Sokolski život, 1937, no. 4; Grupa autora, 1984, 537).

The establishment of the "Soko" society should also be interpreted in a broader geopolitical context. At that time, the Customs War between Serbia and Austria-Hungary had been ongoing for a year. As we have emphasized, the emergence of the Sokol movement has its ideological and political background. Taking into account the foreign policy circumstances in which Serbia found itself in 1907, it is quite evident that the citizens of the Kingdom—at least those who were nationally conscious—felt the need to identify with a sports organization that operated against the interests of Austria-Hungary. In support of this thesis is the fact that in the observed period from 1907 to 1914, similar Sokol organizations were established in almost all cities of Serbia (Gavrilović, 2016, 60-66).

The "Soko" society dedicated itself to organizing exercise classes. Due to the lack of professional gymnastics teachers, the work in the society proceeded without a plan, with numerous improvisations. In the society, Dušan Putniković, Radojica Teodosijević, and other officers worked as leaders (trainers). However, they were not true leaders because they had not completed the leadership courses. Nevertheless, exercise classes were held regularly, as well as preparations for public performances. Since they were not sufficiently familiar with the Sokol exercise system, certain exercises that were unclear to them were not performed consistently and systematically. Doubts in interpreting exercises and unwillingness to perform them correctly were best shown during joint exercises with other societies (Ilić, 1998, 19, 25).

The work of the "Soko" society was not limited only to Niš. On October 6, 1907, members of the society participated in a large public exercise in Kragujevac, which consisted of basic gymnastic exercises and competitions in running and jumping. Simple exercises, i.e., stick exercises, were performed by members of the Belgrade Sokol youth. After them, members of the Kragujevac gymnastic society performed exercises with maces. Finally, a combined group of all societies (including the one from Niš) performed simple exercises from the Croatian Sokol Rally of 1906 and the Prague Sokol Rally of 1907. The Sokols from Niš did not manage to master the standing long jump (Ilić, 1998, 19-20). However, in other disciplines, they achieved notable results: Nikodije Petković ran 100 meters in 15 seconds, while Sreta Stanković won a prize (we do not know what kind or the result) in pole vault (Grupa autora, 2015, 24).

The Niš Sokols visited the Sokol Society "Jug Bogdan" in Prokuplje on June 7, 1908, and on that occasion presented a flag with a ribbon. The flag was received and solemnly carried through the city by the head of the department, Obrad Stanojević, accompanied by a Sokol song. After that, a public class was held where the skills of the Sokol society from Niš were demonstrated. The Sokols from Niš presented themselves to the Sokols and the people of Prokuplje as the Sokol Society "Sinđelić," which was an unofficial name they used when performing in other cities. The societies competed in running, stone throwing from the shoulder, standing long jumps, ball games (football), archery and rifle shooting, pole climbing, apparatus exercises, hurdle running, javelin throwing, as well as rally exercises. The exercises were performed in formation, with impeccable alignment, with "sharp" but harmonious movements and connecting elements of shaping (Zlatanović, 1997, 24-26).

At the end of 1908, Milan Perović arrived in Niš from the Belgrade Society "Soko," bringing with him 50 Sokols with the aim of correcting existing deficiencies and assisting in the further work of the Niš society. Perović was a graduate student of František Hofmann, a Czech Sokol teacher who in 1908, at the summer exercise ground of the Belgrade Sokols, organized exercises twice a week in which about 50 students and Sokol youth participated, as well as about 40 members of the women's group (Jeftimijades, 1939, 18-19; Vukašinović, 2016, 27). Although some members of the Niš society initially received Perović's instructions with distrust, they later became convinced of the positive results of his work (Ilić, 1998, 21-22).

The Serbian Sokols from Niš organized a public exercise on June 14, 1909, in honor of the centenary of the Battle of Čegar and the death of Voivode Stevan Sinđelić. At this event, the following points were performed: simple exercises from the V Czech All-Sokol Rally, exercises on the horizontal bar, pyramids, short stick exercises, javelin throwing competition, wrestling school (Rašić, 1909, 32-34; Ilić, 1998, 20). However, although there were no complaints about the organization of the public exercise, the

Niš society was criticized for not being sufficiently prepared to perform certain points. There was a particularly felt need for a trained leader who would lead the exercises professionally and in accordance with the Sokol system. Therefore, the Sokols from Belgrade promised to provide additional assistance in training leaders (Popović, 1908/1909, 192, 193).

At that time, in the Gymnastic Society "Soko," there were two groups of exercisers – older and younger. Each group had three divisions of exercisers, into which the exercisers were assigned based on achieved results. In the first, highest division, the most successful members exercised. In the second, middle division, those who had mastered the basic exercises were located, while in the third, lowest division, were the beginners. Exercises were held three times a week and lasted one hour each. The society had various apparatus and props: horizontal bar, parallel bars, rings, trapeze, weights, and sticks. In addition to apparatus exercises, simple exercises were also performed, and jumping and stone throwing from the shoulder were practiced. In addition to exercising, social life was also developed within the Sokol organization. Thus, in 1909, a library was established with books on gymnastics and Sokolism. Public lectures on Sokolism were also held, where Sokol ideology was discussed in detail (Ilić, 1998, 22).

### **Establishment and Activities of the Sokol Society "Dušan Silni"**

In order to revive the work of the Pirot gymnastic society, the prominent member of the "Dušan Silni" society, Rajko Karaklajić, left Niš in 1908. This led to stagnation in the society's activities and its gradual merging into the "Soko" society. The unification took place in 1910, when the Chivalric Society "Dušan Silni" and the Gymnastic Society "Soko" appeared under a single name — Sokol Society "Dušan Silni" (Gavrilović, 2016, 66).

At the Sokol rally in Sofia in 1910, the Niš native Sreten Stanić – Cukić distinguished himself in apparatus exercises, winning second place and receiving a laurel wreath as a prize (Gavrilović, 2016, 66). At the Sixth All-Sokol Rally in Prague, held in June 1912, Sokol societies from Serbia also participated, including the Sokols from Niš (Vukašinović et al., 2023, 25). These facts testify to the quality of the work of the Niš Sokols and to the fact that the initial deficiencies in the society's functioning were quickly eliminated.

In the following year, 1911, the society organized a Sokol academy. The program of the academy included a sports part with the following order: greeting; exercises on the pommel horse; exercises with clubs performed by the children's group; exercises on the parallel bars performed by the youth section; simple exercises performed by the members; and group exercises also performed by the youth section. At the end, the orchestra of the Second Infantry Regiment played. The proceeds from this event went toward raising funds for the construction of the Sokol hall "Dušan Silni" (Gavrilović, 2016, 66; Ilić, 1998, 23).

Despite numerous difficulties, the Sokol society continued to develop. However, its faster development was hindered by the lack of professional staff. Part of the problem was solved by organizing internal courses for training leaders (*prednjaci*). In order to improve the quality of work in Sokol societies, the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Serbia sent a request to the Sokol community in Prague to send its experts for the training of domestic personnel. Thus, Bohdan Koutek arrived in Niš and began work in the 1911/12 school year as a gymnastics professor at the Niš Grammar School and as a leader in the Sokol Society (Savić, 2015, 106). The last information about the activities of the Sokol Society "Dušan Silni" dates from 1912, when they participated in the rally in Čuprija (Ilić, 1998, 23).

Following the Balkan Wars, there was a halt in the society's activities. When the First World War broke out in 1914, members of the Sokol Society massively responded to the mobilization call. Numerous examples of their heroism were later described in Sokol literature. A well-known case is that of the aforementioned gymnast Sreten Stanić – Cukić, a participant in the Balkan Wars, who, as commander of a bomber detachment in the Battle of Bregalnica in 1913, was severely wounded and died during transport to the hospital in Kumanovo (Popović, 1914, 11). The period from 1912 to 1918, as far as the organization's activities are concerned, is considered a period of inactivity, as all forces were directed toward war preparations and military operations. During the occupation, the entire archive of the Niš Sokol society was destroyed, as well as the exercise hall with all its apparatus and props. Immediately upon their arrival in Niš, the Bulgarians began establishing their own schools, institutions, and sports organizations. They founded the gymnastic organization "Junak"; however, they failed to attract children and youth to their ranks (Ilić, 1998, 22). After the unification in 1918, the golden age of the Sokol movement in Niš began, when it succeeded in developing to its full capacity and in all segments, precisely as the ideologists of Sokolism had envisioned.

## Conclusion

The establishment of the Sokol society represents an event of primary importance for the development of sports in Niš. Although a certain degree of sports activity existed even before the appearance of the Sokol movement, it was the Sokols who played the key role in shaping a sports, cultural, and national self-awareness, not only in Niš but in all places where they were active.

However, in the period from 1907 to 1914, the Sokol movement in Niš was in its infancy and did not succeed in approaching the level of development and activity seen in the interwar period. The destruction of the archival material of the "Dušan Silni" society deprived researchers of the opportunity to fully grasp the society's activities. Based on

the preserved sources and literature, the impression is formed that the society operated under modest conditions and was limited in numerous segments, especially regarding the training of professional staff.

In order to better understand the emergence and activities of the Sokol movement in the observed period, attention should also be paid to international circumstances. After the May Coup of 1903, Serbia changed its foreign policy orientation and adopted a hostile stance toward Austria-Hungary, with which it waged the Customs War from 1906 to 1911 and clashed over the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908. In this context, the appearance of the Sokols in Niš and their appeal to broader strata of the population should be interpreted. The newly created political climate favored the rooting of a sports organization with a clear Pan-Slavic orientation, whose roots lay in challenging the official policy and statehood of Austria-Hungary.

By promoting physical education, national solidarity, and moral values, the Sokol Society became a strong factor of local and national identification and integration — until the war years, when its work was suspended. Nevertheless, the tradition established by the movement would become the foundation for a new rise after liberation.

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