



**Sokol Flags – The Symbols of Croatian Sokol Movement to 1914:
The Sokol Movement as a Component of National and European Integration
at the Beginning of the 20th Century**

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Abstract

In the European context, Sokol Movement events, and in particular Sokol “slets” (simultaneous group exercising accompanied by music), appear as important characteristics of the social life of Slavic people living on the territory of Habsburg Monarchy at the end of the 19th century and in the first decade of the 20th century. The movement promoted ideals of belonging to Slavia, as well as fostering a sense of belonging to particular nationalities (Croatian, Czech, Polish, Slovenian, etc.) that were specifically expressed during “slet” events. The author presents original (Croatian) Sokol Movement flags and documentary photographs and describes the particular atmosphere that reigned during “slets”.

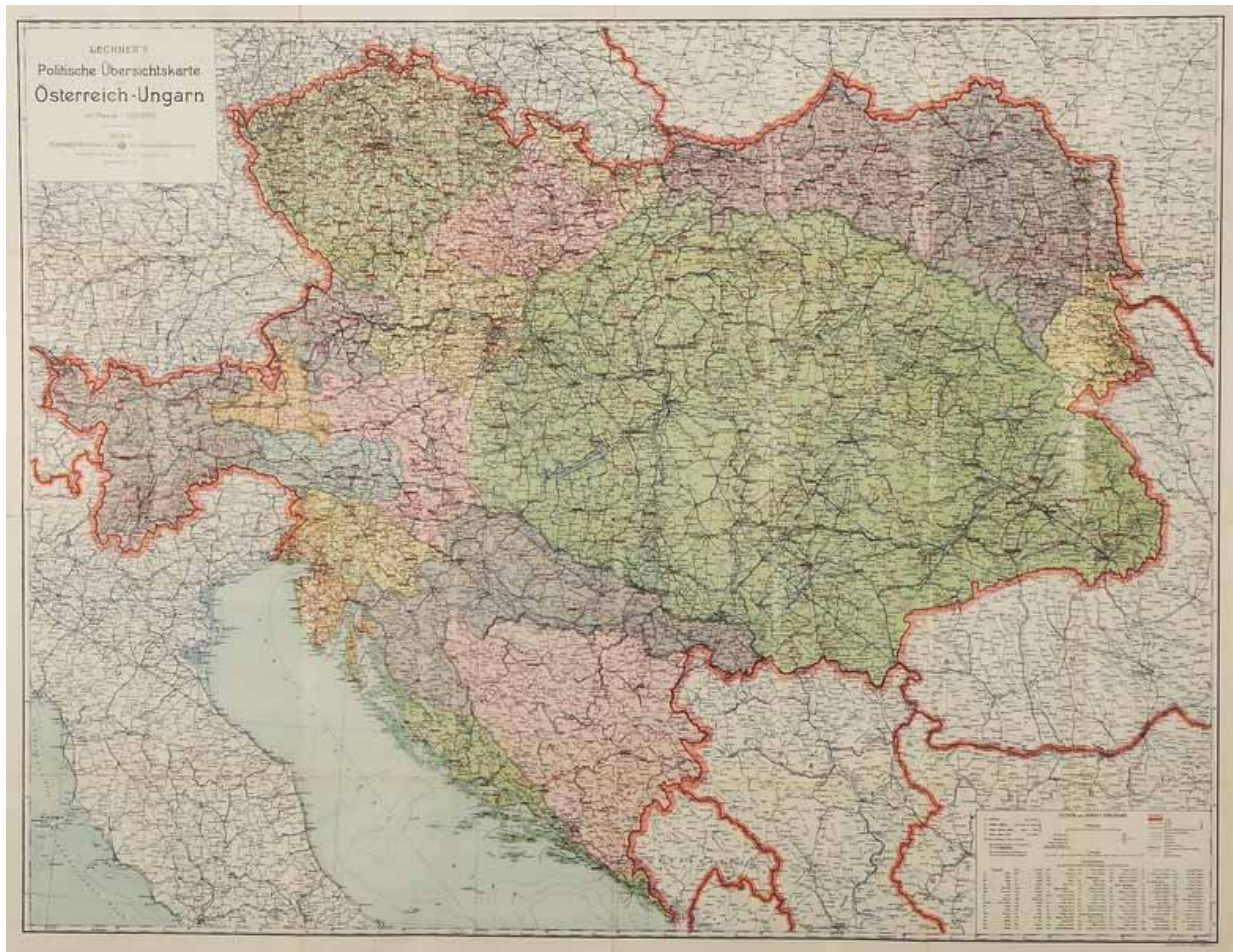


Postcard: The second Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Zagreb 1911, representing a gymnast – “sokolaš”, the Croatian national tricolour, and a falcon.

THE CROATIAN SOKOL MOVEMENT (SOKOLSTVO)

The term *sokolstvo* refers to a physical training movement that emerged in 1862 in Europe, more precisely in almost all Slavic countries. This movement attained growing popularity as a form of recreation characterized by political undertones and national aspirations. The movement draws its name from the Slavic word for falcon – *sokol* – a bird that is, according to popular tradition, the embodiment of courage, boldness, agility, and desire for freedom. The champions of the movement were members of liberally oriented petty bourgeois who started to found special gymnastics associations or societies.

Following the example of Czech Sokol societies, the first Sokol Society in Croatia was founded in Zagreb in 1874 under the name “Hrvatski Sokol u Zagrebu” (Croatian Sokol in Zagreb). Its founders were the members of the bourgeois elite, intellectuals with extensive all-around education (doctors, professors, etc.), but among its members were found people belonging to all social classes (craftsmen, merchants, clerks, and other state employees).



A map of the Habsburg Monarchy and its neighbour countries, which were a part of the Turkish Empire until the end of the 19th century.



Poklon zastava pred vijećnicom.

The celebration of participants' flags bowing in front of Prague's Town Hall (the Fifth Czech Pan-Sokol "slet", 1907).

The Sokol Societies soon became the best organized, the most popular, and the most numerous of public organizations in what is today Croatia (at that time, Croatia was a part of Habsburg Monarchy and its full name was the Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia). In fact, Sokol societies were formed in the cities of Bjelovar (1884), Karlovac and Zadar (1885), Vukovar (1886), Senj (1888), Split (1893), and Krapina (1894). It is also important to note that these societies did not comprise only Croatians, but counted among their members other Slavic nationalities living in Croatia, such as Serbs, Slovenians, Czechs, and others.

With a growing number of members, various social events, and activities, Sokol societies rapidly needed to be very well organized. In 1904, in Sušak (today, part of the city of Rijeka), the Federation of Croatian Sokol Societies was founded. Based in the capital city of Zagreb, in 1907 the federation was renamed the Croatian Sokol Federation and was divided territorially in so-called "counties" – *župe* (the term was borrowed from Croatian medieval history). The aim of the federation was to bind together different Sokol societies' activities, as well as to establish connections with Sokol federations in other countries, and of course, to promote the movement's ideals.

Hence, after 1891 an intensive and organized *rapprochement* of all Slavic Sokol movements based in countries of Habsburg Monarchy began. In 1908 they all united in the Pan-Slavic Sokol Federation with a main office in Prague (today's Czech Republic). A joint and unique system was created, linking the complete Sokol movement together through local Sokol societies, "Sokol counties", national federations, and finally, the Pan-Slavic Sokol Federation.



The Fifth Czech Pan-Sokol "slet" in Prague (Czech Republic) in 1907, a great solemn parade of Croatian "sokols" accompanied by the delegates from different cities with mayors as heads of delegation.

During 1907–1914, nineteen Croatian "Sokol counties" gathering several Sokol societies were created: fourteen "counties" in Croatia, three in the United States of America, and two in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These "counties" were named after illustrious figures in Croatian history.

The Croatian sokol movement also developed in the United States: The first Croatian "Sokol County" in the U.S. was named "Tomislav", after the first Croatian king, who reigned in the 10th century. It was established on 29 August 1909 in Chicago, Illinois. This "Sokol County" participated in the Independence Day Parade on 4 July 1910. In 1915 the first Croatian Pan-Sokol Slet was organized in Cleveland, Ohio.



Flag-bearers open the solemn parade during the First Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Zagreb, Croatia (1906).

Besides connecting different Sokol societies, the Croatian Sokol Federation also actively worked on the development and promotion of the Croatian gymnastic movement, including in an international context. In 1907 the Federation of Croatian Sokol Societies, joined the International Federation of Gymnastics (headquartered in Paris, France). Moreover, in 1911 Croatian gymnasts competed at European Gymnastics Championship in Torino, Italy. That was the first time in the history of Croatian sports that Croatian competitors participated in a major official international event under their flag. Furthermore, the members of Croatian Sokol Federation successfully participated in Pan-Slavic Sokol Slet held in Prague in 1912.



Allegorical representation of Slavia, a frequent motif in the propaganda material of Sokol “slets” (cover of the program of the second Croatian Pan-Sokol Slet, 1911).

The organizational structure of the Sokol movement was strongly revealed during various social events, and notably in Pan-Sokol “slets”. Besides the main goal of slets, promoting physical training and gymnastics, Croatian Sokol Slet performers were expressing the idea of belonging to *Mother Slavia* as well as their *pro-Croatian orientation* and a kind of *national euphoria*.

Considering the aspect of protecting national interests, these social institutions organized around gymnastics became a means of resistance to forced denationalization (Hungarization, Germanization, or Italianization). In addition, they were cherishing the traditional remains of so-called “Slavonic” spirit.

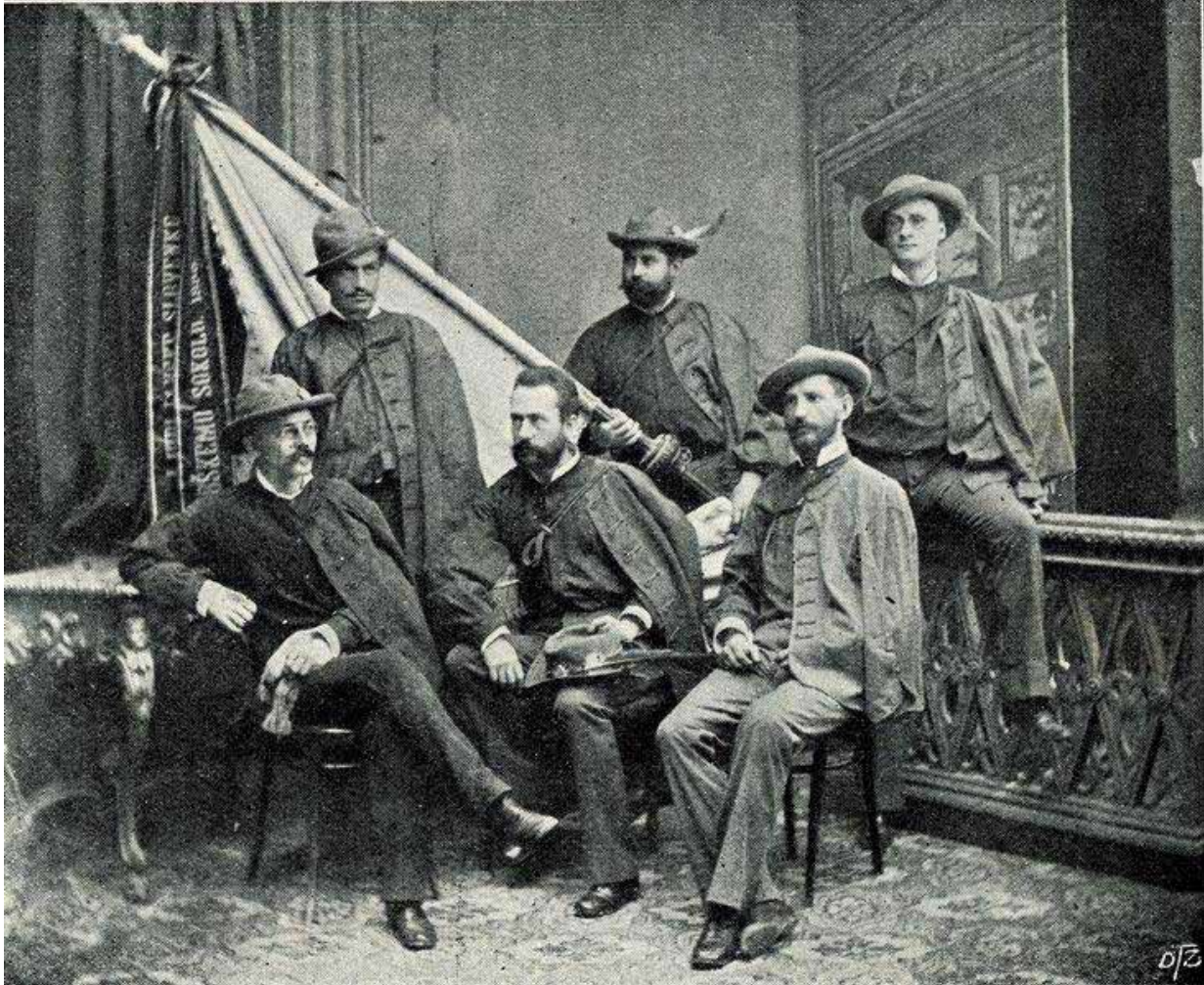
CHARACTERISTICS OF CROATIAN SOKOL FLAGS BEFORE 1914

I have found no traces of regulations or guidelines concerning the design of these societies' flags in any of the available archive sources that I have studied. Nevertheless, it is possible to determine the typological characteristics of Sokol society flag before 1914 by observing extant original flags, as well as by examining original photographs and other documentary material. Actually, by studying original posters, postcards, and photographs, we can see that the flags appear frequently and that the flag-bearers are a very important and elegant part of Sokol parades.

Chronologically, the first group of flags are those of Croatian Sokol societies created up to the end of 19th century. These flags are mono-coloured, decorated only with the Sokol monogram, without any national symbolism.



Flag of the Croatian Sokol of Karlovac from 1890; the society was founded in 1885.



The Zagreb Croatian Sokol delegation, participants in the First Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague, 18 June 1882, with a mono-coloured flag and sumptuous flag streamers attached below the finial.

The second group of flags is composed of those made at the beginning of the 20th century. Their obverse and reverse nearly always use the colours of Croatian national tricolour – horizontal red-white-blue stripes. Moreover, these flags contain always the elements of national symbols – colours and coats of arms are sometimes included in the flag borders. Also, on one side of the flag, the centre of the flag is decorated with the Sokol monogram and on the other side with the name of the society: Hrvatski Sokol (Croatian Sokol), the name of the city (for example, Zadar), and sometimes also with the year. Furthermore, except on flags, the falcon – the symbol of the movement – also appears in metallic falcon-shaped finials. There are no rules when mentioning the year. Sometimes, flags contain the year of the society’s founding, or the year the flag was made. Occasionally both dates are presented – the year of the society’s founding and the anniversary year in which the flag was acquired and consecrated.



Flag of the Croatian Sokol from Zadar, obverse: a falcon holding a dumbbell in its talons, reverse: the Sokol monogram.



Flag of the Croatian Sokol from Koprivnica, at the beginning of the 20th century, obverse: the Sokol emblem, reverse: the crowned arms of the town of Koprivnica.



*Flag of the Croatian Sokol from Osijek (Slavonija),
obverse: embroidered inscription, reverse: the Sokol emblem.*



*The flag of Croatian Sokol in Bjelovar from 1907, a Croatian tricolour of embroidered silk.
Obverse: in the centre, in the white field, an embroidered Sokol monogram in Croatian national
colours, reverse: in the centre, in the white field, a gold-embroidered inscription: Hrvatski
Sokol u Bjelovaru. An ornamental border uses a motif of oak-leaves and acorns.*

For example, the Croatian Sokol flag from Varaždin (Hrvatska) dating from 1904 is one of the most richly decorated. Elaborately embroidered, it contains not only the name and Sokol monogram, but in the angles of the flag appears the movement's credo: In heart, bravery (boldness, courage) / In thoughts, homeland.



Flag of the Croatian Sokol in Varaždin (1904)

Flags are usually rectangular, but very rarely they appear in swallowtail form, like cavalry standards, such as the flag of the Croatian Sokol in Bihać from 1913.



*Flag of the Croatian sokol in Bihać (Bosnia and Herzegovina),
obverse: an embroidered inscription, reverse: an embroidered Sokol monogram/emblem.*

Specimens of Croatian Sokol Society flags from Dalmatia are often ornamented with the image of a falcon with wings spread and dumbbells in its talons.



*Flag of the Croatian Sokol from Split, 1893,
obverse: a falcon holding a dumbbell in its talons, reverse: the Sokol monogram.*



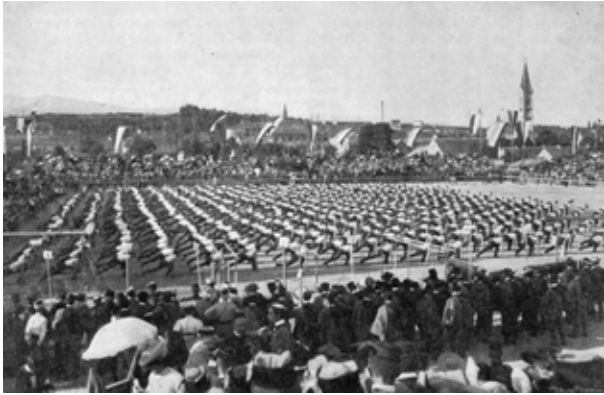
Flag of the Croatian Sokol from Kaštela.



The members of Croatian Sokol in Drniš (Dalmatia), 1908, dressed in official uniforms with a society flag that closely resembles the flag of the Croatian Sokol Society in Split (a red and white chequered border taken from the historical Croatian coat of arms), with the Sokol monogram in the centre.

PAN-SOKOL “SLETS” IN ZAGREB

The first Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet”, organized by the Federation of Croatian Sokol societies, took place in Zagreb 1–4 September 1906. The impulse was clearly the creation of the Croatian Sokol Societies Federation in Sušak. This “slet” brought together numerous participants with various origins: 48 Croatian Sokol societies, the Croatian-American Sokol from Chicago, a cycling-gymnastics club Sokol from Donja Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina), three Serbian Sokol societies from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Kingdom of Serbia, as well as the members of Slovenian, Czech, Polish, Bulgarian, and Ruthenian Sokol societies. 2,893 participants were present: 180 Bulgarians, 516 Czechs, 296 Polish, 470 Slovenians, 185 Serbs and 1,246 Croats. Thousand of “sokols” practiced simple exercises without any equipment, among them there were 400 Croats and 42 societies practiced on gymnastics devices. More than 3,000 participants – “sokols” were present in the great parade in the streets of Zagreb, considered as a manifestation of Slavic unity. That was the most massive public assembly in Zagreb ever. “Slet” participants attended concerts and theatre performances. All these events evolved in Croatian and Slavic atmosphere, full of Slavic and national Croatian symbols.



The first Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Zagreb (Croatia) – 1–4 September 1906.

The second Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet” was also held in Zagreb, 16–18 August 1911. It counted around 5,000 participants from all around “great Slavia”, including 2,300 Croatians, 760 Serbs, 458 Slovenians, and 425 Bulgarians.



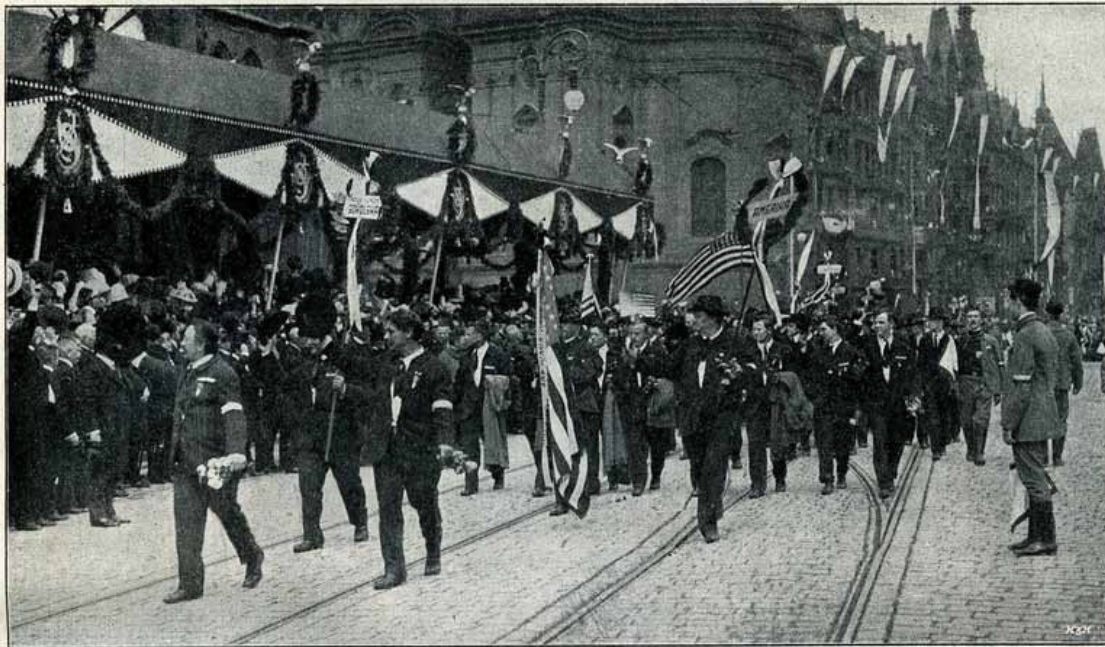
*The second Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Zagreb in August 1911.
Renowned and important guests and participants of Second Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet”
with Zagreb’s mayor in front of the Croatian National Theatre
(the delegate from the “Tomislav” Sokol county in Chicago is holding the American flag).*



PREVED AMERIČANCI



VELKÝ PRAŽSKÝ SLAVNOSTNÍ PŘEHLED



NÁRODNÍ JEDNOTA SOKOLSKÁ V SPOJENÝCH STÁTECH V PRŮVODU. V ČELE DR. RUDIŠ-JIČÍNSKÝ A JOS. ČERMÁK.

The Sixth Pan-Slavic “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) in 1912. Interesting photographs show a solemn procession of Czech “sokols” from America in the streets of Prague: “sokols” with typical Sokol uniforms march under the American flag.

The Croatian Sokol Movement was a part of a unique and unitary system represented by units – Sokol societies founded first in cities, and later even in villages. These elementary units, Sokol societies, were organized in “counties” grouped in national federations, with the Pan-Slavic Sokol Federation at the top of the pyramid. From the aspect of the defence of national interests, these physical training institutions and their activities became a medium for spreading resistance to denationalization, thereby cultivating traditional vestiges of the Slavic spirit.

OVERVIEW OF ALL PAN-SOKOL “SLETS”

- The first Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) – 18 June 1882.
- The first Slovenian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Ljubljana (Slovenia) – 8–9 September 1888: participation of two Croatian Sokol societies with 40 members.
- The second Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) – 27–30 June 1891: there were 244 Sokol societies present, among which two Croatian Sokol societies with 34 participants.
- The first Polish Pan-Sokol “slet” in Lviv (today’s Ukraine) – 5–6 June 1892.
- The second Polish Pan-Sokol “slet” in Lviv (today’s Ukraine) – 14–15 July 1894.
- The third Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) – 28–30 June 1895: there were 7,366 participants (“sokols”) from all Slavic countries.
- The third Polish Pan-Sokol “slet” in Krakow (Poland) – 28–29 June 1896.
- The fourth Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) – 28 June–1 July 1901: there were 20 Croatian “sokols” participating at the meeting. It was a magnificent Sokol manifestation and a major social event for the entire European continent.
- The fourth Polish Pan-Sokol “slet” in Lviv (today’s Ukraine) – 28–29 June 1903.
- The second Slovenian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Ljubljana (Slovenia) – 16–18 July 1904: important participation of 220 Croatian “sokols”.
- The first Croatian Pan-Sokol “slet” in Zagreb (Croatia) – 1–4 September 1906: participation of 2,893 uniformed “sokols”: 180 Bulgarians, 516 Czechs, 296 Polish, 470 Slovenians, 185 Serbs, and 1,246 Croatians. Thousand of “sokols” practiced simple exercises without any equipment, among them there were 400 Croatians and 42 societies practiced on gymnastics devices.
- The fifth Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) – 28 June–1 July 1907: there were 800 Croatian “sokols” present, out of whom 600 were actually participating.
- The Russian Scythian “slet” in Stanislavov (Ukraine) – 22 May 1910: Lazar Car represented Croatian “sokols”.
- The fifth Bulgarian Brave Men Assembly in Sofia (Bulgaria) – 10–12 July 1910, during the Slavic Congress and with 640 Croatians parading.
- The fifth Polish Pan-Sokol “slet” in Krakow (Poland) – 15–18 July 1910: 63 Croatian “sokols” participated.
- The sixth Czech Pan-Sokol “slet” in Prague (Czech Republic) – 1912.

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About the Author

Jelena Borošak-Marijanović graduated in history and archaeology from the University of Zagreb (Croatia) in 1975. In 2007, she obtained a Master's degree in Modern Croatian history, also from the University of Zagreb.

Since 1976, she has worked at the Croatian History Museum in Zagreb. Besides research and conservation activities, in particular those in the Flag and Uniform Collection Department, she has created a great number of exhibitions and written accompanying catalogues related to themes of Croatian national history in 19th and 20th centuries.

She is also the author of *Flags throughout the Centuries*, published by the Croatian National Museum in 1996. This catalogue regrouped studies of 120 flags and more than 30 standards dating from 17th to 20th century in museum's collections.

She also actively participated in the XX Vexillological Congress in Stockholm, Sweden (2003) and in the XXII Vexillological Congress in Berlin, Germany (2007).



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