

Nolte, Claire E.: *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914. Training for the Nation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2003. ISBN: 0-333-68298-X; 258 p.

**Rezensiert von:** Eagle Glassheim, Fachbereich Geschichte, Princeton University

Finally the influential Czech gymnastics organization, the Sokol (Falcon), has found its biographer. In a thorough study of the movement from its origins in 1861 to the outbreak of war in 1914, the New York historian Claire Nolte has given us a life-and-times account of the most important nationalist association of late-Habsburg Bohemia. As Nolte points out, the Sokol was crucial to the spread of the Czech national movement from a scholarly and bourgeois elite to the masses in the late nineteenth century. Drawing on Miroslav Hroch's three-stage typology of national movements, Nolte demonstrates both the new alliances and tensions inherent in the transition from elite to mass nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

The book begins with a summary of the early nineteenth-century German gymnastics movement, which provided the initial model for the founders of the Sokol. Beyond specific gymnastic practices, the Sokol also drew on the Turnverein's blend of cultural and political nationalism. Following a standard Czech argument, however, Nolte stresses that the Sokol was very different from its German prototype. As George Mosse has shown, the totalitarian potential of German mass gymnastics was realized under National Socialism.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, Nolte plays down the integral nationalist tendencies of the Sokol, as the movement seems to have flowed benignly into a democratic Czechoslovakia in 1918. Perhaps this is too sanguine a picture, as Czech radical nationalists—drawing ideological sustenance from the Sokol tradition—achieved their own „final solution“ of the German question after World War II with the expulsion of Czechoslovakia's three million Sudeten Germans.<sup>3</sup> To her credit, Nolte later notes a rhetoric of „cleansing“ among fin-de-siecle Sokol publicists, though the implications of such concepts for subsequent events remain unclear.

In her second chapter, Nolte intriguingly

describes the life and thought of Miroslav Tyrš, the Sokol's founder. Born in German Tetschen (Decin), Friedrich Tirsch was inspired by the liberal Czech nationalism of 1848 and identified increasingly with the Czech national movement in the 1850s. In 1860 he Czechified his name and became involved in newly revived Czech club life. That Tyrš and the Sokol's co-founder Jindřich/Heinrich Fuegner were clearly not native Czech speakers demonstrates both the malleability of national identifications in Bohemia at the time and the flexibility of the national movement itself. Ironically, late nineteenth century efforts to „cleanse“ the Sokol of undesirable (German and Jewish) elements would likely have purged „amphibians“ like the two founders. Fortunately for them, they were already in their graves (the objects of yearly Sokol pilgrimages) by the time Czech nationalism approached a nadir of intolerance in the late nineteenth century.

The early Sokol, at least, maintained Tyrš's ebullient liberalism, adopting a red and white uniform inspired by the Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi. The movement stressed above all physical and moral fitness for the social improvement of the nation. But there were also hints of a deeper, political agenda, which Habsburg authorities found troubling. The club's training had a militaristic tone, and leaders lionized the fifteenth century Catholic heretic Jan Hus and the great one-eyed general of the Hussite rebellion, Jan Žižka. Habsburg officials could not have been reassured by Tyrš's 1863 call to revive „the falcon-like boldness of more glorious times“ that would end Czech dependence „on foreigners... [and] create the foremost unbreachable defense on which the assaults of our foes will shatter“ (59).

Nolte's coverage of late nineteenth-century divisions within the Sokol is particularly strong. Sokol leaders always insisted that

<sup>1</sup> See Hroch, Miroslav, *Social Preconditions for National Revival in Europe*, Ben Fowkes trans, Cambridge 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Mosse, George, *Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbols and Mass Movements in Germany*, New York 1975.

<sup>3</sup> The formulation „final solution to the German question“ came from Czech President Edvard Beneš in 1945, but the phrase and others similar in spirit were rampant among Czechoslovakia's post-war leaders.

---

the national loyalties of their members come above all else. As the Czech working class became increasingly self-aware in the 1880s and 1890s, class politics threatened to tear the Sokol apart. In 1897 Social Democratic supporters seceded from the Sokol and formed their own gymnastics organization. Five years later, Czech Catholics alienated by Sokol anti-clericalism founded a rival group as well. But remarkably—in spite of these conflicts and a push to „cleanse“ the organization of clericals, Jews, amphibians (bi-nationals), and Socialists—the Sokol remained tremendously popular, its membership more than doubling between 1902 and 1912, when it topped 119,000 (185). Relations with the Socialists also improved as Czech Social Democrats split with the all-Austrian Social Democratic Party in 1911. Indeed, the Sokol was largely successful in its pursuit of a Czech politics that elevated nation above supra-national identifications. Though some tensions inevitably remained within the modern Czech social and political spectrum, Czechs entered the Great War with substantial internal solidarity that facilitated the creation of a large, independent state from the ruins of the Habsburg Empire.

Like any good biography, Nolte's portrait of the Sokol moves nimbly between its subject and the wider social and political context in which it was embedded. Not only does this approach enhance our understanding of the Sokol, but it also provides an excellent primer on the emergence of mass nationalism in late nineteenth-century Bohemia. Nolte's book will be of particular value to graduate students and others studying the rise of nationalism in the Habsburg Empire. Those interested in German gymnastics organizations will find excellent comparative material, though they may also be frustrated by Nolte's relentlessly descriptive approach. While the introduction cites George Mosse's pioneering work on the aesthetics of nationalism and authoritarianism, the author rarely seeks to interpret the symbolic and rhetorical function of mass spectacle. Even so, this book is a revealing account of a Czech national icon and an important empirical contribution to the literature of mass nationalism.

HistLit 2003-2-021 / Eagle Glassheim über Nolte, Claire E.: *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914. Training for the Nation*. Basingstoke 2003, in: H-Soz-Kult 10.04.2003.