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The influence of France on sports in the Kingdom of Serbia

Abstract: During its struggle for independence in the 19th century, Serbia considered physical culture primarily through the soldiers' skills or the preparation of future soldiers. It is because of these reasons that military structures had a dominant influence on the introduction and development of physical exercise until the Great War. Gained independence and promoting the principality to the rank of the kingdom encouraged Serbian society to make significant changes in different social spheres. Physical culture also experienced positive changes after the 1880s. With the arrival of Charles Doucet, a Belgian fencing instructor, in Serbia at the end of the 19th century, Serbian society was introduced to the French fencing method. Doucet's pupils promoted the fencing sport in the Kingdom of Serbia, as well as subsequently in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the 20th century, with the aim of specializing in physical culture, Officer Dragomir Nikolajević was sent to France, to Joinville School of Physical Education. After his return from schooling, Nikolajević worked on the development of the Sokol movement and the Olympic movement. By accepting Baron de Coubertin's ideas, the Kingdom of Serbia ranked among few countries which introduced Olympism before the Great War. The influence of France at the beginning of sports in the Kingdom of Serbia was the foundation for further development of physical culture in the territory of the Republic of Serbia and in the region on the whole.

Keywords: France, Kingdom of Serbia, sport, Joinville School (École de Joinville), Dragomir Nikolajević

Introduction

In the period of the Principality of Serbia, the emergence and development of physical education, as well as the first forms of sport, proceeded haphaz-

ardly, periodically and, to a large extent, with no continuity. The number of teachers in primary and secondary schools was small, while their knowledge regarding physical education was modest. The first sport-related steps were taken in different

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schools of fencing, swimming and gymnastics. Fighting for its independence during the greater part of the 19th century, the Serbian state most seriously approached physical culture in military structures. From the foundation of the Artillery School as an initial form of the Military Academy to the beginning of the Great War, the physical education subjects had an important status. After gaining independence and the declaration of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1882, the army also underwent changes. In 1883, two-year general military service was introduced, thus finally putting an end to the dualism between the small standing army and massive people's army. The army was divided into permanent staff consisting of officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers doing their military service. To this permanent staff, the reserve was added, made of the soldiers who had done their military service to the age of thirty. The permanent staff and the reserve made the first-call army. The second call-army involved conscripts of the age between 30 and 37, while the third-call army involved conscripts of the age between 37 and 50. The training content, previously available only to the members of the standing army, after the introduction of the longer regular military service, became available to all young men of military age. The entire educational content of soldiers' training was divided into the content of general-educational military character, military training and physical education, or gymnastics (gymnastics is one of the terms used to denote physical education in the period of the Kingdom of Serbia). The physical education content in all military branches was integral part of all training stages. Doing military service, as well as calling former soldiers into the

reserve, were the systematization periods of the influence of physical culture on the broader population. After its declaration of the kingdom, the Serbian state's attitude towards physical education in primary and secondary schools was raised to a higher level. First associations for physical exercise were founded, while some associations accepted the Czech gymnastics system – the Sokol. After the revival of the Olympic Games at the end of the 19th century, Olympism gained followers in Serbia in the first decade of the 20th century.

The influence of France on sport through officers and physical education teachers in the army of the Kingdom of Serbia

Although most Serbian officers were educated in the country, some officers were sent to foreign troops for further specialization. This matter and the importance of further education was discussed by Minister of War Jovan Mišković (1879) in the journal *Ratnik*: "... Is it necessary to send them abroad now, and how many of them, so that individual military spheres should be explored and studied, in order to be inevitably applied in our country afterwards?". That Minister Mišković's initiative presented to the Chief of the General Staff bore fruit is proved by the results in the specialization of the Serbian Army in the following decades. In the period 1888-1898, as many as 303 officers were educated abroad or, from minimum 18 to maximum 42 officers on an annual basis (Gavrilović, 2011, p. 113). Further education was also obtained in Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, Belgian as

well as French armies. In the schedule of physical activities for officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers in France, which officially came into force in 1874, the emphasis was placed on running, swimming, wrestling, singing, dancing, classical or English boxing, savate or French boxing, fencing etc. (Gavrilović, 2011, p. 28). In the eleven-year period (1888–1898), Serbian officers were not sent to France primarily for the purpose of specializing physical culture, but they certainly practised it in the French troops. In this period, 26 Serbian officers stayed in France. With their return to the country, they brought the French influence on physical culture in the Kingdom of Serbia. A systematic approach to physical culture in the army of the Kingdom of Serbia, applied by these officers, opened the opportunity for French physical culture exerting its influence on the broader population in the Kingdom of Serbia.

During its first thirty years (1850–1880), the Military Academy categorized the most prominent physical education subjects (gymnastics, fencing and swimming) into a group of major subjects, together with the French language, field fortifications and Christian Science (Ljušić, Bojković, Pršić & Jovović, 2000, p. 290). Some foreign gymnastics, fencing and swimming teachers were engaged as well. Jovan Zamastil from Vysoké Mýto, a place in the Czech part of the Austrian Empire, taught fencing, swimming and gymnastics from 1851. After Zamastil, these subjects were taught by Đorđe Marković Koder from 1858 to 1860. Marković had been professionally engaged as a gymnastics and fencing teacher in Szeged-based grammar school in Hungary (Bošković, 2014, p. 263). In addition to fortification,

rules of pioneer service and pontoon service, Engineer Captain Dimitrije Karadžić, the son of Vuk Karadžić, also taught gymnastics from 1859 to 1865. Dimitrije Karadžić graduated at the Military Engineer Academy in Bruck (Austro-Hungary) and then in Serbia he was given the rank of sub-lieutenant of the Serbian Army, and afterwards he was sent to Berlin, for military specialization in the Guards Pioneers Detachment (Šaulić, 1988, p. 236). Moreover, Infantry 1st Class Captain Lazar Cukić taught the gymnastics subject in the period 1858–1859, and in the long period between 1864 and 1887, Infantry Major Ferdo Mihoković taught swimming and gymnastics. In the period 1850–1880, four out of these five teachers of fencing, gymnastics and swimming brought their knowledge of physical culture from the territories beyond the Principality of Serbia (Zamastil, Marković, Karadžić and Mihoković). They had gained their experience primarily in Austro-Hungary. In the further development of the Military Academy (1880–1914), until the beginning of the First World War, as many as ten teachers were engaged for the above-listed subjects: Ljubomir Ilić (1886–1891), Miloš P. Vasić (1891–1899), Charles Doucet (1891–1919), Stevan P. Jovanović (1892–1895), Jovan Stojanović (1893–1894), Svetislav Mišković (1895–1897), Atanasije M. Popović (1898–1901), Dragomir T. Nikolajević (1900–1902), Aleksandar Josifović (1902–1907), Miroslav Vojinović a.k.a. František Hofman (1908–1914) (Ljušić et al., 2000, p. 299).

Two of the above-listed teachers had a significant effect on spreading the French content of physical culture among the cadets of the Military Academy and, in their further engagement,



The cabinet of anatomy at the school in Joinville
Photograph: private archives

also on the civilian population of the Kingdom of Serbia. After five teachers who had brought their knowledge of physical culture from the territory of Austro-Hungary (Zamastil, Marković, Karadžić, Mihoković and Ilić), in 1891 the Military Academy hired Belgian fencing instructor Charles Doucet. Doucet had completed the Brussels fencing school with flying colours. This school was opened in 1885, modelled after the French school in Joinville, near Paris (*École normale militaire de gymnastique*). After completing his education, as a successful and trained fencer, Doucet was engaged as a teacher in Turkey in 1889. At the suggestion of the Serbian military attaché in Istanbul, General Staff Colonel Nešić, Doucet moved to Belgrade and took up teaching fencing at the Serbian Military Academy. Before Doucet's arrival in Serbia, fencing had been taught by the old German method, while after his engagement, fencing was taught by the new French fencing method (Rašić, 1909a). This Belgian fencing instructor soon had a substantial number of students at the Military Academy, as well as in the private school he opened in Terazije, where he rented the whole floor for training premises. The most successful students included Dragomir Nikolajević, Aleksandar Josifović and Bogoljub Dinić, who, after their years-long cooperation with Doucet, were also engaged as fencing teachers at the Military Academy. Doctor Vojislav Subotić, Ješa Pantelić, Novaković and Simić were the outstanding students who attended the civilian fencing school in Terazije.

Charles Doucet's student and fencing teacher at the Military Academy, Dragomir T. Nikolajević, was another teacher at the Military Academy who significantly contributed to the influence of France

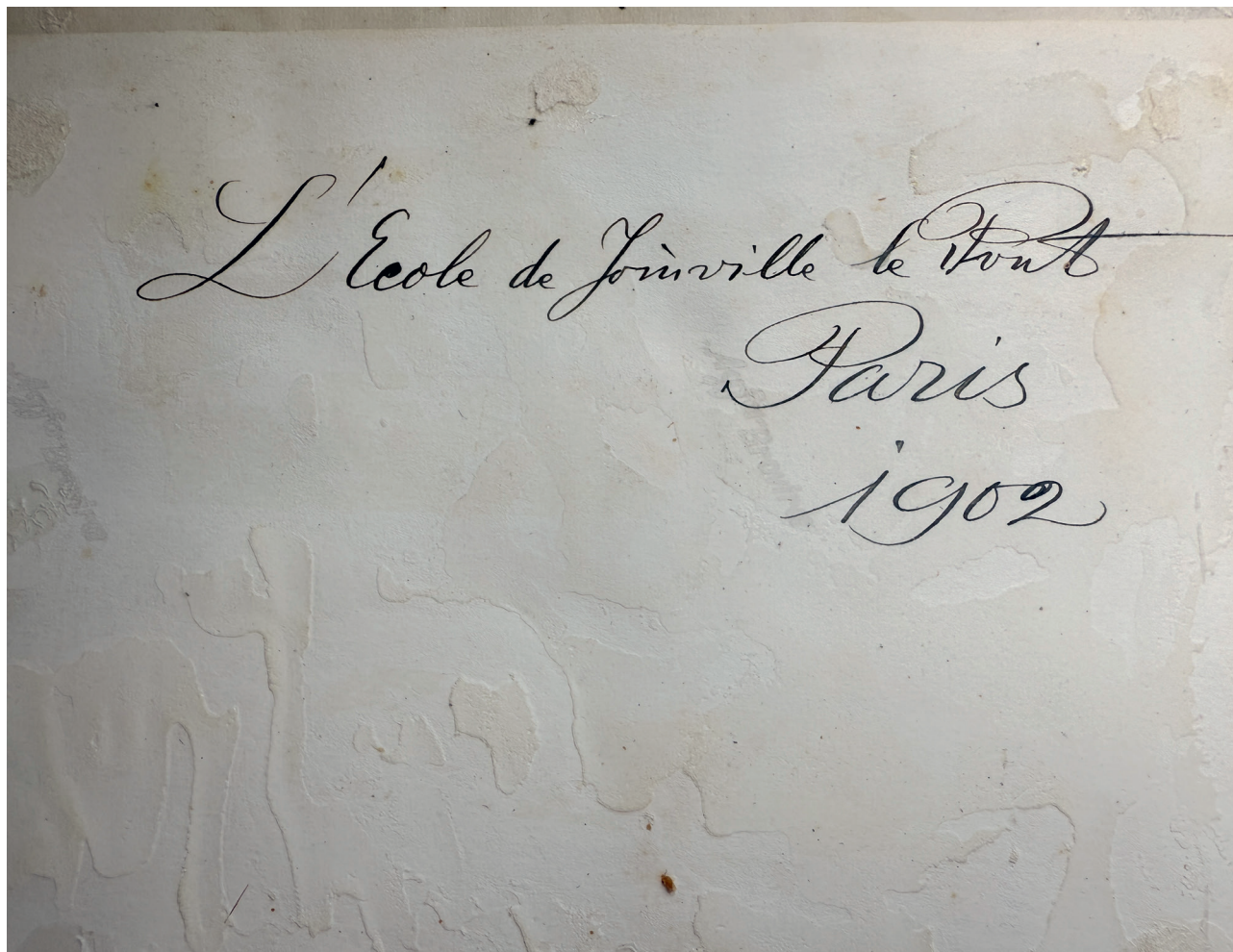
on the development of sport in the Kingdom of Serbia. The Ministry of War decided to send Nikolajević as an exceptionally talented fencer to France for further education in the sphere of physical culture, specifically to Joinville school near Paris (Naumović, 1902). The school in Joinville (*École normale militaire de gymnastique de Joinville*) was opened in 1852 and was an important place for the overall development of European physical culture in the 19th and 20th centuries (Joinville school is the predecessor of today's INSEP). Nikolajević's schooling abroad lasted from 1902 to 1904 (Military Archives, 1925). He studied different sports: gymnastics, athletics, fencing, boxing, savate, swimming, diving, wrestling, as well as anatomy, physiology and biomechanics. Nikolajević was lucky to be taught anatomy, physiology and biomechanics by famous Doctor Georges Demenÿ. In addition, he played for the Joinville football team, won medals in rowing and took part in athletics competitions (Vreme, 1930). He also specialized in the elements of military physical culture – bayonet fighting, uniform diving, transporting the wounded across platforms, crossing pits in uniform and with equipment over horizontally placed trees etc. After his return from specialization, Captain Nikolajević participated in running the Officers' Fencing School in this course from 1904 to 1905. Together with General Staff Major Dušan Pešić, Captain Nikolajević also performed the tasks of a member of the examination board in the Officers' Fencing School. This school gathered the officers most talented for fencing. Two streets in Belgrade were named after two students of the Officers' Fencing School – Branivoj Jovanović and Bogdan Hajnc. After his return from specialization in France, on 18 March



Dragomir Nikolajević exercises French boxing in the French school Joinville
(Dragomir Nikolajević's sport album)
Photograph: private archives

1904, Dragomir Nikolajević made a proposal at the 9th session of Belgrade Sokol Movement to train two members of this movement in boxing. The proposal of the artillery captain was accepted (Rašić, 1909b). In that period of the development of martial arts, there were two distinct boxing methods, French

and English. At the beginning of 1907, Captain Nikolajević and Lieutenant Josifović attended the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Dutch work in the physical and cultural spheres, At the gala fencing ceremonies, Nikolajević fought with Italian teacher Zanella. Both Serbian officers were



Dragomir Nikolajević exercises savate, or French boxing, in the French school Joinville, back side of the photograph
(Dragomir Nikolajević's sport album)
Photograph: private archives

awarded medals for their successful performance by Dutch Queen Wilhelmina. The participation of the Serbian officers in the Netherlands fencing

events is, after more than a century, celebrated as the Military Sports Day in the Army of the Republic of Serbia.^[2]

[2] https://www.vs.rs/sr_lat/o-vojski/tradicija/vojni-praznici (Accessed on 5.4.2025.).

During his service in Niš, Nikolajević announced writing a book with the topic of sport – “Military Library of Rational Physical Labour”. The book would encompass the content about walking and running, fencing, swimming, water polo, rowing, wrestling, French and English boxing... In his invitation for the subscription, Nikolajević emphasized that the book would be enriched with the addition of the data of French scientists, Doctor Demenj, Doctor Tissie, Doctor Michaux, and of the Joinville Military School (Hadžić, 1909). Before the First World War, in 1914, the first book on boxing was published in the Kingdom of Serbia, entitled *French and English Boxing*. On the last pages of the book, the author, Lieutenant Colonel Nikolajević, points out that in the preparation of this publication, he also used the works of Doctor Tissie, Doctor LaGrange, Doctor Paget, Professor Charlemont, Professor Leclerc and the practical experiences of the Joinville school.

As a former student of Joinville school, Nikolajević also took active part in the work of the Union of Sokol Societies “Dušan Silni” and the Serbian Olympic Committee.

Officer Nikolajević selflessly shared the experience gained during his schooling in France in the sphere of physical culture in the Kingdom of Serbia.

France and the Olympic movement in the Kingdom of Serbia

The most important place in the revival of Olympism and the foundation of the Olympic movement in the 19th century belongs to France, more specifically to French diplomat and pedagogue, Baron Pierre

de Coubertin. Intending to reform and improve physical culture in France, Coubertin studied different physical culture systems in Europe. In 1889, he was sent by the French Ministry of National Education to the USA and Canada to become familiar with physical culture at the universities in these countries. In his idea of the educational reform, he treated modern sport as an agent of desired changes in education (Ilić & Mijatović, 2006, p. 295). In sports magazines and at scientific gatherings, Coubertin promoted the idea of reviving Olympism. After finding like-minded people in England and the USA, the three-member committee decided that the International Sport Congress should be organized in Paris in 1894. The delegates from 11 countries attending the event decided to revive the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896. The revival of Olympism, with the dominant influence of France, was exactly an important driving force for the development of sport, as well as of overall physical culture in the Kingdom of Serbia. The first step was made at the First Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 and culminated at the Fifth Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912, when the Serbian Olympic Club was finally accepted to the international Olympic movement.

Although it was not a participant country, the Kingdom of Serbia attended the first modern Olympic Games as a guest. In its visit to the First Olympic Games, the delegation of the Kingdom of Serbia was led by young King Aleksandar Obrenović, accompanied by the state delegation. King Aleksandar's visit was the first visit of a sovereign to the modern Olympic Games. After visiting the Serbian Monastery of Chilandar and Russian Pan-teleimon's Monastery at Mount Athos, the king sent to Piraeus, where he was welcomed by King

George of Greece with Crown Prince Constantine, Prince George and a large delegation. After the meal at the Greek court, the hosts and the guests went to the Olympic cycling race. On the second day of his stay, King Aleksandar appeared at the stadium when in his honour the orchestra played the national anthems of Greece and Serbia. Both rulers were enthusiastically welcomed by the present people. The following day, King Aleksandar watched the Greek athlete win the marathon and it is also assumed that he watched the competition of Momčilo Tapavica, a Serbian wrestler representing Hungary at the Olympic Games (Šarenac, Baljkas & Borovnjak, 2020, p. 39).

The king's retinue included General Franasović, the Minister of War; Lieutenant Colonel Ćirić, first aide-de-camp, Major Rašić, as well as Major Mišić, aide-de-camp. This is how Živojin Mišić described his visit to the Mount Athos and the First Olympic Games with King Aleksandar: „The king used to travel frequently abroad in those years. All aide-de-camps and orderlies escorted the king on many occasions during his journeys. However, it was never my turn, probably because at the same time I was also the commander of the battalion, while others had no other appointments or had only some clerical duties. Eventually, it was finally my turn to escort the king during his journey to Mount Athos and Athens” (Mišić, 1969, p. 181). The visit of Aide-de-Camp and Major Živojin Mišić to the Olympic Games in Athens had a positive effect on the future generations of officers, in terms of their acceptance of the Olympic ideas. The future *vojvoda* of the Serbian Army was the first to accept and spread the “flame” of Olympism among the young officers who founded the Serbian Olympic Club in 1910.

During the Olympic Games in Athens, the Serbian press published reports about the stay of the king and his retinue in Greece. The Serbian king's visit and stay were reported by *Male novine*, *Videlo*, *Večernje novosti*, *Srpske novine* etc. The intonation of the Serbian national anthem and the raising of the state flag at the first modern Olympic Games made a strong impression on the guest delegation of the Kingdom of Serbia. The officers' impressions from the First Olympic Games gave additional momentum to the influence of the army to raising the level of physical culture on the whole.

On 10 February 1910, the Serbian Olympic Club in Belgrade's “Moscow” Hotel. Out of six members of the club management, four were officers of the Serbian Army. Furthermore, in the years before the beginning of the Great War, army officers took up most functions in the management and boards of the Serbian Olympic Club (Gavrilović & Mijatović, 2020). More than 60 officers and a substantial number of soldiers took part in the development of Olympism in the Kingdom of Serbia. The most important figure in the development of the Serbian Olympic movement was officer Svetomir Đukić. From his youth he had excellent physical skills which he further developed through his education at the Military Academy. The attendance of the Serbian delegation at the Olympic Games in Athens had positive effects on the overall physical culture of the Serbian people, as well as directly on young officer Đukić. Živojin Mišić, the *vojvoda* of the Serbian Army in the Great War, stayed as King Aleksandar Obrenović's aide-de-camp at the Olympic Games in Athens. In his subsequent professional career, he promoted sport in the army, but also among people in general. In his *Memoirs from the Balkan Wars*, Svetomir Đukić writes the

following: “[...] As a sublieutenant, I was under the command of Živojin Mišić in Valjevo... He advised the younger among us and drew our attention to the importance of physical exercise. He had a great influence on me and gymnastics became integral part of my life. I am grateful to him, among other things, for being able to make the Kingdom of Serbia a member of the International Olympic Association (Đukić describes his encounter with *Vojvoda* Mišić in 1913), while I was personally accepted as a member of the International Olympic Committee – an honour not only for me, but also for Serbia” (Đukić, 2014, p. 207). According to Đukić’s *Memoirs*, the Kingdom of Serbia was an official participant at the Fifth Olympic Games held in Stockholm in 1912. Serbia was represented by two competitors: Dragutin Tomašević in the marathon and Dušan Milošević in the 100-metre race. At the Stockholm games, Serbia officially joined the International Olympic Committee (Ilić & Mijatović, 2006, p. 521). A year after the Serbia’s entry into the International Olympic Committee, Svetomir Đukić, Director of the Serbian Olympic Committee, had to take up military duties because of the beginning of the Balkan Wars. This is how Major Đukić these abrupt changes in his *Memoirs*: “Life is full of surprises. Several months ago, I was introduced at the Swedish court as a new member of the International Olympic Committee. I could not even imagine the glory and luxury of the Swedish court. I took great care of my behaviour knowing that it was no longer my private thing, but that I represented my country, about which many of the present people knew nothing or had a completely wrong idea” (Đukić, 2014, p. 211). After the participation in the Olympic Games in Stockholm, the work of the Serbian Olympic Committee was

slowed down by the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913. At the beginning of 1914, the Committee organized several competitions: 200-metre race, 20-kilometre race and the cycling race. On the eve of the Great War, in June 1914, the delegates of the International Olympic Committee gathered in the City Hall of Paris. The Congress was chaired by Pierre de Coubertin, the initiator of revived Olympism, while Serbia was represented by Svetomir Đukić. Besides Coubertin, the Congress was attended by Sloane, Balck, Guth-Jarkovský, Edström and giant-like Usseaux as the closest associates of this French humanist and baron. According to officer Đukić, Coubertin was a combination of aristocratic sophistication, democratic idealism and a fighter for justice, humanity and equality. The gathered representatives respected Coubertin, feeling his contribution in the initiation of Olympism, the “ignition” of the Olympic torch, and turning humanity in a peace-loving direction (Đukić, 2015, p. 23). Serbian delegate Đukić believed that Olympic values matched the characteristics of our nation, i.e., humanity, heroism and chivalry. This is how Major Đukić further described the atmosphere at the inaugural congress before the Great War: “At the first session, the Austrian delegate authoritatively demanded that the Czech delegate, Doctor Guth-Jarkovský, should be dismissed from the IOC because the Czech Crown lands were integral part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Two opposed groups were immediately formed – German countries on one side, and Slavic countries on the other. A heated debate began. Coubertin was able to run even the most turbulent sessions with plenty of tactfulness, sophistication and authority, and to resume unity firmly, to find a solution, with no confusion, commotion, hesitation or rudeness – while holding

just a white piece of paper in front of him. In the end, after heated arguments, it was decided that Doctor Guth-Jarkovský should remain in the IOC. On this occasion, it could be felt that the European atmosphere was full of electricity. Coubertin sensed the onset of the terrible disaster and thought about how two and a half years before (in 776 BC), Greek tribes had stopped wars in order to hold the Olympics, while now people suspended the Olympics in order to wage wars” (Đukić, 2015, p. 24). After the Congress, the IOC members were received by French President Poincaré in the Elysée Palace Park. When Major Đukić was introduced to the French president, Coubertin pointed out the following: “He is one of the heroes of Serbia, a small nation by its numbers, but great by its chivalry”, while President Poincaré: “And also by its humanity towards its opponent” (Đukić, 2015, p. 24). On 28 June 1914, Major Đukić visited horse races in Longchamp, where, among many guests from the diplomatic corps, there was also President Poincaré with his wife. After the derby, Đukić stayed at the racecourse for a while. At that moment, terrible commission and apprehension spread among the people while newspaper sellers hurried to inform the public about the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian archduke and his wife in Sarajevo. The world soon entered the Great War, and officer Svetomir Đukić, with a large number of Serbian Olympic sportsmen, took part in the greatest, until then unprecedented, world war conflict.

The Kingdom of Serbia was a victorious country after the First World War and on 1 December 1918 it entered the newly-formed state of South Slavs – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Moreover, the Serbian Olympic Committee continued its activities within the Yugoslav Olympic

Committee, while Svetomir Đukić was appointed vice president of this organization.

Conclusion

After Serbia definitely gained its independence at the Congress of Berlin and declared itself as a kingdom, various social spheres in the Serbian state developed at a faster pace. A large number of young people returned to the Kingdom of Serbia after being educated in European countries. The wide range of knowledge transferred from abroad to Serbian society included the sphere of physical culture. Furthermore, the state took different steps in raising awareness of the importance of physical exercise. After its foundation in 1850, the Military Academy often appointed people who had been educated abroad as teachers of gymnastics, fencing and swimming. Moreover, the Military Academy also sent Serbian officers to foreign troops for the purpose of specialization in the sphere of physical culture. The French fencing method was introduced in the Kingdom of Serbia with the arrival of Charles Doucet, the Belgian fencing instructor. He made a significant contribution to the development of fencing at the Military Academy, as well as in civil society. For the purpose of specializing in the sphere of physical culture, the Ministry of War sent Officer Dragomir Nikolajević to the French School of Physical Education in Joinville. After his return from schooling abroad, Nikolajević took active part in the promotion of sport in the Sokol movement, the Olympic movement, as well as by his publications in the sphere of physical culture. The revival of Olympism at the end of the 19th century raised

awareness of physical culture at the global level. The ideas of Baron de Coubertin and his associates were recognized in the Kingdom of Serbia, which led to the Serbian Olympic sportsmen's joining the International Olympic Committee before the

Great War. France contributed to the development of physical culture in the Kingdom of Serbia and had a positive influence on its further development in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the Republic of Serbia.

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