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FOOTBALL COMMENTATORS AS HISTORIANS: USES OF HISTORY AND SERBIAN CLUB FOOTBALL, 1990 - 2005

While public memory and official uses of history are well established fields of research, the relations between history and popular culture have seen far less investigation. This article aspires to point out some of the ways in which history is used in the public sphere in far less regulated ways by persons who are not professionally associated with history as an academic or educational field. By analysing historical narratives and references in football club magazines the article investigates how history has been used within Serbian football culture from 1990 to 2005. The article demonstrates how uses of history and historical myths within popular culture contribute primarily to the creation of group identities, but less directly also to negotiations of grand political and national histories.

Use of history and popular culture

History is used in many fields of society, in countless ways and for numerous purposes. In Europe history is traditionally the hand maiden of the national states. Much history writing has served to legitimise and naturalise modern European nation states – even Leopold von Ranke, the father of scientific history, let his research serve to

praise what he saw as the divine Prussian state building.¹ Yet, the precondition for these well known political and ideological uses of history is the fact that history is constantly represented and drawn upon much broader in other fields of society, be it to serve social, psychological, political and even commercial needs. An essential resource for imagining communities and identities and for creating orientation in time and space and affiliation to places and communities, it works on all levels of human collectives, from unions, nations and communities to relations between individuals.²

The numerous ways in which history is represented and drawn upon in society may be referred to as *Historical culture*, which includes historiography as well as the countless other types of history communication. Important elements of historical culture are popular representations of history such as schoolbooks and trivial history, as well as political speeches, commemoration ceremonies, monuments, film and other products of arts.³ Furthermore, historical culture also denotes the cultures of the academic and educational fields of history. It is characterised by certain ways of researching and communicating history, and will be influenced by particular relationships to society.⁴ A historical culture contains a reservoir of well known elements such as narratives, references, metaphors and symbols.

Use of history, then, can be defined broadly as „... when aspects of a historical culture are activated in a communicative process in order for certain groups to satisfy certain needs or look after certain interests.”⁵ Uses of history can take the form of lengthy historical expla-

¹ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005, 25-26.

² On various types of uses of history see Peter Aronsson, *Historiebruk – at använda det förflutna*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2004; Bernard Eric Jensen, *Historie – Livsverden og Fag*, København: Gyldendahl, 2003

³ Klas-Göran, Karlsson: ‘The Holocaust as a Problem of Historical Culture. Theoretical and Analytical Challenges,’ in Klas-Göran Karlsson & Ulf Zander: *Echoes of the Holocaust*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003, 32.

⁴ For a similar understanding of the concept, see Jan Eivind Myhre, ‘Den Norske Historiske Kultur. Om sammenheng og fragmentering i norsk historieforskning’, *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Oslo), 1993, 2, and William H. Hubbard et al., eds., *Making a Historical Culture. Historiography in Norway*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press 1995.

⁵ Karlsson, ‘The Holocaust as a problem of historical culture’, 38

nations or drawing of parallels that serve to substantiate an argument; or it can be a quick inclusion of a metaphor that invests the speech or text with a certain emotional capital. History can even be evoked and thus drawn upon by a single word, image or symbol.⁶

The concepts of historical culture and use of history are particularly useful for this analysis because they bridge the gap between private individual uses of the past on one side and official public uses on the other. Also, they avoid the traditional distinction between history and memory, which tends to presuppose that history, unlike memory is rational, balanced and emotionally detached. Obviously, history is very often not so at all.⁷

In spite of the widespread interest in uses of history and memory, the ways in which history is used within popular culture has been studied only scarcely. This is strange, since popular culture can be argued to contribute more decisively than any other use of history to political and ideological mobilisation such as constructions of national identity.⁸ The mobilising potential of sport has long been recognised; it is emotionally evocative and usually associated with celebration and pleasure. Yet, sport is also essentially divisive, and thus an obvious agent of social disorder.⁹ The frequent war metaphors, the hooliganism and even the tribal and violent character of fan behaviour within modern sports culture all testify to the chaotic and disruptive power of sports. Club football is especially interesting in this connection, because large professional football clubs can constitute their own subcultures creating individual historical identities within larger societal ones.

Assuming that both history and popular culture are important elements of identity construction, both on national, individual and other levels, my aim here will be to try to combine the two fields of research in order to investigate how history is used in popular culture. If

⁶ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 203.

⁷ See e.g. Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, viii

⁸ E.g. Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Oxford: Berg, 2002.

⁹ Lincoln Allison, 'Sport and Politics', in Lincoln Allison, ed., *The Politics of Sport*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986, 15-16

we presuppose that history is used as a main resource for sense-making and identity-construction on the private and personal levels as well and on public and collective ones, may popular culture, being very public indeed, but still somehow individual and separate from the official and stately positions, take up a kind of intermediary role between the private and the more official public uses of history?

The intermediating role played by popular culture in the use and negotiation of history may be particularly important in Serbia for two reasons: firstly, because political upheavals often lead to rewriting and renegotiation of history. Since history is usually tied to the political and national cultures of a state, often being used to legitimise and naturalise state constructions and power structures, what can be considered usable history changes with changes of regime. Serbia, along with most other former Yugoslav states, has definitely experienced her share of political upheavals during the last three decades (the 1980s' crises; the fall of communism; the break-down of Yugoslavia; the wars; the establishment of new states). And consequently, Serbia has also seen a lot of history revision. And secondly, because Serbia, again along with other former Yugoslav states, seems to have experienced what we may call a break-down of historical culture. The old institutionalised and hierarchical field of Yugoslav history was shaken, as the history it had told was shown to be manipulated and selective at best. One effect of the profound changes in the historical mythology of Communist Yugoslavia was a significant loss of public trust in the academic discipline of history. According to two historians, Serbian history was still in the first decade of the 21st century struggling to regain legitimacy.¹⁰

In a situation, where historical culture is at least partly broken down, we may assume that history becomes open to negotiation and redefinition. It seems likely that other agents are just as or even more legitimate negotiators of history than historians. In such a situation, I will propose that much interpretation and communication of history is decentralised into what we may think of as *historical subcultures* and that important work with regard to history interpretation and uses of history is taking place within popular culture.

¹⁰ Predrag J. Marković and Nataša Milićević, 'Serbian historiography in the time of transition. A struggle for legitimacy', *Istorija 20 veka*, 2007, 1, 145-146

Football culture and history

At times, sports culture interacts very explicitly with historical culture and plays a conspicuous role in interpreting and negotiating main themes of grand national histories. Two particular examples may illustrate this.

The first is about football, though it is not related to Serbia at all, which, in fact, may be just as well, because it also serves to underline that use of history in football culture is definitely not a phenomenon that should be considered as restricted to a Serbian or, if one wants, Balkan context at all: In an English provincial town, where I was doing my Saturday shopping, I ran into a middle-aged man wearing a scruffy navy blue sweatshirt. On the sweatshirt was printed a lion, the St. George Cross and a text saying: „Two world wars. One world cup. England 1966. We make our own destiny”. This obviously refers to the victory of the England national football team over West Germany in the World Cup final on Wembley in 1966. On the sweatshirt, this event is celebrated by evoking and reiterating a main trope of English (in this case obviously not British) national history, and this leads on to a glamorous generalisation about an essential national characteristic.

My second example is not from football but from basketball. In November 2004, the Serbian star basket ball player Milan Gurović caused an inter-stately historical dispute. On his left shoulder Gurović had a tattoo of World War II Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović. Gurović, playing for Partizan, was to go to Zagreb for a match against Cibona VIP. However, Croatian authorities refused to let Gurović display the tattoo, arguing that it violated Croatian law, which forbids the distribution of symbols that spread racial, national, religious and other kinds of hatred. Gurović refused to cover his shoulder and made a number of statements to the press about how Croatian authorities completely misunderstood Mihailović, who, according to Gurović, was quite the opposite of a wartime criminal Fascist leader. Serbian tabloids repeated this interpretation, while Serbian politicians argued that this was a case of individual ‘iconography’ and should not be

drawn into politics.¹¹ So here we have a case of a sports hero, quite the opposite of an academic historian, interfering with historical debate and all of a sudden drawing a deeply complicated historical disagreement to the front of popular culture. He certainly marked his stance on the issue, though he had to pay for it dearly, as he was not allowed to play in Zagreb, Partizan lost the match and in the end he apparently became too problematic a figure for Partizan and was sold on.

However, such explicit interferences from the side of sports culture into historical culture and debate seem rare. Judging from the publications of two Serbian football clubs, *Partizan* and *Crvena zvezda* (Red Star), between 1990 and 2005, history is not a main preoccupation of people associated with these clubs. Neither is nationalism, though groups of fans were associated with nationalist and paramilitary violence during the Yugoslav wars, as has been well documented by Ivan Čolović and others.¹²

Nevertheless, various types of history are used in different ways in the discourse of the football clubs. By far the most prominent use of history in the football club magazines is the use of internal history, which is inward looking and oriented towards the club. The clubs are strongly self-historicising. They write long and detailed descriptions of their own history, thus constructing strong identities founded in well documented distant pasts. Club magazines make frequent references to their club’s glorious past, most often in the form of purely sports related references to the fantastic results made by the sports club as such. This serves to celebrate the sports club as community, but also to mobilise for further attainment, arguing that club members are both able and obliged to honour that glorious past by attaining great results.¹³

Internal sports history is also widely used to underline just how great a great achievement is. In the Partizan club magazine, goalkeeper

¹¹ See Tea Sindbæk, ‘The fall and rise of a national hero: Interpretations of Draža Mihailović and the Chetniks in Yugoslavia and Serbia since 1945’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 17, 2009, 54-56

¹² Ivan Čolović, ‘Football, Hooligans and War’, in Ivan Čolović, *The Politics of Symbol in Serbia*, London: Hurst 2002; Srdjan Vrcan and Drazen Lalic, ‘From End s to Trenches: Yugoslavia’, in Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti, eds., *Football Cultures and Identities*, London: Macmillan, 1999, 176-185.

¹³ E.g. in an interview with general secretary of the Partizan Club. See Rade Šoškić: ‘Čak i da stanemo, niko nas ne može stića’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 1st of June, 1997, 2-3.

Ivica Kralj was celebrated for not letting in a goal for 840 minutes, thus beating both the Serbian and the older Yugoslav record.¹⁴ Also, the club magazines are full of long and detailed descriptions of important matches of the past, delineating the history of the club's participation in international tournaments or its history of achievements in the Yugoslav and later republican cup tournament.¹⁵ Primarily, the mythical figures of football club history are famous old players and 'golden generations' of teams that gained great results. Thus, the clubs and their members themselves, their titles and other attainments, and their football playing are the core of these internal histories.

Nevertheless, the football clubs' use of history was certainly influenced by widespread turns and themes in the historical culture of Serbian society in general. At times, the grand political narratives served as frameworks according to which ongoing events could be interpreted or subcultural historical identities could be constituted. Elements of national and political history was selected and incorporated as signature parts of the clubs' individual histories, while other bits were discarded. Thus, both subcultural and grand histories were negotiated. In the following I will give some examples of that.

Most of Partizan's and Crvena zvezda's uses of Serbian national and political history focus on two main historical themes: Yugoslav Communism and the Second World War. These two themes occur in quite different contexts and have different functions.

Yugoslav Communist history and club identities

In the first case, that of Yugoslav Communism, the political and national history is included and drawn upon in internal club history. What is at stake here is the historical identity of the clubs; Crvena zvezda's and Partizan's traditional relationship to communism and Yugoslavia. The two clubs chose very different strategies: whereas

Partizan apparently celebrates it, for Crvena zvezda it seems that the communist past fairly quickly became unwanted and was discarded. Instead, during the early 1990s, Crvena zvezda strongly associated with Serbian nationalism.¹⁶ In September 1991 the club management decided that Crvena zvezda was to become a „national club” (narodni klub). The aim, according to the club president, was to create the closest possible cooperation with the fans who supported the team so loyally.¹⁷ In 1992, the manager of the Crvena zvezda football club claimed in an interview with the magazine *Tempo* that the Red Star name had nothing to do with communism.¹⁸ While this feeble statement is obviously wrong, it does demonstrate the problem of revising the club's history without losing essential elements of identity. The name could not really be discarded; therefore some way had to be found around it. Probably the loyal club supporters would not easily have forgiven a renaming of their beloved club. The attempt was made when Dinamo Zagreb during the 1990s was temporarily renamed HAŠK and later Croatia, which caused great consternation and protests among the fans.¹⁹

Crvena Zvezda's distancing itself from its communist and Yugoslav past apparently remains nearly twenty years after the fall of socialist Yugoslavia. When I visited the club's stadium in 2009, the guide explained to me that 'really, Tito never liked Zvezda. He always supported Partizan.'²⁰ This was said with a certain pride and emphasised a somehow autonomous, independently Serbian nature of the club.

Partizan, on the other hand, often embraces its communist Yugoslav heritage. In September 2003, the Partizan football club's magazine *Samo Partizan* published an interview with the 80 year old Stjepan Bobek, who participated in the foundation of Partizan in 1945. Bobek emphasised that the club was created as a military club on political orders and following the Soviet model. The interview draws ex-

¹⁶ Čolović, 'Football, Hooligans and War', 266ff

¹⁷ Rade Stanojević, 'Mi smo narodni klub', *Zvezda*, September 1991, 10-11.

¹⁸ Quoted in Čolović, 'Football, Hooligans and War', 268.

¹⁹ Alex J. Bellamy, *The Formation of Croatian national identity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2003, 117-122.

²⁰ At a small guided tour of the Zvezda stadium on 14th of June 2009

¹⁴ M. Todorović, '840 Minuta Ivica Kralja', *Partizanov Vesnik*, 1st of June, 1997, 16

¹⁵ E.g. Milan Stojanović, 'PFC u Evropi', *Samo Partizan*, broj 9, September 2003, p. 18-21; Srđan Radojević, 'Kup bez značaja – ali treba ga uzeti', *Samo Partizan*, no. 10, February 2005

tensively on the communist past to support a historical identity for the club. Bobek recounted anecdotes about football among the Partisan forces during the Second World War and train transport for free in socialist Yugoslavia, stating that "Everyone were Yugoslavs. That was also how we felt. We played for Tito and Yugoslavia".²¹

On the occasion of Partizan's 60 years anniversary in 2005, the club enthusiastically celebrated its origins in the army and in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In the memorial issue of its journal, Partizan took pride in remembering that it was founded on the initiative of Svetozar Vukmanović-Tempo, high ranking Communist Party official and head of the newly created Yugoslav Army. The journal also pointed to the club's links to other glorious Partisan War veterans.²² The deep interconnectedness between Partizan and the Communist Yugoslav Army was presented as something positive and valuable in Partizan's background.²³ The anniversary was celebrated among others with a symbolic match between Partizan's team and a representation of the Army. The moral element of this was repeatedly emphasised in the journal: 'Partizan respects tradition and do not allow anything to be forgotten'; „we do not forget our creator”.²⁴

Yet, in spite of Partizan's very obvious appreciation of its communist past, the club does approach it selectively with regard to some issues. The role that Franjo Tuđman, the Croatian politician and president 1990-1999, played as director of the Partizan club 1958-1962, the period when Partizan decided on its characteristic black and white colours, is not a popular theme.²⁵ In early 1990, following the increasingly unforgiving political confrontation with Croatia, Partizan badly needed to distance itself from the part Tuđman played in its history. *Partizanov Vesnik*, the club newspaper, fiercely refused that the idea and origin of Partizan was in any way associated with Franjo Tuđman,

²¹ Vanja Nestorović, 'U moje vreme bilo je mnogo majstora!', *Samo partizan*, September 2003, 16-17

²² Slobodan Novaković, 'Drug Tempo', *Samo partizan*, October 2005, 3.

²³ Danko Novak, 'Vojska nas stvorila', *Samo partizan*, October 2005, 4.

²⁴ Danko Novak, 'Proslava', *Samo partizan*, October 2005, 1; Novak, 'Vojska nas stvorila', 4.

²⁵ For a short description of Tuđman's involvement with the Partizan club, see e.g. Darko Hudelist, *Tuđman. Biografija*, Zagreb: Profil, 2004, 211-219.

„that most obscure person from our political environment and leader of the pro-Fascist party”. And it denied any possibility of changing the club colours, even if he did have some influence on them.²⁶ According to Richard Mills, in 2007, Tuđman's role in Partizan's history was still not very popular in the fan community either.²⁷ Probably Partizan as a community is much more comfortable with associating itself with Serbia's and Yugoslavia's communist history than with a most hated Croat, who, in spite of his initially fine communist credentials, became the symbol of independent Croatia and Croatian nationalism.

The celebration of the Communist and Yugoslav past is combined with an emphasised national adherence. Parallel to its communist heritage, Partizan has also identified itself with Serbian national symbols, the Serbian Orthodox Church being the most important one in this case. In connection to the anniversary in 2005, the editorial of the club magazine stated that there was a lot to celebrate for the successful sports society; „First and foremost”, the club was blessed by the Serbian Orthodox Church and its head Patriarch Pavle. A delegation from Partizan visited the Patriarchate and gave the Patriarch some presents, including an album of photos from the unforgettable visit by the Partizan sportsmen to the monasteries of Hilandar and Sveti Vasilije Ostroški. „And in that way”, claimed the editorial, „Partizan received recognition of its position and role in the total life of the Serbian people”.²⁸

Association with the church is thus seen as a main key to identification with Serbs and Serbia and to situating the club within Serbian culture and society. The museum of the Partizan football club in the JNA stadium now holds numerous icons and documentation of the club's financial support to the church. These types of objects can also be found in the museum of Crvena Zvezda at their stadium. Like parts of Serbian society in general, both football clubs have, so to say, adopted the Serbian Orthodox Church as their new ideological adherence.

²⁶ Mihajlo Mihalić, "'Tuđmanovština" među nama', *Partizanov Vesnik*, 17th of March 1990, 4.

²⁷ Mills, 'It all ended', 1196.

²⁸ Novak, 'Proslava', 1, see also Stojanče Risteovski, 'Hram u Humskoj', *Samo Partizan*, October 2005, 35.

Second World War history and the construction of others

In the first half of the 1990s, Second World War references and terminology were used extensively in Serbian football club discourse. This tendency was clearly adopted from the widespread public uses of Second World War history in politics and the media. It also shows how certain events may make political history acutely relevant for sporting life, as it happened with the Yugoslav conflict and wars, of course. As national conflict moved into the football stadiums, Second World War references were increasingly used for creating enemy images.

Especially when discussing the clashes between Croatian and Serbian football fans during 1990, both Partizan's and Crvena Zvezda's club magazine drew extensively on wartime history, even though other historical themes were used as well. The clashes between fans were seen as expressions of nationalism that was blamed on political leaders in the Yugoslav republics, primarily Tuđman and his party HDZ, but also Rugova from Kosovo, Rupel from Slovenia and Drašković from Serbia, whereas Serbia's own Milošević was never blamed.²⁹

Partizanov Vesnik criticised the Fascist-like behaviour of the audience in Western parts of Yugoslavia, and suggested that they were frontline forces under Ustasha-Chetnik insignia, who used the sporting field as a testing ground for their nationalist goals.³⁰ The journal repeatedly warned that it was this kind of ideology that could lead to new instances of mass murder and suffering, such as Jasenovac, the infamous Ustasha concentration camp. Some articles also mentioned Goli Otok, the Bartholomew Night and the Spanish inquisition.³¹ After clashes between Dinamo and Zvezda fans in Zagreb in May 1990 and between Hajduk Split and Partizan fans in Split in September 1990,

when members of Hajduk's Torcida fan club had behaved so violently that the match was terminated before time, a feature article in *Partizanov Vesnik* stated that the Torcida hooligans were, in fact, only another warning that „the ghosts of the past”, who left behind themselves only „execution places like Jasenovac, Gradina, Golubnjaca” were not really dead.³²

It is obviously not a coincidence that the language of historic references focus on Croatia's Fascist Second World War history. That history is a very poignant symbol, when the author wants to condemn the hooligans in unforgivable terms and tie their actions to political developments within Croatia, which he finds worthy of condemnation as well. As was the case with the media uses of Second World War history, this is a use of history that is plainly focused on the present. This way of using history is really not interested in the past as such, but only in history as a source of powerful metaphors and emotion.

In 1991, when the Yugoslav championship tournament was postponed because of warfare in Croatia, an editorial in *Crvena Zvezda's* club magazine blamed the „Ustashoid” politics of the Tuđman government and reminded the readers of the killing of Serbs in Croatia just because they were Serbs. According to the editorial, Zagreb's „Ustasha fans” even threatened the life of Serbian players.³³

The wartime references remained in use, for example in connection to Partizan's horrible defeat (5-0) by Croatia (formerly and afterwards known as Dinamo) in Zagreb in 1997. The match was described very soberly in a long technical feature in Partizan's magazine.³⁴ However, in an interview in a later issue, Partizan's young forward, Dragan Stoisavljević described an argument during the match: „one of Croatia's defence players hit me with an elbow. I said I could return that. Then Jurić approached me: ‘what do you want, Chetnik, that we fondle you?’ and he cursed me. I returned: ‘listen, Ustasha, you have grown old and now you just make threats’.”³⁵ Obviously, wartime terminology stayed a powerful source of expressions for enmity, though apparently mainly in pejorative functions.

²⁹ Cf. Čolović, ‘Football, Hooligans and War’, 264.

³⁰ Mihajlo Mihelić, ‘Demoni zla’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 17th of February 1990, 4.

³¹ Mihajlo Mihelić, ‘Falangisti među sportistima’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 31st of March 1990, 4; Mihajlo Mihelić, ‘Vrh ledenog brega’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 26th of March 1990, 4

³² Mihajlo Mihelić, ‘Nacionalni bojovnici’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 1st of October 1990, 4

³³ *Zvezda*, August 1991, 5

³⁴ Rade Šoškić, ‘Ipak plave gore’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 1st of August 1997, 3-7

³⁵ Miodrag Kos, ‘Majstor driblinga’, *Partizanov Vesnik*, 1st of October 1997, 11.

However, the meaning of Second World War references also changed and developed during the 1990s. Inevitable, wartime symbols were filtered through the experience of the Yugoslav wars in the first half of the 1990s, when these symbols were made very present by references in the media. Second World War terminology was ascribed new layers of meaning through actions made or described with reference to this terminology. Consequently, calling someone Chetnik or Ustasha on a football field in 1997 reactivated both the enmity of World War II and that of the warfare of the 1990s.

Concluding remarks

The use of history in Serbian club football between 1990 and 2005 was mainly a use of internal history for internal purposes, such as strengthening identification, coherence and pride within the club community. At times, however, the football clubs' uses of history clearly followed general tendencies within historical culture. The most obvious example of this was in the use of Second World War history, which largely mirrored the use of that history in the general public at that time.

History was negotiated by the football clubs, mainly with an internal focus, for example when bits of both 'grand' political history and individual club history were selected and other discarded, creating a whole that could serve to supply coherence and identification for the members of the club subculture. But history was negotiated outwardly as well; Partizan and Crvena Zvezda represented two different strategies with regard to coming to terms with the communist past, thus supplying Serbian society with alternatives to choose from. The football clubs' uses of history thus contributed to an even further fragmentation of official historiography by providing alternative history interpretations. But at the same time they supported members of their own football subculture in that individual piecing together of historical identity that is after all the most common and permanently ongoing use of history in any society.