

INTRODUCTION

Football, history, and the nation in Southeastern Europe

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In October 2014, Serbia's European Championships qualifying match against Albania was abandoned after a drone flew onto the pitch in Belgrade with a banner showing Kosovo as part of a Greater Albania, provoking a fight between both teams and their fans. While the flight of the drone was a technologically novel reminder that the nation's territorial space is not two-dimensional but three-dimensional, the subject of a politics of verticality and volume (Weizman 2012, 12; Elden 2013), the imagery of its invasive entry and violent ejection from the symbolic territory, and the battlefield of the nation underlined a point that could have been made at any point since the institutionalization of international sporting competition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: that controversies over sports, between and within nations, reveal the deeper conflicts about territorial and cultural boundaries that are the very process of constructing national identity. Yet all this has taken place within a framework of supposed internationalism and sporting fraternity; indeed, it is the very structure of organized, scheduled competition between nations that makes these sporting encounters regular and possible.

This unsteady balance between the uniqueness of nationhood and the ubiquity of the transnational is summed up in Billig's notion of "the world of nations," a key pillar in his theory of "banal nationalism" (1995, 16). The idea that all of the world's surface (and indeed its volume) is naturally divided into national homelands, each with boundaries that ought to be (from a given nation's point of view) self-evident, is a historically situated product of political imagination and yet has to be taken for granted in order for nationalism to operate as an ideology. Nowhere is this more successfully dramatized, and nowhere is it dramatized in front of so many spectators at once, than in international sporting competition (Billig 1995, 86) – or in cultural events based on the same world-of-nations logic, such as the World's Fair or, in Europe since the mid-1950s, the Eurovision Song Contest (Urry 2002; Fricker and Gluhovic 2013). As theorists of nationalism have continued to probe how the media are implicated in reproducing the world of nations, especially in their coverage of sports (Mihelj 2013; Sked 2014), those theorists have produced a wealth of empirical studies that illustrate how struggles to define the nation and its boundaries continue to unfold through sports (e.g. Bellamy 2003; Hughson and Skillen 2014). Yet it should go without saying that sports are more than a matter of discourse: it is an arena of passion and identification within what Closs Stephens (2016) calls the "affective atmospheres" of nationalism, an economic container for accumulation, dispossession, and corruption that


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should be understood as labor just as much as spectacle (Carter 2011; Boykoff 2013), and a bodily exertion that demands to be understood in “flesh and blood” (Wacquant 2015, 4).

These complexities combine in different ways in the three articles that comprise this special section. Dario Brentin updates previous studies of Croatian football and the politics of World War II memory by demonstrating, through an extensive study of the Croatian press, just how much was at stake for understandings of the national past when the Canberra-born footballer Josip Šimunić took the field after Croatia’s win over Iceland in November 2013 and led the crowd in a chant of the Independent State of Croatia’s (NDH) slogan “Za dom – spremni” (“For the home[land] – ready”). Two decades after the end of the Croatian war of independence, the swell of powerful institutional support for Šimunić demonstrated that critical questions about public rehabilitation of the NDH, first asked in the 1990s and silenced as often as they were raised (Ivančić 2000; Pavlaković 2008), remained equally urgent. Football thus appears as part of a wider media (and entertainment) complex, and as a field that is both shaped by and feeds back into social memory. Richard Mills emphasizes the spatial and material politics of the contest over what used to be Sarajevo’s Grbavica stadium until the Yugoslav National Army/Army of the Bosnian Serb Republic attack on Sarajevo began in April 1992. Notions of defense, loyalty, and normality on the Sarajevo side, and the political mobilization of discourses about these, echo through Mills’ study, as they do through ethnographic studies of wartime and postwar Sarajevo (Maček 2009). Here, too, the media emerge as indispensable social actors in the work of constructing ethnicized and political narratives through sports.

This narrative-spinning is of course not restricted to the former Yugoslavia or the period since the Cold War. The longer view of Florin Faje’s paper, which studies the writing of the renowned Romanian football coach Virgil Economu and the evolution of what could be understood as a national style of play, demonstrates that the ideological conjunctions of earlier periods in the twentieth century can also be productively understood with these conceptual tools. Both in interwar Romania, when the physical as well as political culture of Mussolini’s Italy exerted a powerful influence on Romanian national thought, and under state socialism, as hegemonic interpretations of the Romanian national past continued to be revived, contests over the correct idea of Romania’s geopolitical position affected how Romanian national teams strove to play and what their managers believed they might embody as they did so. At the same time, the details of technique and strategy that Economu described remind the reader that sports are a matter of bodies, even more than discourses, moving through space.

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