Commemorating a Disputed Past: Football Club and Supporters’ Group War Memorials in the Former Yugoslavia

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Abstract
This article documents the existence of numerous football-related war memorials throughout the former Yugoslavia. Utilizing photographic evidence of these monuments, plaques and other methods of memorialization, it illuminates the ways in which those involved in the game have written the deeds of their fallen members into the historical record, often harnessing these sacrifices in the service of a variety of political causes in the process. These commemorative gestures include socialist patriotic memorials erected in the aftermath of the Second World War Partisan victory, as well as monuments and murals created in honour of football supporters who went into battle as paramilitaries and members of incipient national armies during the dissolution wars of the 1990s. It is argued that the deeds of the fallen have been elevated, and at times manipulated, while the creativity of the latest wave of football remembrance is arguably heavily influenced by the traditional epic poetry and mythologized histories of the region. The fact that these disparate memorials have survived from various historical periods means that the region’s built environment offers problematic and conflicting accounts of Yugoslav football’s violent past. Memorials which honour impossibly pure socialist heroes coexist awkwardly alongside those dedicated to supporters who gave their lives in pursuit of ethnically exclusive states. In the case of one desecrated monument, these distinct periods are somewhat paradoxically remembered by the same symbolic object.

In memory of the players and officials of Budućnost Football Club, who gave their lives for the victory of the Socialist Revolution, 1941–1945
FK Budućnost Memorial, Titograd (Podgorica)

To all supporters of Dinamo, for whom the war began on 13 May 1990 at the Maksimir Stadium, and ended with the laying down of their lives on the altar of the Croatian homeland!
Bad Blue Boys Supporters’ Group Memorial, Zagreb

The desire for Yugoslav football clubs and supporters’ groups to honour their war dead manifested itself in two distinct, yet connected, waves of commemoration following the Second World War and the dissolution wars of the 1990s. Although the first wave focused mainly upon players and club officials, and the second on
supporters, the two phases of football monument construction and commemoration nevertheless share many similarities and are therefore considered here as related phenomena.

It is possible to trace an evolution through these commemorative practices. They evolve from those which honour improbably pure socialist heroes to the point at which by the end of the twentieth century a monument was erected in order to proclaim a football riot, which occurred over a year before the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, as the beginning of the entire conflict. This article seeks to trace this evolution from understated socialist-era plaques, towards the extravagant myth-making and modification of national legends which followed Yugoslavia’s demise. It is argued that, at least in the latter case – in which militant supporters and pre-war hooligan clashes are also remembered as part of this legend of the built environment – the deeds of the fallen have been elevated, and sometimes manipulated. At times this was to a level that shares much in common with the traditional epic poetry and mythologized histories of the region.

Politically motivated commemoration was harnessed in both periods as a means of manipulating history. At the same time, one must acknowledge that many of the memorials in question were also inspired by the genuine emotional motivations of club workers and supporters. The fact that the majority of clubs span both periods – something which proved ideologically problematic in the 1990s – further underlines the need to examine the two phases together in order to gain a fuller picture of commemorative activities surrounding football in the former Yugoslavia.

Based upon an examination of twenty war memorials and plaques, alongside other methods of commemoration such as club histories, stadium banners and murals, this article seeks to illuminate the ways in which football clubs and the individuals involved in them sought to write the deeds of their fallen members into the historical record. They harnessed these sacrifices in the service of a variety of political causes in the process. Exploring how those involved with Yugoslav football have selectively memorialized aspects of the game’s past, it is argued that these phases of monument construction were inseparably entangled with the politics and prevalent ideologies of the respective periods. This study also highlights the importance of examining each case individually with reference to both physical location, the period of construction and, in at least one case, adaptation. Careful consideration of these factors demonstrates that, as with many of the region’s other monuments, the football memorials of the former Yugoslavia offer problematic and con-

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1 Ewa Ochman, ‘Soviet War Memorials and the Re-construction of National and Local Identities in Post-communist Poland’, *Nationalities Papers*, xxxviii (2010) [hereafter Ochman, ‘Memorials in Poland’], 509–30, at pp. 524–5, argues that in order to arrive at a clear understanding of the history of specific monuments it is crucial to pay attention to the ‘particularities of time and space’, noting that debates about remembrance ‘occur at local, regional and national levels’.
flicting accounts of the country’s turbulent history. Although developments at Yugoslavia’s most successful clubs are included, this article also deliberately looks beyond the pinnacle of the game in an attempt to understand football commemoration across a broad variety of geographical areas and constituent clubs.

Particularly after the Second World War, extravagant monuments became important parts of the landscape across Socialist Yugoslavia and its successors. Alongside these large-scale structures, smaller monuments and commemorative plaques were also raised in honour of specific events, workers from particular factories, and civic institutions. This latter phenomenon can be viewed as part of a broader commemorative trend in which, as William Kidd and Brian Murdoch explain, war memorials are often erected at an institutional level. Alan Borg also observes that alongside officially inspired national and civic monuments, organizations such as schools, universities, businesses and industrial firms felt the necessity to erect memorials to their fallen members after the Great War. This institutional trend was followed across Yugoslavia after both the Second World War and the recent wars of dissolution. The numerous football clubs and supporters’ groups, many of which suffered considerable losses, were no exception.

I

There is a large body of historiography which examines the numerous war memorials and commemorative practices that spread across the world in the aftermath of the devastating conflicts which left an indelible mark on twentieth century history. Speaking about memorials built to honour the victims of the Great War, Jay Winter notes that ‘For anyone living in Europe, these “documents” are part of the landscape. To find them one must simply look around. . . . They have a life history, and like other monuments have both shed meanings and taken on new significance in subsequent years.’ An understanding of the role of the football-related monuments which will be examined here as historical ‘documents’ strives to demonstrate the extent to which these objects consciously

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5 Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (Cambridge, 1995) [hereafter Winter, Sites of Memory], p. 79.

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portray highly edited, partial and simplified versions of the events which
they were erected to commemorate.

While existing research significantly contributes to our understanding
of remembrance and monument construction in general, particularly
with regard to post-First World War western Europe and the post-
Second World War socialist states, very little research concentrates upon
the commemoration practices of association football. A notable excep-
tion is Dave Russell’s study of commemoration in the English game. He
finds that until the last two decades of the twentieth century, the game
showed ‘little enthusiasm for permanent memorialisation’ of its dead. It
is true that the Football Association erected a modest commemorative
plaque in 1924, in honour of those who were lost to the game as a result
of the First World War, while the tragedy of the 1958 Munich Air
Disaster was also remembered with a permanent memorial. However,
Russell argues that it was really the Hillsborough disaster of 1989 which
proved to be the ‘pivotal moment’, with the commemoration process
gathering pace in the form of a proliferation of monuments and other
commemorative gestures across the country’s football clubs in subse-
quently years. Russell describes this process as being both a part of the
nation’s wider ‘turn to history’ and a football-specific desire to ‘reclaim
the moral high ground’ following two decades of pervasive hooligan-
ism. Indeed, he observes that in spite of its relatively recent emergence,
English football’s ‘culture of commemoration now seems pervasive’,
although it must be noted that the vast majority of monuments and
memorials which have emerged around the English game commemorate
football-specific tragedies or the passing of valued individuals, rather
than remembering those killed in wartime. Similar non-war-related
practices are also prevalent in the former Yugoslavia. For example,
Sarajevo Football Club’s stadium is named after Asim Ferhatović-Hase,
a legendary player who died of a heart attack at just fifty-four years of
age. However, this article will be confined to an analysis of war-specific
commemoration.

6 For example: ibid.; Borg, War Memorials; Memory and Memorials.
7 Examples here include: Oehman, ‘Memorials in Poland’; Michael Ignatieff, ‘Soviet War Memori-
Nikolai Voukov, ‘Representing the Nation’s Past: National History Monuments in Socialist and
Post-Socialist Bulgaria’, Seventh Annual Kokkalis Program Graduate Student Workshop (Cambridge,
Mass., 2005) [hereafter Voukov, ‘Representing the Nation’s Past’].
8 Dave Russell, ‘ “We All Agree, Name the Stand after Shankly”: Cultures of Commemoration in
Late Twentieth-century English Football Culture’, Sport in History, xxvi (2006) [hereafter Russell,
“We All Agree”], 1–25, at pp. 3–4.
9 Ibid., p. 4.
10 Ibid., pp. 7–9.
11 Ibid., p. 9.
12 Dževad Kajan’s book on Sarajevo derbies dedicates seven pages to Ferhatović, while no other
player receives remotely comparable attention: Sarajevski Derbi: 74 prvenstvene utakmice, 1954–1999
(Sarajevo, 1999), pp. 354–61. When Ferhatović left Sarajevo in order to continue his career in Turkey
in 1960 his loss was mourned by Sarajevo supporters. This incident is commemorated in the popular
Zabranjeno Pušenje song ‘Nedelja kad je otišo Hase’.
In stark contrast to developments in football, Tony Collins has demonstrated that British rugby union was far more active in commemorating and honouring its fallen sons in the aftermath of the Great War. Developing their own ‘cult of the fallen’, rugby clubs erected monuments, commissioned poetry and published commemorative books during the inter-war period. Collins states that these ‘were the means by which rugby union paid homage to itself as the embodiment of middleclass tradition and stability’, while intentionally casting the game as a militant and patriotic defender of empire. Yet, while it appears as though British rugby union was far more active than football when it comes to honouring the games’ war dead, there are a number of examples of war memorials erected by football clubs outside the United Kingdom. The Dutch Resistance Museum in Amsterdam recently held an exhibition dedicated to the plight of football during the Nazi occupation of Holland in the 1940s. The exhibit explained that the Jewish football club Hortus Eendracht Doet Winnen (HEDW) erected a monument to the numerous club members who were murdered by the Nazis, while other teams also built, or at least drew up plans for, similar objects of remembrance. While commemorative trends surrounding football in Socialist Yugoslavia and its successor states share much in common with the development of these related sporting memorials in other parts of Europe, the Yugoslav-specific evolution of football commemoration provides a very different example of the way in which the game honoured its dead, albeit one which may have close parallels with other former socialist states.

II

The most prominent form of commemoration in the post-Second World War era was arguably the founding of clubs with names that evoke the sacrifices and aspirations of the socialist revolution. In the Yugoslav and Serbian capital Belgrade both Crvena Zvezda (Red Star) and Partizan were established in 1945. Likewise, in Croatia’s capital clubs which were tainted by association with the defeated Ustaše regime were replaced by the newly founded Dinamo Zagreb. These three teams, alongside the older – but no less ideologically acceptable – Hajduk (Brigand) Split, quickly emerged as the vanguard of football in Socialist Yugoslavia. Numerous other new clubs with socialist-inspired names were founded

Monuments erected by Yugoslav football clubs during the post-1945 period tend to be revolutionary and socialist in character. This is in keeping with broader trends of socialist monument construction across eastern Europe, which Nikolai Voukov stresses were driven by ideology, while ‘the major emphasis in the political commemorations fell upon the heroes of the class struggle and the antifascist resistance.’ According to Voukov, socialist memorials were deliberate manifestations of the communist parties’ ‘intentions to create continuity across time and to rearrange history according to ideological presuppositions’. Michael Ignatieff applies Eric Hobsbawm’s theory of ‘the invention of tradition’ to Soviet war memorials and comes to a similar conclusion. He argues that these statues are ‘symbols of forgetting as well as remembering, icons in a cunning, but also self-deceiving process of choosing the past one can bear to remember and consigning the rest . . . to oblivion’. However, Yugoslavia’s football-related commemorations are modest by comparison to the often colossal Partisan memorials which were constructed in their thousands across the territory of liberated Yugoslavia. It is also perhaps surprising that four of the memorials under examination from this period were erected between 1969 and 1986, many years after the victory of socialism, and potentially at a time when the achievements of the revolution were in need of reiteration.

Vojvodina Football Club honoured its dead of the Second World War and the accompanying Socialist Revolution via a memorial plaque inside Novi Sad’s Karadorde Stadium (see Figure 1). The plaque, erected in 1974, lists the names of six former footballers and officials who apparently: ‘fell in the struggle for Socialist Yugoslavia’.

A closer examination of the monument and of club histories written during the socialist era reveals the highly political nature of this commemoration. Vojvodina, established in 1914, was one of only a handful of football clubs to survive the revolutionary purges of the incipient socialist state. Hajduk Split, founded in 1911, is perhaps the most prominent of these, not least because of the wartime role which the club played as a promoter of the emerging socialist order. In the aftermath of the Second World War, many clubs were prohibited because they were deemed to have an insufficiently socialist and divisive nationalist past. Those clubs which did survive were eager to demonstrate impeccable

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16 Voukov, Representing the Nation’s Past, p. 1.
17 Ibid., p. 2.
20 Srečko Eterović, Ratnim Stazama Hajduka (Split, 1989) [hereafter Eterović, Ratnim Stazama Hajduka].
credentials, often fashioning suitable histories for themselves. In this respect it comes as no surprise to find that names commemorated on Vojvodina’s plaque are of individuals with pre-war and wartime links to the then illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia. This explains the presence of Božidar-Boško Petrović, despite the fact that he died in 1937, four years before the Nazi occupation of the country. An official club history explains that this former footballer in fact died as a pilot, bravely fighting as a member of the international brigades during the Spanish Civil War – an impeccable socialist biography for a national hero. Moreover, Petrović is described in almost superhuman terms: he was ‘tall, athletically built, solid, as if carved from stone’. He is even compared to the ‘sporting figures which were immortalised by the sculptors of antiquity’.

In order to comprehend the high esteem in which Spanish Civil War volunteers were held in socialist Yugoslavia, at least during the decades immediately following the revolution, it is merely necessary to consider the privileged position occupied by veterans in the incipient state. Vjeran Pavlaković, ‘Twilight of the Revolutionaries: “Naši Španci” and the End of Yugoslavia’, Europe-Asia Studies, lxxii (2010), 1175–91.

FK Vojvodina – Pola veka: 1914–1964 (Novi Sad, 1964) [hereafter FK Vojvodina], p. 52. Nikolai Voukov discusses the important role which ‘the notion of sacred bodies and immortal heroism’ play.
The club history also reveals the socialist credentials of other names that feature on the club’s war memorial.23

This is a perfect example of what Ilana Bet-El describes as socialist Yugoslavia’s ‘policy of memory’, whereby the Second World War was remembered solely as a national liberation struggle and socialist revolution, rather than as the complicated and multifaceted civil war which it actually was.24 As part of this deliberate manipulation of the past – which aimed to prevent further antagonism between the constituent ethnicities of Socialist Yugoslavia in the name of ‘brotherhood and unity’ – only Partisans and sympathetic civilians were afforded the luxury of being commemorated, while all others were consigned to oblivion. Bet-El explains that this policy was the ‘ultimate manipulation: forging a single memory as a basis for a single identity in a single, unified state’.25

Other clubs which survived the revolution – and subsequently thrived in post-war Yugoslavia – as a result of sufficiently socialist histories, also raised monuments to fallen members. Two examples include the simple commemorative plaques at Sloboda (Freedom) Titovo Užice in Serbia, and Budućnost (Future) Titograd in Montenegro. In both of these cases the Second World War is presented as a glorious socialist revolution.

The town of Užice holds an illustrious position in Yugoslavia’s socialist pantheon, having held out against the Nazis for over two months as the communist-ruled Užice Republic in 1941. Although the town was subsequently lost to the occupation, this period enabled the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to begin implementation of its policies and organize itself as an effective resistance force under the command of Tito.26 After the war, the town was given the prefix ‘Tito’s’ in honour of the important role which it had played in the revolution. Užice’s football club, Sloboda, has a history dating back to 1925. The austere plaque erected on the wall of the town stadium simply bears the club’s five-pointed star badge alongside the following words:

With pride we preserve the memory of the footballers and sports workers of our club who, during the course of the National Liberation Struggle, honourably fell for freedom

While the plaque does not give the names of the fallen, a club history records that the majority of pre-war players and functionaries joined the


23 The club history explains that Svetozar Džanić was shot in Zagreb because of his ‘progressive ideas’ in 1941, while another footballer, Milan Simin, resisted as a saboteur and ‘fell heroically’ in a battle with occupying policemen in the vicinity of Novi Sad. FK Vojvodina, pp. 12–13.


25 Ibid.

26 Fred Singleton, Twentieth-Century Yugoslavia (Basingstoke, 1976), p. 94.
Partisan forces, and that many did not return. It also names two footballers who were executed in the town as Partisans by the Nazis in December 1941. However, the same book hints at another side to the club’s history, one that is documented by a solitary line. While attempting to underline the ‘progressive’ nature of the majority of Sloboda’s pre-war members, the club history nonetheless exposes a complication to its otherwise pure foundations, noting that: ‘Among the numerous footballers who defended the colours of “Sloboda” . . . over many years, only a few of them went down mistaken political paths during the Second World War.’ In the absence of further detail, it is only possible to read between the lines, but this is a clear indication of historical actors who have been erased from the history of Sloboda Football Club.

The fact that the names of those who chose the wrong path are absent from the club memorials and histories under examination further exposes the utilization of physical monuments and officially sanctioned texts as a means of rectifying the historical record of the sporting organizations in question. Karsten Brüggemann and Andres Kasekamp document similar developments in the case of the former Soviet Republic of Estonia. They note that while Soviet memorials created heroes of their own ‘warrior-liberators’, the vanquished were completely excluded from commemoration in public space. However, such manipulation is by no means limited to the socialist states which emerged in eastern Europe during the twentieth century. James Mayo, writing primarily about war memorials in the United States of America, explains that ‘War memorials not only evoke war history but also serve the more important function of conjuring the history that society wants to remember.’ These motives are unquestionably present in Yugoslavia’s various football memorials from the socialist period.

In the Montenegrin capital of Titograd, now Podgorica, Budućnost Football Club – which incidentally shares the same foundation year as Sloboda – also preserves a plaque from the socialist era on its stadium wall. In a similar way to its counterparts in Užice and Novi Sad, the plaque remembers those players and members of the club’s administration ‘who gave their lives for the victory of the Socialist Revolution’. A list of nineteen names follows this brief dedication (see Figure 2).

As is demonstrated by these three commemorative plaques, the historical events which are being remembered relate specifically to Yugoslavia’s socialist revolution, while the Nazi invasion and the Second World War are merely implied.

28 Ibid., p. 55.
There is, however, one football-related monument from the socialist period which perhaps does not fit the pattern that has been elaborated so far. It is located in the Serbian city of Kragujevac, a city with a dark wartime history. In 1941 the Nazi occupiers executed as many as 7,000 civilians in reprisal for casualties inflicted upon occupying troops by the Partisan resistance. The list of victims, most of whom were executed in a field above the city, includes hundreds of schoolchildren.31 This incident is commemorated by an enormous sculpture park and museum on the outskirts of the city.32 Next to the museum is the stadium of Radnički (Worker) Kragujevac Football Club, another team with credentials which ensured its post-war survival. It has its own monument in honour of ‘the sportsmen and sports workers of Kragujevac who were executed and who died during the Second World War’ (see Figures 3 and 4).

This monument, which is unsurprisingly modest when one considers the large statue park in the immediate vicinity, includes ninety-two names


and was erected in 1969. Although the Nazis are not mentioned by name, the memorial is dedicated to the victims of the fascist occupation, while no mention is made of the socialist revolution and the accompanying liberation of the city.

The invoking of fallen socialist martyrs and murdered innocents unquestionably assisted in strengthening the social standing of these clubs in a socialist state which considered the anti-fascist struggle as one of its principal foundation myths. Talking about the vast suffering endured in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, Michael Ignatieff notes that ‘All that dying is a kind of inexhaustible reservoir of legitimacy for these monuments’. In the case of Yugoslav football memorials, one might add that the same could be said for the clubs which erected them.

33 Ignatieff, ‘Soviet War Memorials’, p. 158.
While physical monuments were erected at a number of clubs, they were certainly not the only form of commemoration available to football teams which wanted to record the contribution of their members to the establishment of Socialist Yugoslavia. The content of two club histories has already been mentioned, and this method of remembrance was utilized by most clubs which were fortunate enough to survive the ideological purges of the late 1940s. Such histories contain detailed examinations of the clubs’ pre-war socialist activities and the sacrifices which players and officials made during the National Liberation Struggle. These highly selective hagiographies also serve as a form of legitimation for the clubs in question, solidifying socialist credentials and removing the potential for any doubt as to the past of these organizations.  

Figure 4 Monument to the victims of fascism – a prominent piece from the nearby Kragujevac sculpture park.

III

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Talking about socialist monuments in Bulgaria, Nikolai Voukov notes that ‘Every aspect of World War II partisan and communist underground activity or any sober event related to communist experience was commemorated and considered sacred.’ ‘Death and the Desecrated’, p. 50.

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Hajduk Split Football Club was closely linked to the achievements of the revolution. It acted as a prominent symbol of Tito’s emerging regime by embarking on a wartime propaganda tour of liberated allied territories around the Mediterranean, and maintaining warm links with the party in the post-war years. This active role is commemorated in a book which documents the club’s wartime activities and is dedicated to ‘the war generation of Hajduk players and functionaries’ who, ‘with their participation in the National Liberation Struggle and commendable representation of the new Tito’s Yugoslavia… wrote the most illustrious page of the club’s history’.

With patriotism and firm affiliation to the struggle of our peoples for freedom, enhancing Hajduk’s name, they permanently obligated all generations of players and friends who wear, or will wear, the red five pointed star – acquired in the difficult days of the liberation war – with pride on their white shirts.

As will be discussed, the newly acquired five-pointed star on Hajduk’s emblem, and the wartime role which it symbolized, would prove controversial during the period of socialist Yugoslavia’s disintegration.

Another prime example of socialist historiography is a history of Željezničar (Railway-worker) Sarajevo Football Club, published in celebration of its sixtieth anniversary in 1981. The book explains how the team refused to compete during the wartime occupation of Sarajevo, and that most of its members clandestinely assisted the Partisan resistance. According to this account, a number of Željezničar footballers – who also belonged to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia – were arrested and taken to Ustaše concentration camps such as Stara Gradiška and Jasenovac, or deported as political prisoners to Nazi camps in Norway. It notes that a considerable number of these footballers were murdered, while others died fighting as Partisans in the National Liberation Struggle. In total, the names and details of seventeen former Željezničar footballers who were killed or murdered are given, alongside those of a handful of survivors. The book then honours these revolutionaries with a moving passage:

To all of them, as well as to many others who are unknown, today’s generation at Željezničar Football Club – players, administration, managerial team and the large army of loyal supporters, state their gratitude for everything which they gave to the club and to their country in the struggle for freedom, for our socialist today and the even better socialist tomorrow.

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35 Eterović, Ratnim Stazama Hajduka.
36 Ibid., p. 5.
38 Ibid., pp. 65–7.
Examples of similar wartime activity and emotional sentiment can also be found in a number of other club histories. Of course, the use of history books to remember club heroes is not unique to Yugoslavia. Tony Collins demonstrates that commemorative books and poetry were also an important part of the remembrance process for inter-war British rugby union. The method of placing ideologically rich individuals on commemorative pedestals, as a way to underline the loyalty espoused by these football clubs towards the socialist project, was harnessed in a far more public manner by certain clubs in the period immediately following liberation. In the town of Subotica, located near the Hungarian border in northern Vojvodina, the victorious Partisan forces sought to establish a sports association which would be an inspirational model in the new socialist Yugoslavia. History books about Spartak Subotica proudly explain that the club was named after Jovan Mišić ‘Spartak’, the heroic commander of the Subotica Partisan Detachment. According to the accounts given in these texts Mišić was killed on 10 October 1944, the day of Subotica’s liberation. A friend of his explains what happened at the funeral:

> While paying our due respects to him beside the catafalque, we made a vow that the athletic club would carry his name. We put the idea forward . . . and it was accepted. But instead of an athletic section, Jovan Mišić’s Partisan nickname was adopted by the newly formed Sports Association.

However, it was not only Mišić’s wartime feats which led to Subotica’s sports association – and the football club which is a constituent part of it – carrying the name Spartak in his honour. Prior to the war Mišić had an impeccable record that was perfectly suited for being harnessed by both communists and sportsmen alike. According to accounts of this individual, he was another figure of almost superhuman capacities – a socialist martyr who is deeply deserving of being remembered in this fashion. ‘He was an intellectual, skilfully handling the pen, scientific problems were not unfamiliar to him, and alongside that he was a sportsman.’ Before the war, as well as being ‘an excellent pupil’, ‘a good student’, a poet, journalist and anti-fascist, Mišić was also a ‘famous athlete’, competing successfully in the triple jump, pentathlon, and a number of other disciplines at both national and international level.

According to these histories, the one potential blot on his pre-war curriculum vitae was the fact that the progressive Belgrade press had

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43 Kalman Petković, cited ibid.
condemned him for participating in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. However, this unfortunate episode is brushed aside, with the hagiographer proudly noting that while this was happening, the staunchly anti-fascist Mikić was applying to be mobilized as a Spanish Civil War volunteer in Paris, only to be turned down on the basis that he had not yet completed his military service. His wartime exploits, which included time in a prisoner-of-war camp in Nuremburg and a prominent role in Partisan activities in his native Vojvodina, only added to this impeccable biography. In other words, the name of Jovan Mikić ‘Spartak’ gave the incipient club an illustrious pre-war and wartime history which it would otherwise have lacked. In much the same way that the Spanish Civil War hero Petrović aided Vojvodina Football Club’s transition to a longstanding bastion of socialism, Mikić enabled Spartak Subotica to stand proudly alongside the few sports associations and pre-war organizations which could genuinely point to a history of class struggle in the inter-war kingdom of Yugoslavia. In effect, this public act of commemoration meant that Mikić unproblematically came to embody a flawless pre-war history for the club:

Really, with the tragic death of an athlete hero, the life of the largest and most prolific trophy winning sports association in the country began in the first years after the war.

Other clubs attempted to rebrand themselves in a similar fashion. For example, Željezničar Sarajevo applied to change its name in order to honour Vaso Miskin Crni, a prominent Partisan who died in 1945. In contrast to what was done in Subotica, however, the Bosnian authorities ruled that no single sports association would be allowed to carry the name of a peoples’ hero, so the club continued to compete as Željezničar. The desire to remove any doubt from the pre-war historical records of clubs and to bolster socialist credentials is at least partially explained by the rigorous purges which the new authorities carried out against organizations which were deemed undesirable. Immediately after the war it was announced that all clubs and associations which had carried religious or national identities before the conflict, as well as those which had continued to compete during the occupation, would be prohibited from functioning in the new socialist Yugoslavia. This meant that teams such as Zrinjski Mostar (named after a Croatian national hero) and Gradanski (Civic) Zagreb, both of which competed in the wartime league of the fascist Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska), were forcibly consigned to oblivion. Others, such as Obilić Belgrade, were

44 Inić, Spartak, p. 24.
45 This appears to be a prime example of what Michael Ignatieff refers to when he states that ‘when masters invent traditions, they have the past re-written as the history of their own glorious beginnings.’ ‘Soviet War Memorials’, p. 158.
46 Inić, Spartak, p. 25.
47 Andelić, Željezničar, p. 72.
48 Ibid.
only allowed to continue after several years of lobbying and a temporarily enforced name change which removed ethnically loaded content from the club’s identity. However, ideological purges and the manipulation of club histories are by no means limited to the period of Socialist Yugoslavia. During its turbulent dissolution during the last decade of the twentieth century, other historical actors gained the upper hand in the battle to write the history of the region and its football clubs. In one city, as will be demonstrated, a team which had been prohibited by the communists was resurrected, while ethnic nationalists deliberately targeted the commemorative monument and socialist history of a club which was deemed to be diametrically opposed to it. Under new circumstances the historical record would be rewritten by the new victors.

IV

The unravelling of both socialism and the multi-ethnic Yugoslav Federation witnessed a wave of targeted destruction and iconoclasm of the built environment. Hundreds of mosques, churches, libraries and monuments were destroyed across the former Yugoslavia during the wars of dissolution in the 1990s. While religious and cultural buildings were targeted in the pursuit of ethnically pure territories, in certain parts of the country socialist objects were attacked as part of a backlash against a regime which had held both power and the right to disseminate its own version of history in Yugoslavia since 1945. Once again, football monuments did not escape this broader trend, and in multi-ethnic Mostar the city’s football club and its war memorial were targeted by nationalists.

Velež Mostar Football Club has been associated with socialism since it was founded back in 1922, and it was even forcibly closed down as a result of these links shortly before the Second World War. Following liberation, the club was promoted as a shining example of a revolutionary institution, and was itself officially honoured with ‘the order of brotherhood and unity with a gold wreath’ for its ‘massive participation and contribution to the national liberation struggle and for spreading brotherhood and unity’ among Yugoslavia’s constituent nations. A

49 The Obilic’ name, taken from a mythical fourteenth-century Serbian knight, was unsurprisingly unpopular with the socialist authorities. The club was allowed to resume competition in 1949, but under the enforced name of Čuburac. However, it was allowed to return to its original name just one season later. Duško Milanović and Branko Nikolić, 75 godina FK Obilic´ Beograd: 1924–1999 (Belgrade, 1999) [hereafter Milanović & Nikolić, Obilic´], p. 38.


52 Milan Škoro, Velež 1922–82 (Mostar, 1982) [hereafter Škoro, Velež], p. 4.
socialist-era club history trumpets the club’s revolutionary roots, its links to inter-war subversive activity, and the numerous players and members who died during the revolutionary struggle for a Socialist Yugoslavia.53 The club also erected an impressive monument to its fallen heroes at its Bijeli Brijeg Stadium, as well as holding an annual memorial tournament in their honour (see Figure 5).54

Alongside these impeccable socialist credentials, Velež prided itself upon its inclusive multi-ethnic character – something which was important in a city with a population which consisted of Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs. However, when war came to Mostar in the 1990s, Croat extremists, who aimed to make Mostar the capital of a future Bosnian Croat state, targeted the club and all of the values for which it stood. Velež Mostar was cleansed from the Bijeli Brijeg Stadium, suffering the same plight as the city’s Muslim population. Zrinjski Mostar, a resurrected Croat nationalist team, moved into the stadium in its place, symbolically underlining the victory of ethnic nationalism and the destruction of Socialist Yugoslavia. The war memorial was sullied as part of this process.

53 Ibid.
Talking about the desecration of socialist monuments in post-1989 Bulgaria, Nikolai Voukov makes a highly relevant point when he notes that such acts were often interpreted as a ‘second murder of the heroes’ of socialism, an act of ‘refusing to pay respects to those whose sacrifice paved the path to the legitimization of the socialist regime’. This partially explains why nationalist forces targeted the Velež monument, but does not account for the way in which this was carried out. Arguably, a very specific type of iconoclasm is present in this case. All traces of the Velež monument’s original status as a commemoration of the National Liberation Struggle and accompanying socialist revolution were removed, and the monument was instead crudely painted with the Croat nationalist checkerboard (see Figures 6 and 7).

While discussing the wilful destruction of cultural artefacts in the recent Yugoslav conflicts, Bet-El states that one of the primary aims of the wars was to rewrite the history of entire regions, or in her words ‘to delete the others, and then recreate the landscape in the image of the winning sacred memories’. Jaš Elsner, who has studied numerous acts of historical iconoclasm, argues that when an object is altered rather than simply destroyed, ‘the preserved damaged object ... signals both its predamaged state – a different past, with potentially different cultural, political, and social meanings – and its new or altered state’. Hence paradoxically, the act of iconoclasm ‘while apparently a kind of visual defacement that effaces the memory of the destroyed – may nonetheless preserve the memory of the condemned in the very act of obliteration’. This is certainly the case with the defaced monument in Mostar, where the poorly repainted and anachronous modifications to the original design highlight the fact that something is being deliberately forgotten, namely forty-five years of socialist Yugoslavia and the ideal of multi-ethnic cohabitation, which were symbolized by Velež Football Club. Such poorly masked requisitioning of a memorial that was originally constructed to honour socialist and multi-ethnic values diametrically opposed to those which are now celebrated ‘signal[s] not just that someone’s memory has been annihilated but that we must note and remember that the forgotten are forgotten’. Talking about related processes of deliberate destruction and replacement in the Soviet Union, Mikhail Yampolsky notes that:

55 Voukov, ‘Death and the Desecrated’.
56 While in common use across Croatia, these symbols are also reminiscent of those used by the Second World War Independent State of Croatia – a genocidal Nazi puppet regime which was an enemy of the Partisans in this part of Yugoslavia.
57 Bet-El, ‘Unimagined Communities’, p. 213.
59 Ibid., p. 211.
60 Ibid., p. 214. Ewa Ochman documents similar cases of monument adaptation in her examination of the plight of Soviet war memorials in post-1989 Poland, noting that ‘many Red Army monuments were adapted to commemorate an altogether different set of war events, victims or heroes. Typically
Destruction affirms the power of the victor to the same extent as the erection of a monument to victory. A tradition has developed historically to build a new monument precisely on the site of the old one, as though accumulating in one place two commemorative gestures: vandalism and the erection of a new idol.61

While the Velež memorial was not literally destroyed, the iconoclasm to which it was subjected nevertheless results in the presence of Yampol-

these adaptations have involved the changing of inscriptions, or direct adjustments of monuments, such as removing a red star and replacing it with an eagle, thus rendering the statue a monument to Polish instead of Soviet soldiers’ (‘Memorials in Poland’, p. 520). Karsten Brüggemann and Andres Kasekamp discuss a case involving the removal of a Soviet monument in the Estonian capital Tallinn and its subsequent replacement by a park devoid of memorials. They note that ‘the government obviously desires to eradicate any memory of what stood there previously’. However, the sight continues to be a place of pilgrimage for ethnic Russians. Brüggemann and Kasekamp, ‘The Politics of History’, pp. 439–41.


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sky’s ‘two commemorative gestures’. Of course, one must not ignore the role of the historian in drawing attention to the dual-nature of such monuments, and in the case of the Velež memorial, research such as this assists in the task of reclaiming and remembering the object’s original status and purpose by forcing a reassessment of its meaning.\(^{62}\) It highlights that the new monument is an example of what Yampolsky defines as a ‘signifier of two signifieds: itself and what is absent, its demolished predecessor’.\(^{63}\)

However, the fact that the other socialist era memorials which have already been examined have been left untouched does not necessarily signify a greater respect for the socialist revolution in other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Ewa Ochman, who has examined socialist monuments in Poland, notes that memorials were sometimes left intact because they were less controversial, or because of their location. The fact that

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\(^{63}\) Yampolsky, ‘Notes on Iconoclasm’, p. 100.
these monuments were no longer the focus of commemoration meant that they ‘existed unnoticed’. This latter point may well help to explain why socialist-era football memorials remain untouched on stadium walls in Podgorica, Novi Sad and Užice, although it is nevertheless true that the socialist period was not always rejected so vehemently in these parts of Yugoslavia.

The socialist content of football club identities was questioned at a number of clubs. Those with socialist-inspired names, badges and histories were often deemed to be ideologically suspect. Certain organizations which pre-dated socialist Yugoslavia, such as Hajduk Split, were able to revert to earlier emblems without red five pointed stars, albeit controversially, following pressure from supporters’ groups and players to do so. Yet, for clubs which emerged out of the revolution, such as Belgrade’s Red Star and Partizan, and Dinamo Zagreb, adaptation to a post-socialist identity was even more problematic. This situation resulted in a paradox of vehemently anti-communist supporters’ groups, which drew heavily upon ethno-national symbolism, congregating around teams with indisputable socialist features. Nevertheless, moves to ‘nationalize’ clubs by replacing ideologically tainted names with ones which were deemed more appropriate were tenaciously rebuffed by supporters’ groups who valued their clubs and forty-five years of tradition, and refused to countenance any dilution of identity.

Aside from the case of iconoclasm in Mostar, a second wave of football-related commemoration occurred in the aftermath of Yugoslavia’s dissolution into what are currently seven independent states. This latest group of monuments, which generally honour fallen members of supporters’ groups who died fighting in paramilitary organizations or incipient national armies, rather than players or officials, has some similarities with its socialist predecessor. Both waves of commemoration hold up their respective victims as heroes who died while fighting for a just cause, whether socialism or national independence. The latter wave also seeks to present a narrow representation of history in which the respective victims fought and died for what was right. However, recent monuments differ drastically from the socialist memorials in that they are laden with the
kind of religious and ethno-national symbolism that was officially frowned upon during the socialist era. The new war memorials also tend to be far more aggressive in nature, with some even naming enemy nations and most declaring that the commemorated individuals gave their lives in defence of their respective homeland.

Football supporters’ groups were a significant source of recruits for incipient national armies and paramilitary organizations across Yugoslavia as the country descended into conflict. It is well documented that members of these organizations enrolled together, and that – in the case of Red Star Belgrade’s Delije (Valiants) group – they even formed the nucleus of a paramilitary formation.67 As a result of this high level of involvement and the subsequent losses incurred, many of the principal supporters’ groups took steps to honour their dead after the conflict. The four largest supporters’ organizations in Croatia all erected monuments after the republic’s ‘homeland war’ of the 1990s. Torcida, an organized group which has followed Hajduk Split since the 1950s,68 dedicated a commemorative plaque inside the club’s stadium, while an enlarged mural of this object has been painted on the side of a prominent city centre school (see Figure 8).

The text of the mural remembers ‘all of the members of “Torcida” who fell in the battle for Croatia’, while the šahovnica-emblazoned club badge, purged of the five-pointed star of socialism, is represented alongside the national coat of arms – another šahovnica shield with the five historical regions of Croatia symbolically depicted above it, as they appear on the national flag. Torcida members were arguably eager to underline their Croat nationalist credentials at this point because, as explained above, the team which this group supports – Hajduk – was heavily involved in the Socialist Revolution. Nevertheless, Hajduk and its supporters also had an alternative socialist era history – one which was closely associated with Croat nationalism, and which manifested itself in a series of anti-Yugoslav acts dating back to the early 1970s, but which escalated drastically in the final years of the federal state.69

Croat nationalist symbolism also features heavily on the Armada supporters’ group monument in the coastal city of Rijeka. The Croat coat of arms is replicated once again and the memorial is dedicated to ‘the members of Armada and supporters of HNK (Croatian Football Club) Rijeka who fell in the Homeland War between 1991 and 1996’. A poetic verse, bordered with the medieval Croatian plait (plet) patterning,

68 The name ‘Torcida’ was inspired by the activities of Brazilian football supporters, known as ‘Torcida’, at the 1950 World Cup Finals. Hence, paradoxically for a group which has become closely associated with Croatian nationalism, its name is a foreign import. Dražen Lalić, Torcida: pogled iznutra (Zagreb, 1993), pp. 85–6.

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occupies the centre of the monument. According to the corresponding memorial in Osijek, members of the local Kohorta (Cohort) supporters’ group ‘gave their lives defending the city of Osijek and the Croatian Homeland’, while Dinamo Zagreb’s Bad Blue Boys group honour those members who laid down ‘their lives on the altar of the Croatian homeland.’ Therefore, in Croatia at least, these groups zealously remember their dead as fallen national heroes.

This turn to nationalism, symptomatic of society in general during this period, was by no means limited to the Croatian supporters’ groups. Similar gestures also occurred in both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As will be examined, nationalist rhetoric and symbolism occupy dominant positions on supporters’ monuments in both Belgrade and Sarajevo. In the Bosnian case, supporters’ group memorials offer a controversial reading of the recent history of the region. At least two commemorations are heavily imbued with exclusivist religious motifs – arguably a highly divisive act in a purportedly multi-ethnic state.

The monument to the fallen supporters of Sarajevo Football Club, many of whom were members of the Horde Zla (Hordes of Evil) supporters’ group, is a prime example. The distinctive sculpture which stands outside Sarajevo’s Asim Ferhatović-Hase (Koševno) Stadium – made

Figure 8 A mural reproduction of the commemorative plaque to the fallen members of Torcida.
famous by the 1984 Winter Olympic Games – commemorates the ‘šehidi, combatants and civilians; the supporters of Sarajevo Football Club; the victims of the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1996’ (see Figure 9).  

The choice of the religiously exclusive word šehidi is significant when one considers that prior to the war the Horde Zla group had been proud of its multi-ethnic composition, while post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina is supposedly an all-inclusive multi-ethnic state. As Ivana Maček has noted, the problem with the use of this term in Sarajevo is that it discriminates between defenders with a Muslim heritage and non-Muslim defenders of the city. Maček explains that this situation also led to financial discrimination as the families of deceased šehidi received assistance from international Islamic organizations, while the families of non-Muslim soldiers were dependent upon the sporadic offerings of a city government which occasionally sought to demonstrate the existence of religious pluralism in Sarajevo. For these reasons, the dedication on this monument must be seen as discriminatory towards the numerous pre-war supporters of Sarajevo Football Club who were members of other ethnicities, some of whom almost certainly served as defenders of the city during the siege.

The term šehidi is also utilized on another football related monument in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The memorial is dedicated to ‘eleven šehidi football aces’ who played lower league football before the war. All eleven names on the sculpture – which was erected by the newly formed Doboj Istok Football Club – are of Islamic origin, while the emblem of the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina is depicted alongside the club badge. The dedication concludes with the Islamic imperative ‘study Fatiha!’ Such an ethno-religious focus is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that this club is located in Klokonica, a village which is close to the Inter-Entity Boundary Line, with the town of Doboj itself falling on the Serbian side of this division. This area was heavily affected by fighting and ethnic cleansing during the recent conflict.

Alongside this evidence of the abundant use of ethno-nationalist and religious symbolism, some of the second-wave monuments also keenly stress who was to blame for the recent conflict. While the Sarajevo Football Club monument was dedicated to the ‘victims of aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina’, other supporters’ groups have exploited memorials in order to be much more specific about the nationality of those aggressors. On the southern bank of the Bosnian capital’s

70 While the term šehidi does not translate well into English, it is roughly equivalent to ‘holy warriors’ and it unmistakably refers to soldiers of Islamic faith. Ivana Maček explains that the term šehid has a very particular meaning in contemporary Sarajevo, defining it as ‘a term that in Sarajevo signified a Bosnian soldier who died in the war and was buried as a Muslim, though it is said that the original meaning of the word was a soldier who died in a holy war, or jihad’ (Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime (Philadelphia, 2009), p. 140).

71 Ibid., p. 141.

72 Ibid., pp. 159–60.

73 The war memorial at Čelik (Steel) Zenica Football Club is also dedicated to ‘the players and supporters of NK Čelik who lost their lives during the aggression against BiH’. However, apart from
Miljacka River a commemorative plaque has been erected by the Maniacs supporters’ group of the aforementioned Željezničar Football Club. Although the plaque records that ‘Željo supporters gave their lives for the freedom of all of Sarajevo’s citizens and for our one and only (jedine) homeland of Bosnia and Hercegovina’, the text also eagerly attributes blame, noting that these heroes were ‘defending their city and their country from the Serbo-Montenegrin aggressor’. This direct reference to the nationality of those considered responsible for the war serves the use of the word ‘aggression’ this particular commemorative plaque, which features this simple dedication above the club emblem, has more in common with socialist era memorials, rather than its modern day counterparts.


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as a blanket condemnation of all members of the named nations, alienating those Serbs who continue to reside in the city in the process. Bet-El writes about the existence of a strong desire to remember aggressive acts committed by opposing ethnic groups in the region, noting that ‘within a decade the modern Balkan wars had generated their own powerful cycle of memories’. The harnessing of a commemorative plaque for this purpose is certainly not conducive to reconciliation, especially when one considers that the Maniacs supporters’ group remains eager to present itself as a non-discriminating, multi-ethnic organization in this post-conflict period.

Examining this second wave of football commemorations in its entirety, a ‘cult of the fallen’ is arguably even more explicit than it is among the post-Second World War memorials. All of the examples which have been examined place heroic defenders of the relevant ethno-national group on a pedestal, exploiting rich reserves of nationalist symbolism in the process. Hence, while their socialist predecessors sought to create a narrative of unified socialist revolution, this latter group unsurprisingly focuses upon the respective causes of the ethno-national communities in question. At the same time, it is evident that the supporters’ groups which erected them seek to obtain legitimacy and glory for their respective organizations as payment for the sacrifices made by fallen members. Each of the monuments proudly underlines the significant contribution made by the relevant supporters’ group to the broader political project. This in turn facilitates the presentation of these groups as model nationalist institutions, members of which have allegedly proven themselves as freedom fighters in a just cause.

The fact that the majority of the former Yugoslavia’s larger supporters’ groups erected some form of shrine after the conflicts of the 1990s can be viewed as an extreme example of what Russell terms ‘hyper-fandom’. According to his understanding of the English game, various forms of football-related memorialization have been utilized by individuals as a means of affirming loyalty to particular clubs, acting as ‘a new vehicle for the strengthening of footballing allegiances and the dissemination of cultural knowledge’. Russell sees the dramatic post-1990 increase in practices of remembrance in English football as part of an ‘intensification of football fan loyalty or, perhaps more accurately, an increasing desire to express those loyalties in visible and dramatic ways’. In the case of football in the former Yugoslavia, where belonging to a particular supporters’ group has long been a means through which to actively affirm ethnic identity, and where direct migration from forms of football-related

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76 Željko, Hamo and Lelja – The Maniacs, FK Željezničar Sarajevo Supporters’ Group, group interview with author, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina, 23 May 2008 [hereafter The Maniacs interview].
77 Winter, Sites of Memory, p. 93.
79 Ibid.
violence towards actual warfare resulted in the death of a number of participants, the idea of these commemorations as a form of ‘hyper-fandom’ – or even hyper-nationalism – is a highly appropriate one. In other words, in the same way that the immense losses of the Second World War provided an ‘inexhaustible reservoir of legitimacy’ for the socialist monuments and the clubs which erected them, the recent sacrifices made by football supporters on all sides of the conflict also created a vast store of legitimacy for the supporters’ groups to which they had belonged before the war. This arguably affords these groups, who are often characterized as violent and anti-social elements in modern society, a level of patriotic respectability which they would otherwise lack. In this respect, the commoration of the wartime feats of individual members also becomes a powerful source of legitimacy for the supporters’ groups in question, just as it was to football clubs striving to create immaculate revolutionary histories during the socialist period. At the same time, one must not understate the role of genuine emotional motivations in the erection of these memorials.

VI

In much the same way as certain socialist-era clubs utilized commemorative techniques in order to create individual club legends – such as Jovan Mikić ‘Spartak’ – the supporters’ groups of the 1990s also sought to strengthen their own histories by creating a cult of personality around prominent former members who fell as combatants. For example, the Maniacs supporters’ group of Željezničar Football Club revel in the emerging legend of the group’s former leader Dževad Begić Đilda. Đilda, who has become a šehid to the cause of a unified Bosnia and Herzegovina, fought as a defender of Sarajevo in the opening year of the siege. He was apparently ‘Brave to the extent that stories of his accomplishments resembled legend to those who did not know him’, and he ‘had a heart which was open to everyone, along with kindness and bravery without limit’. A hagiography which was published in 1992 and dedicated to Sarajevo’s defenders, describes some of the numerous amazing feats for which the legendary Đilda is allegedly responsible. The following episode provides a sufficient impression of the account’s tone:

On the Vrbanja Bridge, in the first days of the aggression against the city and Bosnia and Herzegovina, he defended demonstrators at whom Serbian terrorists brazenly shot. He did this in his own distinctive way – standing

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80 Ivan Čolović suggests that war creates the possibility of transfer for football hooligans: ‘it offers a good opportunity to channel that violence so that its target is no longer authority and established social values... but external enemies of the nation.’ According to Čolović, actual war ‘offers an opportunity for such hooligan-fan-fighters to redeem their peacetime transgressions and, sacrificing themselves for the Fatherland, to return under its wing and earn the love reserved for the penitent Prodigal Son.’ Politics of Identity, p. 286.

upright while shots showered around him, with two rifles in his hands which, when Đilda carried them, looked like a couple of toys.82

According to this account, and the recollections of longstanding Maniacs members, Đilda was killed in August 1992 while attempting to save a wounded civilian who had been shot by a sniper. Members of the supporters’ group note that ‘during this attempt to save the life of an innocent women he lost his life’,83 while the aforementioned hagiography records that ‘The executioner with a sniper’s rifle murdered Sarajevo’s greatest fighter, according to his colleagues.’84 In the first year after his death this legendary figure was passing into the realms of immortality: ‘Đilda’s picture and all of his actions remain with his friends – for others to remember and hand down. Because Đilda was the kind of fighter of which there are few.’85 In a stoical rallying call the text goes on to say that ‘they murdered him, but the bravery with which he defended the city remains with us, everything of Đilda’s is still present and will be forever, therefore our commitment to free Sarajevo as soon as possible, is all the greater. Because of Đilda.’ He was buried in a cemetery for šehidi shortly after his death.86

This almost mythical figure is fondly remembered by fellow Željezničar supporters as an individual who ‘had charisma, both as a strong man and as the first leader of an organised group of Željo supporters . . . The Maniacs’.87 The nature of his brief career and untimely death make him the perfect martyr for the supporters’ group:

his star was never splashed with dirt, and that is why he is still shining now among the people – because he went from the scene in a situation in which man cannot compete. Nobody, among the people, dragged him from the stands or from the bar – the police could not do it, the other supporters could not. The bullet did the dirty job, so that is why his star is shining.88

Today he is remembered at the club’s Grbavica Stadium in the form of a large banner which is draped over the front of the terraces, while Maniacs members note that ‘for all important games we have a song about Đilda . . . to show him respect (see Figure 10).’ The lyrics solemnly declare: “Đilda you left us, the grief remained, but we will always love you, the Maniacs from the South Terrace.”89

The group obviously derives credibility via this continuing remembrance of a former leader and national hero. The place where he fell near
the centre of Sarajevo is marked with a memorial that is often decorated with Željezničar scarves. Having told the story of how Đilda died trying to save somebody else, one proud supporter explained that ‘this act shows what kind of people stand behind the club’. We can therefore see that while socialist-era teams strengthened their reputations via links to fallen revolutionary heroes and suitably subversive histories, the supporters’ groups which were involved in Yugoslavia’s demise also solidify their places in the respective nationalist canons and football folklore through the harnessing of similar phenomena.

A comparable legend is developing around a former leader of Red Star Belgrade’s Delije supporters’ group in Serbia. Before the war, Branislav Zeljković ‘Zelja’ was a prominent member of this organization, as one of the few who travelled to watch Red Star at almost every away match. As the political situation in Yugoslavia began to deteriorate, Zelja became a member of Željko ‘Arkan’ Ražnatović’s Serbian Volunteer Guard (Srpska Dobrovoljačka Garda), a paramilitary organization which

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Figure 10 The Maniacs offer support to Željezničar Football Club, while their former leader Đilda looks on over the stadium from the banner on the left of the photograph.

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90 Ibid.
included a large number of Delije members. This organization was responsible for numerous war crimes during the course of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. Zelja died in 2010, following a prolonged illness, and thousands of football supporters and club officials attended his funeral. The Delije group also organized a spectacular piece of commemorative choreography in order to honour one of their former ‘commanders’, by holding up a banner of his image that covered thousands of supporters on the North Terrace of Red Star’s Marakana Stadium before the start of a game. The illustration from this banner was reproduced in a mural which occupies a prominent position overlooking the pitch at the rear of the terracing where the Delije congregate (see Figure 11).

A leaflet which was distributed around the North Terrace during the match when Zelja was commemorated declared: ‘The north army is with

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92 In recent years these methods for commemorating individual supporters, such as murals, banners and chants, have been utilized by many clubs as a way of remembering those who have been killed.
you Commander Zeljković. People like you never die.’ This message, which was replicated on a large piece of material inside the stadium, was signed ‘Your Delije’.93 According to a newspaper report of his funeral, Zelja was a model Serbian patriot during his lifetime.94 Talking about his departure to the front, along with many other Delije members, he is once reported to have said: ‘We organised ourselves, we went for Serbia – not for Yugoslavia – but for Serbia, us volunteers.’95 He also spoke fondly of his former group leader and commander, Arkan. The same report explains that other Serbian supporters’ groups also respected ‘commander’ Zeljković, because of his illustrious career as a supporter and as a paramilitary.96

VII

These latter examples of the memorialization of remarkable individual supporters also signify that the second wave of football-related monuments and commemorative practices depart significantly from earlier acts of commemoration in an important respect. There is a noticeable shift away from the relatively sober commemorations of revolutionary socialist heroes of the resistance, and a move towards an even more explicit mythologizing of the recent past, which seeks to incorporate new martyrs into the seemingly eternal national legends of the respective ethnic groups. A number of the monuments in question depart from the realm of remembering and honouring the dead, consciously tapping into a rich terrain of epic history and emotive national symbolism in a highly spiritual manner. As elsewhere, myth and legend play an important role in the history and politics of the former Yugoslav region.

Scholars have examined the process by which aspects of the Serbian past continue to be developed via present-day myths.97 Discussing the power of memory in the recent Yugoslav conflict, Bet-El adopts Walter Benjamin’s notion of messianic time as ‘a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present’ in order to explain the way in which self-conceptions of Serbian history operate.98 Arguably, it is this simultaneity of historical periods, made possible via the legacy of a strong and vibrant
oral tradition, which enables the monuments and murals in question to incorporate present-day heroes into the epic tradition, elevating them to a timeless mythological status in the process.

These characteristics are on show at the memorial to fallen members of Red Star Belgrade’s Delije supporters’ group in the capital of newly independent Serbia. As mentioned, this group contributed many volunteers to Željko ‘Arkan’ Ražnatović’s notorious paramilitary formation during the recent wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. As a result of this direct participation in Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution, the group has erected a shrine to honour its fallen members at the rear of the North Terrace of Red Star’s Marakana Stadium (see Figure 12).

A memorial plaque embossed with a Serbian Orthodox Cross, the Serbian coat of arms and the Red Star emblem commemorates those members ‘who gave their lives in the wars for the fatherland’ between 1991 and 1999. Below the plaque a religious icon is also mounted on the wall, alongside a row of candles. I was present for the aforementioned
match when the Delije honoured ‘commander’ Zeljković, and as part of their ritual of remembrance these candles were devoutly lit by individuals praying in front of the icon. This shrine is flanked on either side by large murals which commemorate important events in Serbian history, stretching from the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje, via the nineteenth-century uprisings against the Ottomans and the Second World War, right up until the present-day feats of ‘commander’ Zeljković and the Serbian Volunteer Guard (see Figure 13). In this manner, the supporters who fought and died in the 1990s are symbolically added to the pantheon of Serbian national heroes.

Another commemoration in the Serbian capital utilizes the same national legends in order to honour an even more famous individual. In the late 1990s, Obilić Football Club, which is named after the Serbian hero Miloš Obilić (a warrior who supposedly killed Sultan Murat on the Kosovo battlefield over 600 years ago), was run by the aforementioned
paramilitary leader Željko ‘Arkan’ Ražnatović. Presumably the medieval symbolism associated with this previously unsuccessful club attracted the indicted war criminal and former leader of the Delije. Arkan was assassinated in 2000, but he is nonetheless remembered as a hero on the walls of Obilić Football Club, where large murals similar – although of poorer quality – to those at Red Star also depict important Serbian national symbols, such as Belgrade’s iconic Saint Sava’s Cathedral.

Arkan is painted in his paramilitary uniform, alongside a depiction of the glorious warrior Miloš Obilić (see Figures 14 and 15). In this way the epic tradition takes over to such an extent that Arkan is unproblematically assigned a place in Serbia’s historical legend. Beneath his image are the immortal words: ‘Željko Lives’. Although Noel Malcolm is discussing the cultural evolution of the Kosovo myth when he states that ‘many of

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the folk epics mingle characters promiscuously from different periods’, he could just as easily be explaining the emergence of these new football legends at the end of the twentieth century. In our case, the individual is both commemorated and mythologized at the same time, becoming a prominent feature of Belgrade’s football infrastructure in the process.

Similar tactics have also been utilized by the Croatian Bad Blue Boys supporters’ group, followers of Dinamo Zagreb. Seeking to create a

Figure 15 From reality to myth – Arkan, a controversial newcomer to the nationalist pantheon, looks out alongside the fourteenth-century knight at Obilić Stadium.
legend around the Maksimir Stadium Riot of 1990 – when the Bad Blue Boys clashed violently with both the Delije and the police – they commemorate it as the opening act of Yugoslavia’s wars of dissolution, drastically elevating the role played by the group’s fallen members in the process. Despite the fact that this riot took place over a year before the outbreak of hostilities in Croatia, the text on the monument stridently declares that it is dedicated ‘to all supporters of Dinamo, for whom the war began on 13 May 1990 at the Maksimir Stadium, and ended with the laying down of their lives on the altar of the Croatian homeland!’ Alongside this text is an engraving of an armed soldier, superimposed over a depiction of the chaotic rioting which took place between Serbian and Croatian supporters back in 1990. In this respect, the monument is just one of a number of tactics which have been utilized to elevate the importance of pre-war nationalist hooliganism and the consequent role played by the Bad Blue Boys supporters’ group in the establishment of an independent Croatia. Histories of the group, journalism and even academic texts have all added to the legend of this stadium riot as the first battle of Croatia’s homeland war, and by the time of the twentieth anniversary of the incident a Croatian newspaper reported that ‘the majority of Croats are convinced that the physical division of an artificially established country began at the Maksimir Stadium itself.’

Just as the myth of the battle of Kosovo was elaborated and deformed in subsequent years via the medium of epic poetry, the events at Maksimir – as well as the legends surrounding Arkan and the Delije – have also undergone a conversion to national mythology and legend.

As has been demonstrated, this commemoration and elaboration of recent history, as well as its integration into older historical narratives, is being performed by supporters’ groups across the former Yugoslavia via the second wave of football memorials. This is carried out in a highly ritualistic manner, harnessing religious symbolism such as Orthodox icons and candles, references to Catholic altars and the creation of sehidi. These war memorials glorify their respective ethnic groups at the expense of others, and revel in the emotive symbolism of their own nationalist histories.

VIII

The fact that football-related monuments have survived from various periods of the twentieth century means that the former Yugoslavia’s built environment offers problematic and conflicting accounts of both the

region’s and the game’s violent past. As we have seen, memorials which honour impossibly pure socialist heroes coexist awkwardly alongside those dedicated to supporters who gave their lives in the pursuit of mono-ethnic independent states. In the case of the desecrated Velež Mostar monument these distinct periods are somewhat paradoxically remembered by the same symbolic object. It is also true that the vast majority of the memorials and commemorative practices which have been examined deliberately present narrow interpretations of the past. The overarching objective for this appears to be the establishment of legitimacy for the organizations which commissioned them, although one should not discount the genuine emotional motivations which are often behind such commemorative activities. As has been demonstrated, the socialist-era examples seek to recall, and in some cases fabricate, sufficiently revolutionary pasts for the football clubs in question, while the monuments which are being erected in the aftermath of Yugoslavia’s dissolution generally trumpet the sacrifices made by supporters’ groups to the various nationalist causes.

It is clear that the football-related war memorials of the former Yugoslavia occupy, or at least occupied, important positions for the clubs and supporters’ groups in question. This is true in both a symbolic and a literal sense. Symbolically, this amorphous collection of commemorative objects act as highly charged examples of what Pierre Nora defines as lieux de mémoire, or sites ‘where memory crystallizes and secretes itself’. In this role they assist clubs and their supporters in the task of defining what their organizations represent, however contested and fluid this may be. Therefore, the construction of these war memorials can be read as an attempt to write important episodes in the histories of these organizations into the historical record. Again, Nora is instructive here:

The demand for history has... largely overflowed the circle of professional historians. Those who have long been marginalized in traditional history are not the only ones haunted by the need to recover their buried pasts. Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity.

Commenting on Nora’s term and the importance of ‘particular places’ to the mythic narrative of national histories, Katharyne Mitchell notes that such sites of memory ‘are precisely these types of conflated spaces, where geography, history, identity and memory run into and through each

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103 Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, Representations, xxvi (1989), 7–25, at p. 7. In one particular case it is the stadium itself which is commemorated. The NK Zagreb stadium has two plaques on its outer walls which commemorate the day when the stadium was the site of the first inspections of the incipient Croatian National Guard (Zbora Narodne Garde). This took place on 28 May 1991. This instance is somewhat reminiscent of commemorations of the call to arms in First World War Britain, which are documented in Winter, Sites of Memory, p. 80.

104 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 15.
other’. This brings us to the literal sense in which these monuments are almost impossible for anybody involved in football to avoid. They are located in prominent positions on the approach to stadiums (Bad Blue Boys, FK Sarajevo, Radnički Kragujevac), on stadium walls and at the rear of terracing (Delije, Sloboda Užice, Budućnost Titograd), and in some instances they are even constructed inside the stadium itself, overlooking the pitch (FK Vojvodina, Torcida, FK Velež). The location of these monuments means that they have become a part of the everyday football environment in the former Yugoslavia. In the case of the desecrated Velež Mostar monument, its prominent position between the dressing rooms and the pitch means that on the relatively regular occasions when newly resurrected Zrinjski Mostar and the cleansed Velež Mostar face one another in emotive derby matches at the Bijeli Brijeg Stadium, both teams must walk right past it. The memorial also remains visible to both sets of supporters for the duration of the game. Today it is likely that many of those who attend the stadium are unaware of the symbolism of this crude concrete structure, which was the target of iconoclasts, but its continued presence means that the turbulent history of both the region and the Yugoslav game is always present inside the stadium – a brooding spectator laden with conflicting memories of the past.